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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last dozen years the phrase ‘The Sea of Faith’ has become synonymous with the work of Don Cupitt and the network that has emerged to develop his ideas of a non-realist perspective on God. Cupitt’s thinking along these lines first came to prominence with his two volumes published by SCM in the early 1980s\(^1\) plus the 1984 BBC TV series, *The Sea of Faith*, together with the subsequent book of the same name. One of the key ideas that Cupitt explores is, the notion of God being a human creation and a projection of the human imagination. This is not a new line of thinking and Cupitt points out that the process of demythologising the concept of God has a long post-Enlightenment history through such key thinkers as Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. Interestingly other writers have drawn parallels between this contemporary debate and a similar discussion over the demythologising of the gods in classical Greek culture between Plato and the Sophists.\(^2\) In its simplest form, Cupitt argues we can no longer regard God as a being with an objective reality but should regard all talk about God as discussion about the human condition and values, and he has continued to elaborate this idea in his subsequent work. However, it should be noted that Cupitt is not alone in developing these ideas and other philosophers of religion have taken a similar path.\(^3\) Perhaps Cupitt's greatest strength is as a populariser of an important strand of modern thought and in this he has been joined by people like Anthony Freeman, the Anglican priest who was notoriously sacked by the Bishop of Chichester.

It will be clear from this introduction that there is (to continue the metaphor) an ocean of ideas here and questions raised by a ‘Sea of Faith’ perspective involve: philosophy, theology, classics, psychology, sociology, history, ecclesiology and more. So how can we hope to begin to explore all the currents, eddies and whirlpools in these deep waters? Perhaps one way is through the image chosen by Cupitt for his TV Series and taken up by the network of groups exploring his ideas: The Sea of Faith. What does the metaphor telling us about this way of viewing God? To address such a question we must go back to 1867, the year in which Matthew Arnold published his poem 'Dover Beach' which provides the context for the evocative image of the ebbing tide of belief.

*Dover Beach* by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; À on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high stand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.
Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

I shall argue that Arnold's metaphor of 'the Sea of Faith' has subsequently been used to provide three important elements for a contemporary framework of belief, which maybe called a 'Sea of Faith perspective':
1. Conflicting ideas
2. Loneliness and Wholeness
3. Structures and the Process of Change

However, I shall also ask whether Arnold's poetic imagery is adequate to the task and suggest that another sea poem might be more suitable.

2. ELEMENTS OF A 'SEA OF FAITH' FRAMEWORK

2.1 Conflicting ideas

Arnold's poem was written in the Victorian Era which modern mythology tends to regard as a time of confidence and imperial triumphalism. That is true, up to a point. However, it was also a time of great uncertainty and conflict. In the period leading up to the probable composition of 'Dover Beach' in 1851 and its publication in 1867 there were a number of key historical events; including: the Chartist riots (1842); the famine in Ireland and the repeal of the Corn Laws (1846); the coup d'ètat of Louis Napoleon (1851); the Crimean War (1854-56); the outbreak of the American Civil War (1861); the Austro-Prussian War (1866). And lying in the near future were: the First Vatican Council (1869); the Married Woman's Property Act (1870) and the Paris Commune (1871). Thus, the poem was written against the background of great change in the political world and it was also written against the background of great change in the world of ideas. For instance, there had been the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1829 and the rise of the Oxford Movement within the Church of England. In 1843 John Henry Newman resigned his Anglican orders and was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1845. The theological world had also been challenged through an infamous book by the Tübingen theologian and pupil of F C Baur, David Friedrich Strauss. His Life of Jesus (1835-36) in which he argued that all the supernatural elements in the gospels were due to the creative minds of the early Christians caused great controversy and was translated into English by the novelist George Eliot in 1846. Furthermore, Eliot's translation of Feuerbach's influential book The Essence of Christianity came out in 1854 and in which it was argued that the gods are a projection of ourselves which are then given a mistaken objectivity.\(^5\) This was followed in 1859 by Charles Darwin's Origin of Species published only after much searching of his conscience by Darwin but to great public debate in the worlds of science and religion.\(^6\) Owen Chadwick, commenting about this period, has stated that:

No educated Christian could fail to feel the disruption, caused by new knowledge, to the faith of his childhood.\(^7\) And this intellectual turmoil appears to be reflected in Dover Beach when Arnold writes:

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.\(^8\)
Nicholas Lash has argued that these lines could allude to one of Newman's University Sermons in which he stated:

Controversy, at least in this age, does not lie between the hosts of heaven, Michael and his Angels on the one side, and the power of evil on the other; but it is a sort of night battle, where each fights for himself, and friend and foe stand together.\(^9\)

In 'Dover Beach' there is an air of peace – the sea is described as 'calm' and the bay is 'tranquil'. However, this is deceptive because the hidden power of the waves can be detected in the sound they make drawing back the shingle in a confused and disordered way:

Listen! you hear the grating roar
of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high stand,\(^10\)

It is the latent and ceaseless power of the sea which sounds the discordant note in the otherwise serene picture. The sea is a metaphor for the ceaseless conflict in society and in the world of ideas. Just as worldviews can appear as secure as the coastline, they are under constant attack from different perspectives and alternative ideas that are being thrown up against them. This is similar to the phenomenon that Don Cupitt describes near the beginning of *Taking Leave of God*:

the traditional realist understanding of God belongs entirely to traditional culture and must vanish with the changeover to the modern outlook. At the very least, a considerable revision of belief in God seems to be required.\(^11\)

### 2.2 Loneliness and Wholeness

The sea is a recurring theme in Arnold's poetry and often is linked with a sense of loneliness, melancholy and unrequited desire. In 'The Forsaken Merman' a mythical creature opines to his children the loss of his partner and their mother to a life on land. Her reason for leaving them was to go and pray:

She said: 'I must go, for my kinsfolk pray
In the little grey church on the shore to-day.
'Twill be Easter-time in the world - ah me!
And I lose my poor soul, Merman! here with thee.'\(^12\)

However, the mermaid does not return from her devotions and although her partner notes laconically that 'Long prayers in the world they say' he is moved by his sense of loneliness and love to search for her with their children:

We went up the beach to the sandy down
Where the sea-stocks bloom, to the white-wall'd town
Through the narrow paved streets, where all was still,
To the little grey church on the windy hill.
From the church came a murmur of folk at their prayers
But we stood without in the cold blowing airs.
We climb'd on the graves, on the stones worn with rains
And we gazed up the aisle through the small leaded panes
She sat by the pillar; we saw her clear:
'Margaret, hist! come quick, we are here!
Dear heart,' I said, 'we are long alone;
The sea grows stormy, the little ones moan.'
But, ah, she gave me never a look,
For her eyes were seal'd to the holy book!
Loud prays the priest; shut stands the door.
Come away, children, call no more!
Come away, come down, call no more!13

We can see in that poem a number of the motifs that are also found in 'Dover Beach': a beach is mentioned; there is the threat of the sea's power; the weather is once again still; but most striking of all is that in both poems the poet is standing at a window with the haunted feeling that something precious has been lost. Compare those lines with this section from 'Dover Beach':

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high stand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.14

If we read 'The Forsaken Merman' with 'Dover Beach' it is tempting to speculate that as Arnold stands, shut out of the 'little grey church', he is also the outsider looking in on his lost faith as well. The faith that he sees receding with the tide through the window overlooking Dover Beach. This metaphor could also be seen as underlying a passage in The World to Come where Cupitt cautions against looking into the Void of meaninglessness (a window) and projecting a picture onto it (orthodox religion).
Instead, he takes up Arnold's image of water and argues that we need to recognize the rituals seen through our 'windows' are all created by human beings and:

until we have looked long enough into the Void to feel it turn our bones to water we will not be persuaded. The hard lesson is that since it will not change, we must. To endure the Void we must undergo inner transformation, learn a discipline of selflessness, purge the terror of the Void by renouncing that in ourselves which it terrifies.  

2.3 Structures and the Process of Change

The sea is symbolic of change but there are indications in 'Dover Beach' that Arnold's romanticism yearns for a society in which change has ceased – particularly in the reference to the stillness of the night and 'the cliffs of England stand' (line 4). However, he knows that in his time great change has come upon the world of ideas and the social world. They have changed forever:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

The critique of faith which had begun in the poet's time with Feuerbach was to reach a new intensity with the ideas of Nietzsche who was born only 6 years before 'Dover Beach' was probably written and was beginning his military service at age 24 when the poem was published. In his discussion of Arnold's poem Lash asks how Christian theology should respond to this thoroughgoing religious scepticism that Arnold had already sensed and argues that a pietistic dissolution of institutions or romantic refuge in love such as the appeal in 'Dover Beach':

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another!

is inadequate. He believes that: Unstructured human existence, socially, linguistically, conceptually, is an autistic illusion. In other words, it may be tempting to want to live without social structures or to take refuge in either individualism or a close partnership but ultimately such a recourse is far too narrow. Cupitt puts the same temptation in more poetic form when he opens his discussion about how some have responded to his critique of faith and suspicion of religious institutions. He argues that many people feel:
One should live in the hills and walk in the free air, an alien and a wanderer, suspicious of all creeds and organizations and owing no allegiance to any of them. It's not that we trust ourselves, no, not at all, but we actively distrust groups.20

Yet, Cupitt also seems to find this thoroughgoing individualism inadequate. Although Lash and Cupitt tend to have different responses to 'Dover Beach' in this respect they appear to share a similar perspective. For Lash the journey of faith involves 'the quest is for ever less inappropriate structures' both inside and outside the Church;21 while for Cupitt the same journey requires 'the continuous reinvention and renewal of humanity'22 which again has important implications for the Church internally and externally.

2.4 Summary

I have argued that the metaphor of the Sea of Faith, taken from 'Dover Beach', has contributed three key aspects to what I have called a 'Sea of Faith perspective'. These have been in the form of challenges that religion must face on the shoreline of belief:

1. Conflicting ideas
2. Loneliness and Wholeness
3. Structures and the Process of Change

However, it is at precisely this last point – the process of change – that I feel we reach the limits of Arnold's metaphor and, where we need to turn to other writers and other imaginations.

3. AFTER 'DOVER BEACH'?

I have heard it said in discussions about 'Dover Beach' (like many people I am sure) that the image Arnold uses implies sooner or later the tide must come back in, yet neither the cultural nor the intellectual tide has shown any sign of turning in intervening years since Arnold wrote his poem. That is not to say that it is impossible to mount a strong case for a more traditional understanding of Christianity;23 however, despite their work and that of many others, the tide remains resolutely distant from the foreshore. If the tide has not changed and shows no sign of changing, then perhaps it is time to find a new poetic metaphor for faith. Since, aquatic and nautical images continue to play a significant role in framing some theological thought24 I would like to argue that the time has come to leave Dover Beach on the south coast of England and make our way to the Lleyn Peninsula in North Wales in the company of another poet, R S Thomas:

*Tidal* by R S Thomas (b 1913)

The waves run up the shore
and fall back. I run
up the approaches of God
and fall back. The breakers return
reaching a little further,
gnawing away at the main land.
They have done this thousands
of years, exposing little by little
the rock under the soil's face.
I must imitate them only
in my return to the assault,
not in their violence. Dashing
my prayers at him will achieve
little other than the exposure
of the rock under his surface.
My returns must be made
on my knees. Let despair be known
as my ebb-tide; but let prayer
have its springs, too, brimming,
disarming him; discovering somewhere
among his fissures deposits of mercy
where trust may take roots and grow.²⁵

It seems to me that 'Tidal' provides a better starting point for reflection on faith and change than
'Dover Beach' because R S Thomas's use the metaphor is much more dynamic than Matthew Arnold's.
Arnold's image of the tide turning on the Sea of Faith implies that belief has withdrawn and leaves the
future unstated. While this may be true in the very specific instance of some Christian institutional faith
structures in Britain, there is evidence that: (a) faith and religious experience remains a significant part
of the lives of those outside or on the fringes of organized religion;²⁶ and (b) it is still an important
factor in global terms.²⁷ Faith has continued to change and develop in ways that Matthew Arnold could
never envisage. The tide has come in and gone out on numerous theological and philosophical
perspectives since he employed his well-known metaphor. Whether our philosophical position is that
of a realist, a critical realist or a non-realist most would agree that our understanding of 'God'
(whatever that word may mean to us) can only be partial and, as finite creatures, is being constantly
remade and rediscovered. Beyond 'Dover Beach' it is (or should be) the sort of dynamic encounter
which R S Thomas describes, not the 'beached' experience that it was for Arnold. Anthony Thiselton
has recently argued that the hermeneutics of selfhood and the search for truth should be based on a
conversational approach or a dialectic of question and answer. In this respect, Thomas's description of
faith as a tide that constantly returns to the shore is surely a much more elegant description of the
conversational dynamics of faith than Arnold's image, which only catches one element in a much more dynamic process.

Endnotes

5 For a recent analysis of Feuerbach's understanding of religion see Van A Harvey, Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
7 Owen Chadwick, The Victorian Church Part II Second Edition (London: A & C Black, 1972), p.124 cf 'For many thoughtful mid-Victorians the result of this intellectual ferment was a disturbed and unsettled faith – or indeed increasingly as time progressed, no faith at all. Matthew Arnold's celebrated poem 'Dover Beach' is only one particularly evocative manifestation of this unease, and the correspondence and diaries of a host of other Victorians, both eminent and otherwise, reveal precisely the same tensions and nostalgic longing for a fast-vanishing age of religious certainty.' (Stephen Ross White, Authority and Anglicanism (London: SCM Press, 1996) p.51)
8 Arnold, Selected Poems p.77 lines 35-37
9 Nicholas Lash, Theology on Dover Beach (London: DLT, 1979) pp vii and 5
10 Arnold, Selected Poems p.77 lines 9-11.
11 Cupitt, Taking Leave of God pp.20-21
12 Arnold, Selected Poems p.21 lines 56-59.
13 Arnold, Selected Poems p.21 lines 68-84.
14 Arnold, Selected Poems p.77 lines 6-14.
15 Cupitt, The World to Come (1982) p.66 Again Cupitt seems close to Matthew Arnold in a call for such an inner journey. As Charles Taylor notes on Arnold's Culture and Anarchy: 'Arnold is exploring here a third path, neither faith in God of a normally recognized kind nor scientific agnosticism. It is an aspiration towards wholeness, towards a fullness of joy where desire is fused with our sense of deepest significance. Its source is the Romantic ideal of self-contemplation through art.' (Charles Taylor, Sources of Self: The Making of Modern Identity Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press 1989) p.409
16 Arnold, Selected Poems p.77 lines 21-28
17 Arnold, Selected Poems p.77 lines 29-30
18 Lash, Dover Beach p.20
19 Cupitt, Radicals and the Future of the Church (London: SCM Press, 1989) p.7. Echoing Arnold's embrace of the Romantic ideal of self-contemplation through art, Cupitt goes on: 'In these times the only truth left to us is the truth of art, and art requires one to remain wholly uncommitted.'
20 Lash, Dover Beach p.20
21 Cupitt, Radicals p.172
23 E.g. a collection of papers from a conference on New Testament interpretation and the social sciences was framed by the story of Jesus calming the storm on the sea of Galilee (Modelling Early Christianity edited by Philip F. Esler, London: Routledge, 1995) and a theologian has defined his discipline in terms of sailing: 'It is in contact with powerful, fluid elements, symbolized by wind and water, over which it has little control and by which it is drawn and driven toward mysterious goals. The ship of theology has no foundation other than itself, no external prop, but only the structural integrity and interplay of its component parts, which enable it to float and sail.' Peter Hodgson Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology (London: SCM Press, 1994: 3)
24 Reprinted by permission from Bloodaxe Books Ltd: taken from Mass for Hard Times by R S Thomas (Bloodaxe Books, 1994) p.43