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A CRITIC OF CUPITT’S NON-REALISTS’ AUTONOMY

Abstract
Philosophy of Religion was trapped in debate between religious realism and non-realism. Don Cupitt, a proponent of religious non-realism is one important figure in this debate. Cupitt’s writings on non-realism can be found in many of his works published in 1980s. Having some traces of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and some modern French thought this radical theologian/philosopher set his own philosophical fellowship. In the heart of Cupitt’s thesis is the claim that modern living as a challenge for today’s humans is caused by the authoritarian nature of the belief in the realist God. To cope with modernity, he asserts, however, humans should be able to make their own laws and impose them on themselves. He calls for autonomy. Whereas many realists find faults in Cupitt’s autonomy claim, the autonomy he advocates appear to lack enough defense in the realm of theological and philosophical debate.

Keywords: Philosophy, Religion, Cupitt, Criticism, Autonomy
CUPPİ'TİN NON-REALİZMIN OTONOMI BİR ELEŞTİRİSİ

Öz


Anahtar kelimeler: Felsefe, Din, Cupitt, eleştiri, otonomi

Introduction

Born in 1934 in Lancashire and a graduate from Cambridge University, Don Cupitt is a British and arguably a prominent living radical Philosopher of Religion of British origin. He is famous for his televised series “Sea of Faith” on BBC in 1984. He is considered as both a philosopher of religion and a one of the makers of theology in the postmodern deconstructive vein (Michener, 2007: 141). Cupitt was born in a secular family who had but little religious influence from his grandmother, Emma Cupitt. Cupitt religious skepticism from the beginning was informed by the plight of his grandmother. In an interview with Alan Macfarlane (Ayabaya 2010a) Cupitt narrates how his grandmother’s inability to pursue higher studies due to family constraints led her to find solace in religion. Cupitt joined the evangelical service on Cambridge campus as a student and later on became a devoted Christian upon reading widely in theology. Later on, after earning M.A degree he was ordained in 1959 deacon to Manchester Diocese and became an assistant Chaplain at a Royal Hospital in Salford (Michener, 2007: 142).

Cupitt however left the Church as he developed and got immersed in his non-realist thought. His thought set forth a radical movement called the Sea of Faith Network. Cupitt gradually moved from his non-realist thoughts, though he still participates in the Sea of Faith Network programs, he currently calls himself a secular Christian. According to him, a secular Christian is a person for whom language (our language) gives one world which is this world and only one life which is this life (Meissner 2012). Critics have since raised several concerns on Cupitt’s non-realist thesis.

The main concern of this article is the period of Cupitt’s life characterized by his non-realist thought. This article does not present the non-realist view of the religious philosopher. It rather looks at some criticism raised on his thought especially those that concern religious autonomy. I shall begin by presenting some criticisms of his non-realist view before concluding with some defects in his “religious autonomy”.

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Critiques and Criticism of Cupitt

It is important to note that Cupitt did not stand as the initiator of religious non-realism and that many religious non-realists have faced several criticisms mainly from the mainstream Churches. Lewis Connolly writes that

“Being a Christian non-realist is a challenging perspective to hold, for it confounds orthodox Christians and irritates Atheists, because it challenges common assumptions in both camps. It is a perspective which seems to have had its day in the established church, and in part this led to my decision to leave the Anglican ministry and pursue Unitarian ministry” (Connolly 2015).

Lewis Connolly is Ipswich Unitarian Minister who abandoned the mainstream church to embrace religious non-realism. Anthony Freeman unlike Connolly who abandoned the Church on his own will, was dismissed from the Church when it was realized he drifted from its core value. Cupitt writes that

“On the 25th of February, this year there was a gathering in Loughborough of members of Sea of faith who are or have to be active in the professional ministry of the Churches. The dismissal of Anthony Freeman by the Church by the Bishop pf Chichester was a matter of a great concern to us. We were of course much troubled about the positions in which Anthony has found himself, and also about the possibility that some others of us also be threatened. How could we support them; and how can we defend the legitimacy of our position within the Churches?” (Cupitt 1994)

It is evident from Cupitt’s speech that non-realists have the tendency of being persecuted. Cupitt himself faced similar problems. For instance, as he mentioned once, it was easy to write and select a topic for research on any contemporary philosopher but students in Cambridge were discouraged to write anything on him or his Christian non-realism thought. Below are some critic and their criticisms on Cupitt’s non-realism.

Stephen T. Davis

Stephen Davis in Against ‘Anti-Realist Faith’ published in Joseph Runzo’s Is God Real? (1993:56) suggests that Cupitt’s as well as other non-realists’ view about God and Religion are not causing any harm to their realist faith. He asserts that,

“Most of us who believe in the existence of God made our peace long ago with the fact that there are intelligent and moral people who do not believe in God. We also know that some of these same people wish to retain certain aspects of the religious life. If Cupitt belongs to this last category (and I believe he does), there is nothing here so far that is particularly threatening to believers in God” (Runzo, 1993, pp. 56)

Davis offers three criticisms of Cupitt’s non-realist thought. He calls the first concern, the rhetorical method. By rhetorical method Davis means that Cupitt’s depiction of realism entails all sort of unusual rational baggage. He thinks that much of those depictions would only startle most realists. This all due to the fact that Cupitt seems to have a way of making positions he opposes look weird and bizarre. More to the point, Cupitt asserts that realism entails (a) that there are unchanging and invisible essences (b) that there is an invisible higher world beyond this world which our language describes, (c) that meaning is a spirit-being that inhabits a body, (e) that a law of nature is a spirit principle that controls events by pulling them with invisible
wires, and (f) that the three (rather than the standard two) modalities of truth- ‘truth’, ‘necessarily true’, and ‘absolutely true’. However, Davis argues that Cupitt has been by this general definition and description of realists seeking to classify all realists as Platonists whereas some of them are really not. He also criticizes Cupitt’s ‘absolutely true’ explanation as strange and understandable. All those names and categorization made by Cupitt as his summary of the core beliefs of realist is not bought by Davis. For Davis, he wouldn’t embrace none of them despite being realist and also, Aquinas, Schleiermacher, Barth and Tillich wouldn’t accept that too.

In his second criticism, Davis scrutinizes the popular clause of non-realism which is ‘Nothing can be known’. A clause Davis considers self-stultifying which means that it is refuting itself. He criticizes the usage of perspectivism because he thinks perspectivism is self-stultifying. Cupitt should provide a reason they should use perspectivism when non-realists seem more non-perspectivists Davis quizzes. Cupitt’s way of understanding truth as well as absolute truth according to Davis is unacceptable, in his words “I am not sure what the term absolute means here- perhaps it just means true. But the position that, there cannot be any true description of anything...refutes itself” (Runzo 1993:58). This is in reference to Cupitt’s earlier position that there couldn’t be any absolute description of what happens. And also, Cupitt’s position that non-realism is not the metaphysical truth of the condition of human only poses a question of what the epistemological status non-realism is supposed to have, observes Davis. More importantly Cupitt’s assertion that religion is historical and cultural all the way through and that it could not have been otherwise be consistently held or is open to many objection Cupitt should answer (Runzo 1993).

In his third criticism, Davis probes the essence of religion as Cupitt mentions. Cupitt mentions that the goal of religious life is a spiritual state that comes beyond all symbols. If spirituality is the goal and heart of religion, it is possible obviously that one can be a non-realistic or even an atheist and still be religious. Davis says that “Indeed, one of my friends- a practicing Zen Buddhist-is an atheist, and his level of spirituality is, I believe higher than mine” (Runzo 1993: 59) To Davis however, though he cannot disprove Cupitt’s contention that spirituality precedes doctrine and what really matters is religion, he thinks the Christian faith is not what Cupitt is setting out to explain. God is not logically teleologically dispensable. This is because the realist God which Davis is defending is the Christian necessary God whose existence is independent of anybody’s views about God and crucial to the Christian faith. For one to necessarily be spiritual there is a need responding appropriately as it was revealed pre-eminently in Christ (Runzo 1993). A point Cupitt would still not accept because of his obvious position about Christ, and the role of the early clergy such as Paul who he thinks distorted the role of Jesus in order to exploit believers. Many criticisms in Davis arguments are issues of definition and explanations which have to do with the main position of non-realism. He partially accepts the position of Cupitt but doubts the ‘Christianness’ of it.

**Gregory Spearritt and Brian Hebblethwaite**

Both Gregory Spearritt and Brian Hebblethwaite have written to ascribe Cupitt’s non-realism position to Christian-Buddhism. They find Cupitt thesis closer to Buddhism than Christianity or an amalgamation of both. Published in Joseph Runzo’s book, as early as 1993, Hebblethwaite, traces remnants of Buddhism in Cupitt’s non-realism. According to him, in Life Lines and the Long-Legged Fly, is it obvious how Cupitt was influenced by Buddhism in developing his the-
Cupit’in Non-Realizmın Otonomı Bir Eleştirişi

sis. In some instances, too Cupitt is seen preferring and commending the Christian ideal of selfless love when he says, “just to will the death of God is atheism, and just to recognize and accept the void is Buddhism; but to accept that for love’s sake, one must die in union with the god is Christianity” (Runzo 1993: 135).

It is clear Cupitt shares Buddha’s hostility to metaphysics like he admires his way of postmodern deconstructionism and agrees with his negation of self and hails his dexterity of touch. Though suggesting Cupitt is sympathetic to Buddhist Theravada philosophy, Hebblethwaite suggests that Cupitt’s suggestion that it is anti-metaphysics is far from truth. Spearritt on the other hand asserts that radical thinkers have been among those who are attracted to Buddhists attitudes and ideas. He argues as he writes that

“In the recent work of Anglican priest and radical theologian Don Cupitt a deliberate attempt has been made to appropriate elements central to Buddhist though and practice. More than a decade ago, in Taking leave of God, Cupitt espoused a ‘Christian Buddhism’ in which ‘the content, the spirituality and the values, are Christian; the form of Buddhist’. He has since seemed to be edging closer and closer to a Buddhist understanding of humanity and the world” (Spearritt 1995: 1)

Spearritt claims that it was Cupitt himself who made position clear about his closeness in ideology to Buddhism when he says that it is an honor for Westerner to be thought to deserve that name. He even describes Zen Buddhism in one of his works as one of the most perfect of all religious traditions and also regards Zen Buddhism as worthy of emulation by Christians (Spearritt, 1995)

Above shows Spearritt position about Cupitt’s writing. Both Spearritt and Hebblethwaite are tagging Cupitt from different perspectives of Buddhism. As Hebblethwaite shows nearness of Cupitt’s thought to Theravada Buddhism, Spearritt also indicates its nearness to Mahayana Buddhism as represented by the second-century philosopher Nagarjuna and Zen Buddhism. Comparing and defining both religions, Spearritt observes that Cupitt is without doubt on the outer as far as ‘orthodox’ Christianity is concerned. Cupitt fits best to the category of Christians called the radical Christians. He defines radical Christianity “…as the one which rejects a supernatural aspect to reality, yet seeks to maintain a perspective that is religious and informed and inspired by Christian story and tradition” (Spearritt, 1995: 2)

Though Cupitt seem fit in the definition of radical theologians, he calls himself, despite his continues changing positions of belief a “Secular Christian”. As early as 2015, in his article published in Horizante with the title, A secular Christian, Cupitt writes that

“I am a secular Christian, a person committed to the critical way of thinking and a person for whom there is only one world, and it is this world; only one life, and it is this life. Our language developed in order to serve the purpose of our life, in this, everyday world; and we cannot usefully pretend to be able to jump clear of the life-world and talk sense about a supposed eternal or supernatural World above. Since the rise of the novel to be our most popular literary form, we seem to have taken secular humanism for granted. Jane Austen’s characters are all of them Anglicans; but the world they inhabit has already become completely secular” (Cupitt 2013: 1).

However, it is one thing labeling oneself as something and appearing to others as something else. If one claims to be Christian but yet behaves likes a Buddhist, people have the right to tag
them as Buddhist as they appear but not Christians as they claim. Below are three aspect of Buddhism that seem to hold attractive to Cupitt writes Spearritt.

Spearritt observes that one of Cupitt’s main concerns is the role and also the abuse of power in Western religion and society. The so-called inactivity of the Western society in the name of religion gave birth to blighted Christianity down to the present day. Like mentioned earlier Cupitt, following the latter Wittgenstein and French philosophy sees no reality besides that which is painted, construed and constructed by a powerful male hierarchy. Cupitt maintains that the crushing ‘overagainstness’ of God in the theology of the Christian has compromised human autonomy. It is in this light according to Spearritt that Cupitt finds Buddhism primarily appealing because it lacks power-wielding hierarchy. The second aspect which seem appealing to Cupitt in Buddhism is its spiritual focus. Cupitt admires Buddha’s way of putting spirituality above theology by exalting the Dharma above the Gods. Thirdly is the non-ideological nature of Buddhism. Already Cupitt advocates a belief less Christianity when he rejects the notion of fixed messages or essences. Both truth and orthodoxy as they appear in realist theology are subservient to power and should not be trusted any longer. Spearritt writes that Cupitt must be impressed by Zen, a Buddhist religion which is neither dependent on any sutras nor guided by any creed or theory (Spearritt, 1995).

Both Cupitt and Zen Buddhists agree that conventional truth is fiction and illusion. Humans have created them with their language. Spearritt also observes that in Buddhism and Cupitt’s works, there is affirmation of a dynamic particularity. He sums up his argument by concluding that while there are extensive areas of agreement similarity between Cupitt’s ideas and Buddhism, there two more areas of similarity. The first is the notion that “eternity manifests itself in the here and now, and that life at this moment is not a means to a future end, but is the end itself” the Buddhists say whilst Cupitt says “eternal life is realized in the winged joy, the non-clinging, non-acquisitive and transient happiness of those who can truly yes to time.” (Spearritt 1995)

On the other hand, Hebblethwaite mentions that his critique of Cupitt’s anti realist thought is largely because it is religiously, intellectually and ethically inadequate. Whilst refuting and objecting Hebblethwaite seeks to relate Cupitt’s thought to that of Buddhism (Theravada Buddhism). Claiming that Cupitt goes extreme with his thoughts not only to religion and ethics but science Hebblethwaite observes that intellectually Cupitt’s non-realism failed because it couldn’t account for the existence and nature of the world. It also fails to detail humanity’s religious sense as well as utterly account for objectivity and truth. Criticizing Cupitt’s ethics which is dependent on his ‘autonomy’ claim, Hebblethwaite mentions that Cupitt pushes for notion of autonomy to quite untenable extremes. Cupitt posits that if only people create their own realms of value are they autonomous moral beings. To Hebblethwaite, Cupitt’s position undermines the nature of value on its essence lays a claim on the mind and heart of the moral agent. Accordingly, he adds it is the decision of man to either accept to acknowledge and respond to the needs of a neighbor in distress. That obligation is however not created by man himself. Even respect for human rights is not optional. Such views assert Hebblethwaite reduces morality as it does religion to a human product. A further ethical inadequacy he observes lies in its failure to do justice to people’s need for resources from beyond should they be enabled to change and to live altruistically. More importantly he observes that the ethical insecurity Cupitt’s view poses is the manifested in his location of all values on the surface of things. It is inadequate ethically, according
to Hebblethwaite, to ascribe to the creation of wrong and right. He relates Cupitt’s anti-
metaphysics theological influence from Hume and Kant to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as he
interprets 20th century philosophy through Wittgenstein and Heidegger. He claims though none
of those great philosophers were atheist Cupitt traced their increasingly atheistic successors’
determination. Again, writes Hebblethwaite,

“What strikes one as extraordinary in Cupitt’s position is the way in which he unquestioningly
embraces atheistic philosophy and translates the heart of Christianity into completely atheistic
form. But the Christian philosopher has no business to be holding on to the coat-tails of athe-
ism, as it has expressed itself since Nietzsche in ever more bizarre and self-destructive philo-
sophical forms” (Runzo, 1993, pp. 147).

In his reply to Hebblethwaite’s criticism, Cupitt replies that

“As always, Brian Hebblethwaite’s paper is vigorous and enjoyable but where has he been
these part thirty years? Even back in the 1950s, when I began to study the philosophy of sci-
ence, my teacher Norwood Russell Hanson was already maintaining that ‘all observations are
theory dependent’. Sense experience and scientific activities do not take place in some privi-
leged region outside culture and history: on the contrary, sense-experience itself has a history,
and the history of science is an integral part of general cultural history” (Runzo 1995:149)

Cupitt claims that Hebblethwaite obviously seems reluctant to face a fact about the late twenti-
eth-century world which says that the more realistic one’s idea of God nowadays, the more ut-
terly anti-Christian their morality. Cupitt mentions that anyone who doubts this claim should
check out the realist God’s attitude to AIDS. Furthermore, he finds Brian Hebblethwaite criti-
cism of his books unacceptable. To him, his books were found extreme by Hebblethwaite be-
cause they are a Christian writer’s response to the human current spiritual condition (Runzo,
1995). Many expected that Cupitt will give answers to the whole issues and defects raised by
Hebblethwaite in his article. However, Cupitt rather went narrative as he tries to give reason
why anti metaphysics dominates today’s theological and philosophical discussion. And the main
worry of Hebblethwaite as indicates Cupitt was the fact that criticisms were coming from a
Christian rather than an atheist. It is also worth mentioning that Hebblethwaite did not give
enough reasons why calls Cupitt a Christian Buddhist unlike Spearritt did. Spearritt was able to
compare the main arguments of Cupitt to that of Zen Buddhism with examples.

Keith Ward

In Taking Leave of God written by Don Cupitt attracted much criticism and stirred a lot of de-
bate ever since it was published in the early 1980s. Among the critics was Keith Ward who re-
piled Cupitt in his “Holding Fast to God” book published in 1982. Marneffe presents both views
in his article, Taking Leave of God or Holding Fast to God. Obviously, he sides with Keith
Ward. He criticizes Cupitt’s autonomy or freedom claim. He thinks Cupitt’s concept of freedom
lacks real freedom on two accounts. The first account is that it is transformed into a divine-like
freedom which is not the case and secondly it seems conceived in the negative term of absence
of necessity. This is because there are necessities to which humans are free to consent as the one
of their character and that can make their greatness. He argues that if human freedom is con-
ceived as another divine freedom, it would then be intolerable to God as He would not tally with
another God. More importantly he mentions that there cannot be two infinities. This is because
if human freedom is spiritual power which is finite it means it can be shared and participated as
well from another infinite freedom. For instance, knowledge of a teacher can be shared by the students without the teacher losing anything. The students come to know without them being denied true knowledge whereas the teacher loses nothing. Thus, he argues that the rejection of God for the sake of human autonomy is based on a wrong understanding of “man” which leads to wrong understanding of God. This means that the autonomy concept was gotten wrong by Cupitt because of his lack of understanding of ‘man’.

Marneffe further argues that he sides with Keith Ward not because he has faith in God but because he has philosophic arguments for His existence as well as the understanding of human freedom which is quite at home with religious attitudes and values. Marneffe appears to be a non-believer of God yet he deems Cupitt’s arguments philosophically not enough for one to Take Leave of God and accordingly he endorses Keith Ward’s argument of Holding Fast to God. Though he appreciates efforts made by Cupitt to bring forth arguments, that is valuable in the materialistic context of today, he remains grateful to Keith Ward for helping his likes in avoiding ‘mistakes’ of Don Cupitt. Cupitt according to Marneffe upholds the spiritual values at the expense of true religion. However, it is doubtful whether the same criticisms would appropriately be related to consequent books of Cupitt. This is because Cupitt keeps on improving his arguments in his consequent books. Surely Cupitt would not accept the criticism of Marneffe that he holds the spiritual values at the expense of religion because what constitutes truth or absolute truth is doubted and denied by Cupitt. To him, the truth humans claim is endemic is religious language which is created by humans (Marneffe 1985)

**The Autonomy or Freedom Claim**

Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society by Paul A. B. Clarke and Andrew Linzey explain autonomy as coming from Greek words *auto* and *nomos* which means self-law. Autonomy “*is the state of being fully self-legislating or self-governing, free and independent of any external constraints*” (Clarke & Linzey 2013: 72). Immanuel Kant is believed to have been the first philosopher to have promulgated the idea of autonomy as a human subject. According to Kant since humans are rational they must be able to take deterministic view of this world which is physical. He is regarded as the initiator of moral non-realism. In the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) broadened the doctrine of autonomy. According to Nietzsche, everything is the product of human and also everything is historical. There exists neither single truth of things out there, world of telos, goals, moral world order nor one true morality. He thinks that there exist several moralities, truths and faiths which are all transient products of human (Clarke & Linzey 2013: 72). In the twentieth century as Nietzsche began to gradually replace Marx as the most widely studied modern philosopher, Albert Schweitzer and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were among the theologians affected by his thoughts. Contemporary theologians to have been influenced by his thoughts on autonomy are the American, T. J. J Altizer (the author of Death of God) and the British theologian and philosopher, Don Cupitt. This can be witnessed in Altizer’s 1960s writings and Cupitt’s writings in the 1980s.

Cupitt justifies the need for autonomy in three ways. In the preface *Taking Leave of God*, Cupitt asserts that to live their own lives and choose their own destiny, modern people increasingly demand autonomy. He further states that

“For first, I must have the freedom of action I need if I am to follow the course of life and habits of an action that will make me the person I want to be; secondly I must be autonomous in the sense..."
of being able to make my own rules and impose them on myself; and thirdly, the morality I actually adopt must itself be autonomous in the secondary sense of being intrinsically authoritative” (Cupitt 1980: x). In this book Cupitt provides two reasons which are central against theological realists. He gives a historical narration as a reason that religions which are heteronomous are no more fit in modern socio-historic context.

The non-realists think that traditional religion imposes autonomous constraints on an individual moral choice thereby inhabiting moral development. The crisis facing traditional religion is the result of its continuing to function heteronomous in the face of the emerging moral autonomy. Cupitt argues that if religion is to contribute to the lives of individuals then it must become autonomous. This he says can be achieved by abandoning realist theology and internalizing its doctrines and adopting “religious” principles on the same terms as any other principle might be adopted (Cupitt 1980: 27) Secondly, he argues further that “it is contradiction to suppose that my highest spiritual freedom could be determined for me from without, and by the act of another” (Cupitt 1980: 28). This means that obedience to God by abiding the ‘divine laws’, to Cupitt necessarily means loss of one’s autonomy.

Critics and Criticisms of Cupitt’s Autonomy

The religious autonomy campaigned for by Cupitt has the following benefits; it provides room for tolerance, moral uprightness as well as freedom and individuals who are architect of moral laws cope with modern life better. However, many have criticized this claim advocated by Cupitt. Stephen Clark for instance observes that metaphysics cannot pass unchallenged as Cupitt relies too much on philosophical distinctions that professional philosophers have long since posed questions about. He safeguards himself from the correction by the treating all unorthodox philosophers as irreligious intellectuals. He mentions further,

“He holds for example, that ‘autonomy’ would be incompatible with willed obedience to an objective law and lawgiver, failing to notice that if this were so (and he gives no argument for it) then autonomy would also be incompatible with the recognition of the laws and logic or scientific method” (Clark, 1988: 4).

He observes further that Cupitt also constantly confuses that which is necessary with that which is priori which consequently to confuse to embrace Lessing’s declaration that contingent historical truth never implies ‘necessary’ or eternal truths. He argues that for one to describe a truth as ‘a priori’ means they should say how they are found out whilst describing it as necessary means they should say that it could not be otherwise. He adds that not all necessary truths are yet known a priori and not all truths known a priori are strictly necessary. Any necessary truth is logically implied by any contingent one (Clark, 1988). In agreement with other critiques, Clark posits that Cupitt’s thoughts appear to him as rhetoric rather than philosophic. To him just like to other critiques Cupitt is not a philosopher. Even his views are not philosophic but rhetoric. He says that “Cupitt, so it seems to me, is not writing as a philosopher at all, but as a rhetorician, and he should not resent the charge” He advises Cupitt further, “as a rhetorician, all he needs to do is appeal to the comfortable prejudices of an audience entirely ignorant of metaphysical subtlety or sophisticated faith. He can drop the names of various philosophers (Wittgenstein or Derrida), but he does not treat them as philosophers, as people concerned to argue their way to conclusions, but (rightly?) as sources of obscure aphorism” (Clark, 1988).
Also, criticizing Cupitt’s autonomy and freedom concept, it is argued that it is surely questionable to assume the possibility of determining one’s own destiny in such an omnipotent fashion. Cupitt is seen mistaken by not realizing that humans see far only by standing on the shoulders of those who have preceded them. In a nutshell, the critics finds Cupitt’s work an intriguing failure with a faulty central thesis which does not really follow from its premises. Melvyn Mathews however does not share this view. Matthews observes that Cupitt provides a religious or apparently religious way of coping with life. Further Matthew notes

“People warm to what he is saying because he confirms their skepticism as being correct and places it within what he would call the mainstream of Christian spirituality. He has understood the anomie, the emptiness and darkness of the modern experience and is effectively saying to modern men and women, ‘Yes, what you are experiencing is within the gift of God, it is really a form of dark night of the soul; what you have to do is be courageous and stay within it’. (Matthews, 1985: 4)

In another critical review, “Cupitt’s Dogmas” by Fergus Kerr, besides calling Cupitt’s book a Christian Buddhist presentation, he hails the book as a piece that could help a first-year theology student to exercise their power of reasoning. He admits also that Cupitt’s work is so fertile in raising questions and provoking protest. He also agrees with Cupitt that many people today are quietly agnostic about Christian doctrine but quite capable of practicing Christianity to good effect. On autonomy and freedom, he criticizes that “some of the time, what he says is no more than the sensible parent’s advice – attempting to get a child to think for himself, to be reasonably critical of the moral standards which one hopes that he has learnt to internalize from his upbringing and so on” (Kerr 1981: 5).

By autonomy Kerr writes, Cupitt is endorsing liberal democratic republic but as to whether a liberal democratic republic is the best kind of society may be doubted (Kerr 1981). No one can envisage the danger of making individuals alone the source of all law. As it states in this modern world, religious people who make up the largest part of the world population are following and depending the set aside religious laws in their every aspect of life.

He argues further that it was because Cupitt raises all the deepest theological questions his dogmas lead him that he gave all the most inadequate answers. Finding his work still unfruitful Kerr writes that “demythologizing Cupitt’s dogmas is an exercise from which few could fail to profit” (Kerr 1981: 10).

Among the strong critics of Cupitt is Keith Ward who replied Cupitt in his Holding Fast to God book published in 1982. Marneffe presents both views in his article, Taking Leave of God or Holding Fast to God. Obviously, he sides with Keith Ward. He criticizes Cupitt’s autonomy or freedom claim. He thinks Cupitt’s concept of freedom lacks real freedom on two accounts. The first account is that it is transformed into a divine-like freedom which is not the case and the second, it seems conceived in the negative term of absence of necessity. This is because there are necessities to which humans are free to consent as the one of their character and that can make their greatness. He argues that if human freedom is conceived as another divine freedom, it would then be intolerable to God as He would not tally with another God. More importantly he mentions that there cannot be two infinities. This is because if human freedom is spiritual power which is finite it means it can be shared and participated as well from another infinite freedom. For instance, knowledge of a teacher can be shared by the students without the teacher
losing anything. The students come to know without them being denied true knowledge whereas the teacher loses nothing. Thus, he argues that the rejection of God for the sake of human autonomy is based on a wrong understanding man which leads to wrong understanding of God. This means that the autonomy concept was gotten wrong by Cupitt because of his lack of understanding of ‘man’.

**Conclusion**

Despite the changing positions in Cupitt’s non-realist arguments, religious freedom or autonomy seem to cut across all his developing thoughts. This is because religious freedom or autonomy is considered by Cupitt as a necessity for modern living. Modernity also is an important aspect that is unfolding in Cupitt’s thoughts in his recent writings. Though in Cupitt’s understanding, it is through the rejection of the realists God and the “holding fast” of the non-realists God that could set man free to impose laws on themselves, critics have also given reason why one can maintain their realist belief and still be autonomous. Keith Ward, Kerr and Melvyn Mathews among others have disagreed with Cupitt’s claim which proposes that autonomy in religion can only be achieved when non-realism is embraced.

Cupitt’s autonomy claim can be considered as unnecessarily necessary. This is because humans can choose to abide by divine laws and yet live an autonomous life. What then happens when our self-imposed laws concord with divine set laws? Also if obedience to God destroys our autonomy, as responsible adults deeming it loving and trusting to obeying our parents, friends and spouses may mean our autonomy is lost. However, our autonomy is intact because we do not only obey them due to the fact that we find their moral advices sound but we also do not hesitate to query their directives we find opposing to our moral sense. People of faith also find divine laws as agreeing to their basic moral sense. Just like state laws are imposed on citizens of the state without many agitations do those state laws take away the autonomy of the citizens? Some few people moral sense would choose not to agree with the states laws and yet would see those laws as oppressive. The realists only find their obedience to the law as a way of showing that the divine laws appeal to their basic moral sense.

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