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Rebuilding the Boat: The Church and the Sea of Faith

The Sea of Faith Network, inspired by the writings of Don Cupitt, has sprung to prominence over recent years. The Network seeks to jettison the orthodox understanding of a personal God, arguing instead that 'God' is merely a way of talking about our religious aspirations. Andrew Moore examines what members of the network believe, offers a critical response, and considers the practical, pastoral implications for church life.

Introducing the Sea of Faith: a not very tall tale

Imagine the following situation. You are the vicar of a large evangelical church and a senior member of your congregation has asked to see you. Timothy works in senior management. He is a respected member of your PCC, preaches at family services, and leads your youth group. His marriage is stable, his job secure, and his children are pillars of the youth club.

'Sarah, I've been meaning to come and talk to you for some time', he begins. 'As you know, I was converted when I was a student, but for some time now I've been questioning what I believe and why I believe it.'

Some time back, it had emerged that his wife had had an abortion, and they had been deeply hurt by the church's hypocritical and what he called 'legalistic' stance towards them. He still mentioned this episode occasionally, and it was obvious that some healing still needed to be done. But it wasn't this that was on his mind. There was something far bigger.

'I've undergone a kind of second conversion', he explains. 'I'm still happy to call myself a Christian – in fact, I'm happier with that label now than I was five years ago, and I still believe in God. I just don't believe that God exists "out there".' You know Timothy well enough to feel that you can be direct with him. 'What do you mean? How can you say that God doesn't exist "out there" and that you still believe in him; isn't that just atheism? If you're a Christian, don't you have to believe that God is "out there"?'

'I thought we'd get onto something like this pretty early on in our discussion. Look, I'll be straight about what's been going on, not least because part of my conversion has been to *honest* religion. So much Christianity is dishonest nowadays: the clergy are dishonest with their congregations about the results of biblical criticism, congregations are dishonest about their doubts. They shove them under

the carpet and hope they'll go away. They don't and they shouldn't. The world needs Christianity, honest Christianity that's faced up to all the difficulties and come through to the other side. Honest to God, God isn't out there. All that realist stuff is so deadening. Once we're honest about that, then we can be free; then the church will have something lifegiving to offer the world again!' He pauses. 'I don't know how much time you've got, but what I've done is put together some quotations from some of the books I've been reading. If you like, we could look at them together; that way you will be able to appreciate how my thinking has been developing.'

He passes you a wadge of papers. One is a photocopy from a booklet introducing the Sea of Faith Network. As you glance at it, faint bells ring. 'The Sea of Faith Network – isn't Don Cupitt something to do with that?' 'Yes, that's right. It's named after the TV series he did back in the early 80s; perhaps you saw it.'[1] You didn't and read on to find out more. It reads, 'The Sea of Faith Network has as its object "to explore and create religious faith as a human creation" ... God is not a metaphysical entity "out there". Such a God is too small. "He" is no longer credible. God is, and always was, a metaphor for the values which, though we understand them to be generated by human culture, we have come to think of as "ultimate" and "eternal".'[2]

'This sounds pretty daunting and I have to say, I'm still not convinced that you aren't just an atheist now. The Sea of Faith *Network* – how many members does it have?'

'About a thousand in the UK, and there are quite a few people like me who attend meetings from time to time but aren't members.[3] That may not sound a lot, but the Network seems to be striking a chord. A mainstream publisher has recently put out a book by Don Cupitt,[4] and I keep on bumping into people like me who are disillusioned with traditional, *realist* Christianity but feel that that needn't mean that they should stop calling themselves Christians. The Network is also trying to make links into the student scene and one of its leading authors is a university chaplain. And anyway, the more high-profile cases there are like that of Anthony Freeman...'

'Wasn't he the guy Eric Kemp fired for not believing in God?'[5] Timothy nods. 'You're not into all that nonsense are you? Can you explain something to me, please. You've used the word "realist" a couple of times; what does it mean?'

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1 The book originally published in conjunction with the series is *The Sea of Faith: Christianity in Change*, SCM, London 1994[2].

2 David Boulton, *A Reasonable Faith: Introducing the Sea of Faith Network*, Sea of Faith Network (UK), Loughborough 1997, pp 3, 9.

3 Figure stated by David Boulton, *A Reasonable Faith*, p 5.

4 Don Cupitt, *After God: The Future of Religion*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1997.

5 Anthony Freeman was removed from office as Priest-in-Charge of St Mark's, Staplefield by the Bishop of Chichester when he did not retract the views expressed in his *God in Us: A Case for Christian Humanism*, SCM, London 1993.

Explaining the Sea of Faith[6]

Realism and Non-Realism

The Sea of Faith Network is best defined by its opposition to *realism*. Realism is a philosophical doctrine which can be expressed in terms of three characteristic claims.

1) *Ontologically* (that is, concerning what there is), the realist holds that there is a reality independent of and external to human minds and that its being what it is does not depend on our conceptions or sense experiences of it; that is, reality is there to be discovered as it objectively *is*, rather than subjectively invented, constructed, or projected.

2) *Epistemologically* (that is, concerning our knowledge of what there is), the realist holds that reality can be (approximately) known as it is and not just as it appears to us to be.

3) *Semantically* (that is, concerning our linguistic expression of what there is), the realist holds that it is possible to refer successfully to and so make (approximately) true statements about reality; that is, the truth of a proposition is a matter of its corresponding to reality, and this independently of our being able to verify or otherwise confirm it.

Thus, when Christian faith is subjected to philosophical scrutiny, realism is the view that (i) God exists independently of our awareness of him (he is not a figment of our imaginations), but that (ii) despite this, we can know him and that (iii) human language is not an inadequate or inappropriate medium in which we can speak about him truthfully. So far as Christian theology is concerned, non-realism is the view which 'has as its object "to explore and create religious faith as a human creation"... God is not a metaphysical entity "out there"'. As we go on, we shall discover more of the implications of this position.

To deny that Christian faith is realist, to deny that 'God' exists 'out there' but is merely a metaphor, would seem to imply that Timothy and others associated with the Sea of Faith Network are, as Sarah thinks, atheists. Yet this they deny. To understand why, we need to look in a little more detail at what they believe.

What do members of the Sea of Faith believe?

In our imaginary meeting, Timothy showed Sarah a wadge of papers, the first of which was a photocopy introducing the Sea of Faith Network. The others were

6 It is beyond the scope of this article to explain even the immediate sociological background to the Sea of Faith Network. Many of the issues discussed in the first four chapters of Dave Tomlinson's *The Post-Evangelical*, Triangle/SPCK, London 1995, pp 1-59, are relevant. The philosophical and theological issues extend a long way back and are connected with the rise and fall of modernity and its impact on the church. For the whole gloomy story, see (in addition to Cupitt's *The Sea of Faith* and *After God*) Michael Buckley S. J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1987; Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1993; Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame and London 1981.

photocopies of some pages from Cupitt and some of his fellow-voyagers.[7] Each quotation had a heading, but like many of those associated with the Network, Timothy's explanation of the passages left Sarah more confused than ever, so I'll explain them myself.[8]

Modern religion

> Religion is not metaphysics but salvation, and salvation is a state of the self. It has to be appropriated subjectively or existentially. There is no such thing as objective religious truth and there cannot be. The view that religious truth consists in ideological correctness or in the objective correspondence of doctrinal statements with historical and metaphysical facts is a modern aberration, and a product of the decline of religious seriousness.[9]

Cupitt is very keen on religion and sees it as having a vitally important role to play in the health of society. This is why he has such zeal for 'religious seriousness' and why he is unwilling to be regarded as an atheist. Although readers of *Anvil* would not regard him as one, he sees himself as evangelist for religious values in a technocratic, postmodern, and nihilistic society. Modern people need religion, but their mistake has been to identify religion with the philosophical outlook which undergirded it. He wants to retain a religious outlook but one which is shorn of discredited metaphysics. So (rightly in my view) Cupitt is emphasizing that if "religion" is understood primarily as a philosophical or metaphysical system, it becomes abstract and loses contact with the actual lived experience and needs of humanity. Our next quotation helps show why Cupitt repudiates a realism which understands truth as correspondence between language and facts.

Christian faith and science

> Now suppose we ask, did St Paul think the resurrection of Jesus was a fact? The answer can only be, No, because St Paul did not have our concept of fact. Influenced by modern scientific and critical ways of thinking, we use the word 'fact' of descriptive propositions whose truth is testable in ways quite independent of local cultural beliefs, human wishes and so on.... We now live in an age which sharply separates factual description from religious expression, so we no longer have the old kind of mixed or confused style of speaking available to us.... The crucial objection to religious realism is that insofar as it

7 The reader will notice that there are no quotations from the more recent work of Cupitt. This is because his earlier work, dating from the early 1980s, is most influential in the Sea of Faith Network and sets out many of his dominant philosophical and theological themes. From the mid-80s to the late 90s he has been influenced by continental postmodern philosophy, and more recently still, by Heidegger. For a survey of his development up to his most recent phase, see Stephen Ross White, *Don Cupitt and the Future of Christian Doctrine*, SCM, London 1994, pp 3-102.

8 The editor of the Network's magazine *Sea of Faith* seems to admit the difficulties in explaining its self-understanding when, at the end of an article ostensibly intended to help its readers 'get to grips with the jargon' of non-realism, he writes, 'use the labels if they help, junk them if they hinder. I've probably got them wrong, anyway.' (David Boulton, 'A Bluffer's Guide to Non-realism and all that' in *Sea of Faith* 29, (1997) pp 10f.)

9 Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, SCM Press, London 1980, p 43.

> succeeds in being realistic it necessarily ceases to be religious.... Insofar as an apologist manages to establish a realist interpretation of some major doctrine he necessarily destroys it as religion.[10]

Cupitt is on to something important here. Our world is dominated by a scientific ideology. We think that science shows what's true and what's false, what's fact and what's fiction. And it's not just atheists who think like this: consider the way in which much contemporary apologetics is still resolutely determined to show the factual reliability of the Bible, especially for example with respect to Jesus' resurrection, or how the early chapters of Genesis can be reconciled with a scientific outlook. Our mindset is shaped by science: we allow ourselves to be put on the defensive by a scientific conception of the world, even though this is not self-evidently the Bible's own view of the matter. Remember that after appearing to Thomas, Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe'.[11] There is a limit to what sinful flesh and blood can establish by reason and evidence, yet those who do believe without seeing believe in Jesus who was raised to eternal life by the Father. His aliveness transcends the categories by which we apprehend space and time, and so, although we must not deny that his resurrection happened and that he is indeed alive, nevertheless, we must not restrict the manner in which we express his aliveness to those in which we express matters of scientific fact.[12]

Cupitt's mistake is to think that we can only think of things that have happened in scientific terms or not at all. Cupitt thinks that because our concept of 'fact' is not the same as Paul's, we cannot talk in terms of something's having happened. This is why he throws the baby out with the bath-water and denies that we can suppose that Paul thought that the resurrection of Jesus was a fact. Cupitt will not admit the possibilities that in the course of their work scientists themselves might have to modify their understanding of the 'factual', or that we might learn from the Bible and the present Christ how to speak of him without conceding to a distorting (empiricist) framework. The only option left to Cupitt is to deny that we can use factual language, however chastened, in Christian faith.

Autonomy

> People increasingly want to live their own lives, to make their own choices and to determine their own destinies, and they refuse to be dissuaded by the objection that their autonomy will lead only to unhappiness. On the contrary, they insist that it is better to live one's own life, even if unsuccessfully, than to live a life which is merely the acting of a part written by someone else, and the principle holds even if that 'somebody else' is a god. Anyone who has tasted freedom knows that it would be a sin against one's own soul to revert to dependency. We note that in the process the meaning of 'sin' has

10 Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, pp 44f.
11 John 20:29.
12 The best brief discussion of how we should think about the resurrection is that offered by Hans Frei in 'Of the Resurrection of Christ' in Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, eds George Hunsinger and William C Placher, Oxford University Press, New York 1993, pp 200-206, cf. pp 45-93.

> been reversed. In traditional society the affirmation of one's own radical freedom was the very essence of sin. Sin was discontent, rebellion against the existing divinely-ordered framework of life. But today obedience is sin. Above all one must not surrender one's inner integrity; and what is integrity? – It is one's *autonomy*.[13]

This passage speaks for itself and brings us up against Cupitt's central accusation against orthodox Christianity. He thinks that a realist view of Christian faith requires a hierarchical view of the universe in which a medieval polity has been projected onto (and beyond) the heavens. 'Realism', says Cupitt, 'is cosmic Toryism.'[14]

Thus we can well conjecture that in our imaginary meeting, Timothy does indeed have the abortion episode in the back of his mind when he sees Sarah. In the Sea of Faith Network, he has found a group of people like himself who feel that orthodox Christian faith has been legalistic, exclusively concerned with matters of personal morality, and restrictive of autonomy. He feels that he has been kept in servitude and unable to be himself. He cannot recognize the possibility that obedience is a Spirit-enabled and loving response to the God who longs for us to grow to the full stature of the humanity of the most free person who ever lived – Jesus Christ.

What then is God?

> God is a unifying symbol that eloquently personifies and represents to us everything that spirituality requires of us.... We use the word 'god' as a comprehensive symbol that incorporates the way the religious demand presents itself to us (God's will), its ideal fulfilment by us (God's essence), and the mythic psychodrama that envelops us on the way (God's action).... Is there any extra-religious and objective existence of God? There is a paradox here, for there cannot and must not be any religious interest in any extra-religious existence of God; such a thing would be a frivolous distraction.[15]

Cupitt's understanding of God brings together all the themes that we have discussed so far. God does not exist independently of our minds or our wills, rather, according to what Rowan Williams has described as Cupitt's 'Promethean fantasies', 'God is no more than a ... device of the will for its own salvation'.[16]

It is now obvious just how far Cupitt's non-realism is from traditional Christianity. Denial of realism seems to emasculate the gospel: if God does not exist objectively but is only a human construct, it looks as though there is no gospel of salvation as traditionally understood. We might just as well talk of having been saved by the Easter Bunny as of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ setting him forth as an atonement for sin. But this would be to proceed too quickly.

13 Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, pp 3f.

14 Don Cupitt, *Creation out of Nothing*, SCM Press, London 1990, p 54.

15 Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, pp 9, 96.

16 Rowan Williams, '"Religious Realism": On not quite agreeing with Don Cupitt' in *Modern Theology 1*, (1984), p 13. This article remains one of the best and most searching discussions of Cupitt's work. Amongst more recent and up-to-date discussions, two works stand out: Anthony Thiselton's *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1995, in particular pp 81-117; and Stephen N. Williams' *Revelation and Reconciliation: A Window on Modernity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, especially pp 110-142.

Remember Timothy. He is typical of many associated with the Sea of Faith Network in not wanting to leave the church. Indeed, since discovering the Network, he feels that he has got a positive, evangelistic contribution to make. He feels that a non-realist faith has set him free to be honest with himself and what had been his 'doubts'. He feels 'saved' in a way never allowed by his traditional evangelicalism. If truth isn't a matter of words matching reality then it doesn't matter whether the Bible tells us 'what really happened'. Through his association with the Network, Timothy feels a new freedom and a new kind of personal affirmation.

This is why he feels he's been through a conversion experience in discovering that God isn't 'out there' and it's something he wants to pass on to others. No longer does he feel that he has to obey some kind of cosmic tyrant; that view was a realist mistake. Cupitt's vision of religion as a condition of radical freedom in which we use the resources of Christian faith to make up our own lives as we go on is deeply appealing. We are as free to make up our own lives as we are to use language to make up the world. Religion is poetry and religious people are artists. As Cupitt writes,

> Like us, God is made only of words. So, as we are returned into language and God is returned into language, a new sort of theology [emerges]. For we can no longer distinguish clearly between the sense in which God creates, the sense in which language does, and the sense in which we do. The religious life becomes a continuous flowing creative process, a little like art: humanly constructed and constructing.[17]

What are members of the Sea of Faith doing when they go to church?

One might wonder how Timothy can retain his integrity as a member of his church, serve on its PCC and help in so many other ways. Such enquiries are particularly pressing for those members of the Network who are ordained Anglicans, and their critics have a good point. After all, when Church of England clergy are licensed their bishop states:

> The Church of England is part of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, *which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation....* In the declaration you are about to make will you affirm your loyalty to this inheritance of faith as your inspiration and guidance under God in bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation and making Him known to those in your care?[18]

When Anthony Freeman published his apologia for adopting a stance broadly in sympathy with that of the Sea of Faith Network, his bishop put him on a year's notice to examine his views and change them or face being removed from his parish. He did not change his mind and accepted the consequences: he saw himself as discharging his responsibility to 'proclaim afresh' the church's faith in an entirely proper way and in his book he explained why:

17 *Creation out of Nothing*, p x, cf. 201-3. This passage gives a good flavour of Cupitt's thinking since his conversion to postmodernism.

18 My emphasis.

> In presenting the faith to this generation I am bound to be presenting a *different* faith from that which my forefathers presented. Not just a different *interpretation* of the same essential core, but a *different faith.* This is because there is no essence or inner core. Re-interpretation is not like taking the shell off a nut. It is like peeling the layers off an onion: the interpretation goes all the way down. All is interpretation. That is the *essence.*[19]

What is going on here? The key is in Freeman's understanding of interpretation. He seems to have drunk at the well of those postmodern literary theorists who deny that texts have any stable and ascertainable meaning. Since readers produce meaning in the act of reading, texts mean different things to different readers in different historical contexts. Thus the texts by which the church understands her identity and the gospel she is called to proclaim mean just whatever readers make them mean. On this view, if the catholic faith is textually transmitted it can have no perduring substance, no abiding essence. It is therefore obscurantist nonsense to allege that people like Freeman are betraying the faith of the church by continuing in orders.

The concept of credal orthodoxy to which critics appeal is regarded by non-realists as a denial of their autonomy in making the faith relevant today. They do nevertheless continue to use the creed, but any sense that it defines the boundaries of the church has almost dropped out of sight. David Hart, Senior Anglican Chaplain to Loughborough University and a member of the Sea of Faith Steering Committee explains his understanding of the Nicene Creed as follows:

> it seems to be important that the proclamation [of the Creed] is communal ... [and] this solidarity of expression may be a more important signifier than the precise content of the words recited ... understanding is less important than the sense of participation in a common proclamation of faith.[20]

In the light of what we have learned of non-realists' approach to Christian faith, it is neither surprising that they *do* use the creeds – they wish to retain links with Christian tradition because they see themselves as its vanguard – nor is it surprising that they make them mean whatever they wish. The same principle applies in their understanding of liturgical texts, and in a passage of deep, if inadvertent pathos, Hart writes:

> No given God, no unchangeable reality. We are worshipping neither a being out there nor yet ourselves.... And so we worship, acknowledge a sense of worth, in those parts of ourselves and others that truly free us to creativity and a greater humanity.... Our worship prepares us for lives of worthiness; liturgy is the text for full commitment to the panoply of human values, and gathering together in prayer is a way of saying with others: 'We want to be taken seriously. We want to take seriously. Let us give each other the chance not to exploit and injure but to work with and build up'.[21]

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19 Freeman, *God in Us*, p 75.

20 David Hart, *Faith in Doubt: Non-Realism and Christian Belief*, Mowbray, London 1993, pp 81f.

21 *Faith in Doubt*, pp 92f.

If religion is constructed, if God is created rather than discovered, and if we are free to use language as we wish, this gives associates of the Sea of Faith Network *carte blanche* to reinterpret Christianity and worship as they wish. From their perspective, they are the true torch-bearers for the gospel.

Defending realism

Theologians who have sought to defend realism have usually done so by seeking to argue that we can truly know God and that metaphor is indispensable in enabling us to do so. For these thinkers, realism is principally a problem about how we can use language to represent God. The crux of their argument is drawn from the philosophy of science. God, they suggest, is unobservable. Now science posits many unobservable entities – quarks, gluons, and so forth. They then reason that if we can defend realism in the scientific case – that is, if it can be shown that scientifically unobservable entities exist independently of the mind – then maybe we can apply an analogous argument to defend realism about God. That is the standard argument in a nutshell.[22]

It seems to me that this argument is deeply flawed. I can't go into details here, but to give an idea of the problems, I raise two questions. First, the standard argument depends on there being some analogy between scientific theories and Christian doctrine. This analogy is quite widespread in contemporary theology, but can it stand?[23] Acceptance of a scientific theory is partly dependent on new data being produced which confirm what the theory predicts. It also depends on the experiment which confirms the theory being repeatable. However, it seems to me that if Christians take seriously the finality and unrepeatability of God's self-revelation in Christ they have to concede that there will be no new data available which could confirm, for example, a scientific theoretical understanding of the orthodox doctrine of the two natures of Christ.[24] The second reason for being suspicious about the standard defence has to do with its concern with how we represent God. Heavy stress is put on our gaining knowledge of God and on how we might be able represent him by means of our language.[25] This approach has been rightly criticized by Sue Patterson as tending towards a reduction of revelation

22 Readers who wish to follow it up in more detail are referred to Janet Martin Soskice's well-known book, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1985, especially pp 97-161. A more succinct version of Soskice's argument can be found in Arthur Peacocke's *Intimations of Reality: Critical Realism in Science and Religion*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1984, pp 22-34, 40-50.

23 One of the most thorough and lucid arguments for such an analogy is presented by Nancey Murphy of Fuller Theological Seminary in her *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1990.

24 This argument receives support from two scientists turned theologian, though they would not share all my reservations concerning the standard argument: see Alister McGrath, *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*, Blackwell, Oxford 1998, p 206; John Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality: The Relationship between Science and Theology*, SPCK, London 1991, p 15, and *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1998, pp 47, 113.

25 See Soskice, *Metaphor*.

to 'frank anthropomorphism'.[26] However, thinking of representation might put us in mind of two central strands of Christian doctrine and these will give us an important steer in the direction of a more theologically fruitful, and to my mind philosophically compelling, defence of the realism of the Christian faith.

If we believe that God represented himself to us in Jesus Christ and if we believe that by his atoning death and resurrection he has restored his image in us, does not this suggest that we should think in terms of God's showing his reality through Christians' humanity? Maybe it's less a matter of sophisticated philosophical argument – though that will certainly be necessary if the kind of position I am suggesting is to be rigorously defended – and more a matter of our obedient discipleship, of patiently taking up the cross we are called to bear. Maybe the testimony to Jesus through our living and our dying, especially that of martyrs, is more eloquent than endless apologetics. Might not *this* be the kind of thing Paul had in mind when, writing of the suffering he endured in discipleship, he explains that 'we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.'?[27]

There is a persistent strand of suspicion in the Bible, and especially in the NT, against proving intellectually that God is independent from us, or that he is at work amongst his people. Its testimony is to the power of God freely to reveal himself, to show and represent himself, through obedient living.[28] Any purely *philosophical* argument which does not take God's redemptive act in Christ as its source and goal would be a matter of confidence in the 'flesh', of exalting human so-called wisdom and power over God's 'folly' and 'weakness' on the cross: it would be temptation to 'believe, not in God, but in [our] own belief in God'.[29] Lives lived under God speak for themselves and by God's grace show that of which they speak.[30]

Rebuilding the boat

'We are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry-dock....'[31] Surprisingly perhaps, these words were written about the sense of conceptual revolution that was in the air during the high days of logical positivism. But they are applicable to the situation that the contemporary church faces with respect to the Sea of Faith Network. We cannot put into harbour to

26 Sue Patterson, 'Janet Martin Soskice, Metaphor and a Theology of Grace', in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993), p 14.

27 2 Cor. 4:7-10.

28 One might think of Jesus' refusal to offer signs or to testify on his own behalf, or of Paul's offering his own flock and his own sufferings as proof of God's calling him to apostolic ministry (1 Cor. 9:1ff, 2 Cor. 1-6, 10-13).

29 Karl Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1933, p 17.

30 I have argued this position in detail in my Oxford D.Phil. on *Realism and Christian Faith: God, Grammar, and Meaning.*

31 Otto Neurath, 'Protocol Sentences', in Oswald Hanfling, ed., *Essential Readings in Logical Positivism*, Blackwell, Oxford 1981, p 160.

reconstruct our vessel; we must make running repairs as we sail to our heavenly haven. Yet we do our rebuilding confident that the ship of salvation has a captain (*archegon*) and our hope has an anchor which is secure on the far shore of the sea of faith.[32] What does this task require of us? I have six suggestions to make.

1) We need to be willing to name heresy as such. Anthony Freeman appeals 'for the Church to be open to non-realism as a permitted starting point – not something to be imposed, but something to be allowed for those who find themselves at that position'.[33] This statement seems to me to be a flat refusal to accept that non-realism threatens the very being of the church. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the church who was raised by the Father and to whom the Holy Spirit witnesses. He is risen and alive, and more real and more alive than we are. He makes the church the church. Unless we affirm something along these lines, there can be no church from which to dissent. The Sea of Faith Network is a parasitic distortion of the church, and as such needs to be recognized as an heretical movement within it. Here, 'heresy' is understood as Barth defined it:

> By heresy we understand a form of Christian faith which we cannot deny to be a form of Christian faith from the formal standpoint, i.e., in so far as it, too, relates to Jesus Christ, to his Church, to baptism, Holy Scripture and the common Christian creeds, but in respect of which we cannot really understand what we are about when we recognize it as such, since we can understand its content, its interpretation of these common presuppositions, only as a contradiction of faith.[34]

To say that the Network is heretical is not to say that its members should not be welcomed by the church, but it is seriously to question the appropriateness of their holding official, and especially teaching positions in it. If the church were to endorse it 'as a permitted starting point' it would soon enough cease to be the church. Recalling my introduction, Sarah might, after listening carefully to Timothy, invite him to consider his position regarding his PCC membership and teaching positions in their church.

2) We need theological theology which is more than apologetics.[35] Karl Barth continues the passage just quoted by admitting that 'heresy must attack the Church because it is not sufficiently or truly the Church'.[36] This is a good reason for being open to hearing what the Sea of Faith Network is saying to the church. In my view, the fundamental challenge it poses is to learn again how to uphold the faith which the church has received. Theology is done when the church engages in the never-ending task of purifying its own language and thought so that it is as faithful as possible to the Living Word. In this work, it is focally concerned with listening to

32 See Heb. 2:10, 6:19.

33 Anthony Freeman, 'Non-realism and the life of the Church', in Colin Crowder, ed., *God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-realism*, Mowbray, London 1997, p 27.

34 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, I/1, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1975, p 32; cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, VII/19.

35 This proposal consciously echoes the title of John Webster's Inaugural Lecture at Oxford: *Theological Theology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998.

36 Karl Barth, *CD*, I/1, p 33.

the Word of God; however, it needs also to hear what its critics are saying and sift it carefully so as to learn how its actual language and thought falls short of what it should be saying and thinking.

This is not the same thing as doing apologetics. The latter is principally concerned with defending what the church has to say against its external critics. It is correctly observed that Cupitt and his detractors usually seem to argue past each other. This is because his opponents are often insufficiently theological in their style of arguing. Apologetic strategies do not work against the Sea of Faith Network for two reasons. First, because its members have seen through the arguments (for God's existence, for instance), and second, because their challenge is from within the church and is therefore essentially theological. Since at least the Enlightenment, apologetic thinking frequently appeals to a supposedly context-neutral understanding of rationality, for example when it argues for God's existence. However, it then risks losing its irreducible distinctiveness, and with it the integrity of Christian thought. We need to recover an Anselmian approach to theology: 'For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand.'[37]

3) We need a concept of authority which is less tied to Enlightenment models. Cupitt and his ilk rightly reject an authoritarian understanding of authority which, they think, suppresses rather than encourages them to become fully human.[38] This is why they are so keen on autonomy. However, it must be asked whether the concept of authority they reject is properly Christian. Oliver O'Donovan explains in his fine book on the 39 Articles that '"Authority" means that which initiates, but specifically it refers to that which initiates free thought and action'.[39] This definition is coherent with God's relationship with his creation. God shows the authority of his Word in the first instance by creating the world and human beings to inhabit it and be stewards over it; in doing so he gives them their own reality and their own freedom. They have their own *relative* autonomy being neither emanations of God's nature nor entirely independent from him. But human beings lost their freedom in the Fall. So by redeeming the world in Christ, God restored to humanity the freedom it had lost in slavery to sin: 'For freedom Christ has set us free.'[40] The God of creation and redemption is sovereign in his freedom; he has created us in his image and likeness, and that means he has created us for freedom.

Whilst being careful to avoid antinomianism, we need to affirm and express in our own lives this glorious liberty which God's authoritative Word offers us. In our use of the Bible we need to remember that its authority is derived from the free and risen Christ 'who is the head of all rule and authority'.[41] The legalism which Timothy experienced when his wife had an abortion might have been deeply

37 M. J. Charlesworth, trans., *St Anselm's Proslogion*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame and London 1979, p 115.

38 For an example of such an understanding, see Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief*, IVP, Leicester 1982, p 15.

39 Oliver O'Donovan, *On the Thirty Nine Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle 1986, p 98.

40 Gal. 5:1.

41 Col. 2:10.

unhelpful in this respect.

4) We need to have a vision for educating all members of the people of God to love him with their *minds*; such education needs above all to be confident and joyful in the Gospel, non-defensive, and culturally and theologically informed. This quotation from the secretary of the Sea of Faith Network makes my point:

> The theological education of the clergy equips us to understand that the gospels are not historical accounts of the life of Jesus, but creative writing a generation or two or three after his death, and that most liturgical language can be understood symbolically. There is, however, a deafening silence from the hierarchy about these issues. It results in depressed people in congregations walking sadly away from the Church. When will the bishops and other church leaders give an honest lead by sharing publicly their knowledge of the development in biblical and theological scholarship of the last 150 years?[42]

One can only lament the way in which the author of this quotation seems to be stuck in a 60s time-warp. Perhaps his congregation doesn't give him time to read Tom Wright or Luke Timothy Johnson.[43]

5) We need pastoral care that models God's covenant of grace with humanity and which, while recognizing 'the moral boundaries within which human flourishing can be aided', says '"I am for you; I am with you; I am on your side."'[44] Such care will not legalistically dominate people, manipulate them, or make them dependent on clergy; it will treat them as adults who are answerable to God.

6) We need worship which is real as well as relevant and which is addressed to *God*. Members of the Sea of Faith sometimes describe their view of worship as 'expressivist'. In part they mean that they wish to express themselves and thereby satisfy their own felt needs. I have encountered friendly concern that evangelical worship can be excessively emotional and escapist, and that where it is, it risks being 'expressivist'. It would be a shame on Christians who disagree fundamentally with 'expressivism' if our worship were to be seen as having the same purpose as that of the members of the Network.

Could we be failing to address God because our worship is not primarily directed towards him but towards our own needs, or those of the unchurched? When I was a curate, my vicar was having a running battle with a churchwarden who was deeply opposed to any liturgy other than that of the BCP. I weighed in for my vicar. Delivering what I thought was a *coup de grâce*, I asked to whom he thought worship is directed: my view at that time was that it needed above all to be accessible to

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42 The Revd Ronald Pearse, Secretary, Sea of Faith Network, letter in *The Independent*, 4 September 1998.

43 I think we need to balance the kinds of thing Wright is saying with the questions Johnson raises against historical enquiry into the NT; see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, London 1992; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, SPCK, London 1996; and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, HarperCollins, San Fransisco 1997.

44 Francis Bridger and David Atkinson, *Counselling in Context: Developing a Theological Framework*, HarperCollins, London 1994, p 152.

outsiders, that they needed to feel comfortable in church, and that therefore we should use contemporary English. His answer came as a sharp and unforgettable rebuke to my deeply anthropocentric view of worship. 'To God', he replied.

Conclusion

The views of Don Cupitt and the Sea of Faith Network are often flatly rejected by their detractors. In my view this is a mistake. They raise issues which are central to Christian faith. Though orthodox Christians will rightly regard them as fundamentally in error, I think we need to hear what they are saying, partly because the Network expresses a cry from the human heart that the church needs to address evangelistically and pastorally, but also because we should never complacently assume that the church's expression of its faith is perfectly in order as it stands. We need to be reappropriating the Gospel of Christ in such a way that it is allowed to criticize – even to judge – the distorting effects of alien modes of expression which have crept into the church. If Cupitt and company are challenging the philosophical and moral effects of much Enlightenment thought on the church, maybe those who wish to uphold orthodoxy need to accept the validity of some of their critique precisely so that we can be set free from captivity to the Enlightenment.[45]

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45 An earlier version of this paper was given at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford and I am grateful for discussion with those present, especially Alan Garrow.