

# The Religion of Ordinary Life (Parts 1-3)

## INTRODUCTION

Is it possible / desirable to have a religion that does away with all 'metaphysical' beliefs? No 'God', no 'life after death', no 'soul' or rebirth/reincarnation'?

Explain that one modern (or post-modern) philosopher who has been promoting this view is Don Cupitt.

Show students Cupitt's thinking about 'Life' [Part 1 of his summary of 'The Religion of Ordinary Life' included at the end of these notes].

Explain that 'post-metaphysical', can mean different things and is a contested term, but for the purposes of investigation we might say that it refers to dimensions of existence and being that go beyond the purely physical, and may deal with questions such as whether the universe has an ultimate purpose, whether there is a life after death, whether there is a God or ultimate creator, and so on.

## ACTIVITY

Ask the students to respond to such questions as:

- *Don Cupitt says that 'life is everything' and 'life is all there is': is he right, do you think? What **more** might there be?*
- *Does there have to be a final 'Truth' to the way things are?*
- *Cupitt says 'Life is God': is that a good enough definition? What **more** might God be?*
- *Is there any role left for religion if this is a 'post-metaphysical' world?*

Point out that Cupitt (Point 6) quotes John's gospel, "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1.1). The passage continues, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made." Ask students to consider that there is poetic wisdom in these verses, and ask them to comment as such questions as:

- *How far do you think Don Cupitt's interpretation of the verses is a helpful one for people today?*
- *In what sense might language (in its broadest sense) be responsible for the way the world is?*

Show students Parts 2 and 3 of Cupitt's 'The Religion of Ordinary

Life' [See notes below]. Provide some reading and reflection time and ask students to comment on anything they find puzzling, interesting or contentious.

After some time exchanging views, get some feedback from the groups and encourage an exchange of views and ideas.

In particular bring out their thinking on such ideas as:

- *What might the consequences be of believing that human beings have no 'soul'?*
- *If there is no ultimate 'justice' in the after-life, what are the consequences for this life?*
- *Why should 'love' be esteemed most highly of all values?*
- *could some conflicts be resolved if people gave up on the idea of possessing a fixed 'identity'?*
- *If people believe that their life is 'all they have and all they'll ever have', how might that affect their attitudes and behaviour?*

Play 'The Fear' by Lily Allen [warning – contains explicit lyrics – see, e.g: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-wGMISuX\\_c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-wGMISuX_c) and lyrics, e.g: <https://genius.com/Lily-allen-the-fear-lyrics>].

Then ask students to consider such questions as:

- *What are the lyrics saying about life?*
- *Why are a couple of swear-words used?*
- *What are the cleverest parts of the lyrics?*
- *is there a message here about society / social attitudes?*
- *What is 'The Fear'?*
- *If people don't know 'what's right and what's real' will they invariably behave selfishly and irresponsibly?*

# Don Cupitt: The Religion of Ordinary Life

## PART 1. Life

### 1. Life is everything

Life is the whole human world, everything as it looks to and is experienced by the only beings who actually have a world, namely human beings with a life to live.

### 2. Life is all there is

Our age is now post-metaphysical. The world of life is not dependent upon, nor derived from, any other realm, not is there any other world after it, or beyond it.

### 3. Life has no outside

Everything is immanent, interconnected, secondary. Everything remains within life. When we are born, we don't come *into* this world, and when we die we don't *leave* it. There is no absolute point of view from which someone can see 'the Truth', the final Truth, about life.

### 4. Life is God

Life is that in which 'we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28), within which we are formed, and of whose past we will remain part. Both our ultimate Origin and our Last End are within life. Life is now as God to us.

### 5. To love life is to love God

Every bit of our life is final for us, and we should treat all life as a sacred gift and responsibility. We should see our relation to life as being like an immediate relation to God. We are moved and touched by the way all living things, and not just we ourselves, spontaneously love life, affirm it and cling to it.

### 6. Life is a continuous streaming process of symbolic expression and exchange

The motion of language logically precedes the appearing of a formed and 'definite' world. It is in this sense that it was once said that 'In the beginning was the Word'.

## **PART 2. Life And My Life**

### **7. My life is my own personal stake in life**

The traditional relation of the soul to God is now experienced in the form of the relation between my life and life in general. As, traditionally, one's first responsibility in religion was for the salvation of one's soul, so now a human being's first duty is the duty to recognise that I simply am the life I have lived so far, plus the life that still remains to me.

### **8. My life is all I have, and all I'll ever have**

I must *own* my own life, in three senses: I must claim it wholly as mine, acknowledge it, and assume full responsibility for the way I conduct it. I must live my own life in a way that is authentically mine. To be authentically oneself in this way - the opposite of 'living a lie' - is the first part of the contribution each of us should seek to make to life as a whole.

### **9. Every human person has, in principle, an equal stake in life**

This principle is vital to our ideas of justice and of love for the fellow-human being. Murder and other offences against the person are almost everywhere regarded as equally serious, whoever the victim is. The love of God is love and fellow-feeling for 'the neighbour' - or the fellow creature - generalised without limit until it becomes the love of all life.

### **10. In human relationships, justice is first in order, but love is first in value**

We should esteem love most highly of all; but love itself must be based on justice, not least in parental/filial and in sexual relationships. The work of justice is to clear a level space for love, but love eventually 'kicks away the ladder' and exceeds justice.

## **PART 3. The Limits Of Life**

### **11. Life is subject to limits. In life, everything is subject to temporality**

In life everything is held within and is subject to the movement of one-way linear time. Life is, as people say, a single ticket: there are no second chances or retakes.

### **12. In life, everything is contingent**

In life, the one-way linear movement of time makes every moment final and every chance a last chance; but at the same time everything is contingent. This painful combination of finality with contingency is what gives rise to people's talk of luck or fate. More to the point, it also follows that there are no fixed or unchanging absolutes in life. There are no clearly and permanently fixed realities, or identities, or even standards.

### **13. Life itself, and everything in the world of life, is mediated by language**

Consciousness is an effect of the way language lights up the world of experience, and self-consciousness is an effect of the use of language to talk about itself. Thought is an incompletely-executed motion of language somewhere in our heads.

### **14. Life goes on, but my life is finite**

The only deaths we need to prepare ourselves for are the deaths of others who are dear to us. We will never experience our own deaths. So we should simply love life and say Yes to life until our last day. There is no point at all in making any other preparation for death.

## **PART 4. Faith In Life**

### **15. When I have faith in life, love life, and commit myself to it, I have bought a package deal: life with its limits**

Whereas in traditional theology 'evil' was seen as a secondary intruder into an originally perfect world, and therefore as being eliminable, the limits of life, which were traditionally called 'metaphysical evil' or 'evils of imperfection', are essential to life. Unlike God, life is finite and imperfect, and has to be accepted as being neither more nor less than what it is. If I want to refuse the package, the alternative for me is 'passive nihilism' or thoroughgoing pessimism. For the religion of life, apologetics<sup>1</sup> takes the form of an attempt to show that pessimism is unreasonable.

### **16. The package deal of life cannot be renegotiated**

There is nobody to negotiate the deal with. We cannot hope to vary the terms on which life is offered to us.

### **17. Life is bittersweet, and bittersweetness is greatly to be preferred to pure sweetness**

In the classic iconography of Heaven, everyone is 33 years old, everyone looks the same, and everything is oddly dead, like a plastic flower on a grave. In real life, we love imperfections, irregularities, beauty spots, and signs of frailty or age. The mortal actual is far more lovable than the ideal.

### **18. We should never complain, nor even feel any need to complain**

Life should be loved purely affirmatively and exactly as it is. Everyone gets basically the same deal, and nothing else is on offer. Any sense of victimhood or paranoia or grievance is out of place, and we should get it out of our systems. Never say, nor even *think* 'Why me?'

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<sup>1</sup> 'Apologetics' means speaking in defence of a particular position or set of beliefs. For Christians this first took the form of Paul's defence of his Christian faith when he was put on trial – see Acts 22.

## **PART 5. Solar Living**

### **19. Life is a gift (with no giver) that is renewed every day, and true religion is expressive, 'solar' living**

By faith, and without any qualification or restriction, I should let life well up in me and pour itself out into symbolic expression through me. Thus I 'get myself together': we become ourselves by expressing ourselves.

### **20. Solarity is creative living-by-dying**

In solar living I live by dying because I am passing away all the time. In my symbolic expression I get myself together, but as I do so I must instantly pass on and leave that self behind. I must not be *attached* to my own life, nor to my own products, or expressed selves. My self, and all my loves, must be continuously let go of and continuously renewed. Dying therefore no longer has any terrors for me, because I have made a way of life out of it.

### **21. Solar living creates great joy and happiness**

My symbolic expression may take various forms, as it pours out in my quest for selfhood, in my loves or my work. In all these areas, continuous letting-go and renewal creates joy, which on occasion rises and spills over into cosmic happiness. This 'cosmic' happiness is the modern equivalent of the traditional Summum Bonum, the 'chief end' of life.

### **22. Even the Supreme Good must be left behind at once**

I, all my expressions, and even the Summum Bonum, the supreme Good itself, are all of them transient. Eternal happiness may be great enough to make one feel that one's whole life has been worthwhile, but it is utterly transient. Let it go!

## **PART 6. The End Of The Real World**

What people call 'reality' is merely an effect of either power, or habit.

### **23. The Real: a product of lazy, unthinking habits of perception and interpretation**

The fixity and unchangeability that people like to ascribe to the real world out there is in fact merely the effect upon them of their own lazy habits. They are in a rut of their own making.

### **24. There is no readymade Reality out there**

There is no readymade meaningfulness out there, and no objective Truth out there. Meaning is found only in language, and truth belongs only to true statements. Because life is always language-wrapped, everything in the world of life is always shaped by the language in which we describe it, and in a living language everything is always changing. It follows that we ourselves, and our language, and our world, are shifting all the time like the sea. Nothing is, nor can it be, objectively and permanently fixed.

### **25. We ourselves are the only Creator**

As we become critically aware, the objective world melts away. So many supposed features of the world turn out to be merely features of the language in which we describe it. By now, critical thinking has dissolved away objective reality, leaving us with just the human world-wide web, the stream of all our human activity and conversation, and the changing consensus-world-picture that it generates. Our world is our communal, partly-botched work of folk art.

### **26. Nihilism and creative freedom**

There is no stable real world and no enduring real self. But this situation is not one for despair: it offers us the freedom to remake ourselves and our world. By solar living we can each of us make a personal offering, a small contribution to life, an oblation.

## **PART 7. Death**

### **27. Passing out into life**

Unattached, but loving life to the last, I am able at the end of my life to pass out into the moving flow of life in general. The only sensible preparation for death is the practice of solar living.