LIFELINES, by Don Cupitt. *SCM Press,* **1986. Pp. 232. £7.95.**

I do not expect that Don Cupitt would expect to be well reviewed in *New Blackfriars* and I do not intend to disappoint him, but *Lifelines* is an intriguing and tantalising book in its attempt to sketch a 'post-modern' approach to religion. I say 'sketch' because it is difficult to work out from the hints in this book what his position actually is; and I say 'religion' because, while I am prepared to accept the author's affirmation that he is religious, I cannot see how he could be regarded as Christian. Neither can I see how he could be said to believe in God, nor that he himself would want to say that he believes in God. His religion has developed within a Christian culture but seems to be actually closer to Buddhism — as he virtually admits — in which a vestigial language about God is occasionally retained but which does not refer to anything of substance. Indeed, for a book on spirituality, there is very little talk about God. While his use of the word 'God' does not refer to anything of substance, Cupitt would paradoxically say that there is as much substance behind 'God' as there is behind anything else — because there *is no* substance behind anything else. All we have is language (or 'texts' as he often prefers to say, having been much influenced by Derrida) which has meaning, with which we play games, and which with other symbolic systems embodies cultures. How far language corresponds with what we might crudely call a real or objective world out there is something that cannot be determined, so we cannot assert that there are things out there to which our language refers. The words have to remain self-sufficient; 'there is nothing outside the text'.

Lifelines is in fact a taxonomy of the spiritual life represented by sixteen staging posts in a flow-diagram that adorns the cover of the book. Cupitt describes these sixteen positions that can be adopted in one's religious development from Genesis that applies to toddlers, to Mythical Realism commonly found in children, to such stages as Doctrinal Realism, Designer Realism and several others. To this extent the author is sketching pathways of religious development from infancy to old age and could be compared with James Fowler and Gabriel Moran. Cupitt, however, makes finer distinctions and is altogether more theologically interesting and controversial than they are.

The sixteen stages follow three main pathways representing, Cupitt supposes, Catholicism, Protestant Orthodoxy and Liberal Protestantism. I would suggest, however, that they are not sixteen discrete positions, for it seems that more often than not an individual will synthesise two or perhaps several of these. It is not the author's intention to map out lines of spiritual development from, as it were, primitive to more sophisticated stages, but inevitably something like that does happen because the first six stages are all 'realistic' in which the believer believes that religious language refers to things out there, or better to truths independent of the one who believes. For example, to a transcendent God, the persons of the Trinity, heaven, and so on. But the next two stages are semi-realistic (Objective Symbolism and Protestant Ethical Idealism) leading to The Crisis after which realism is abandoned altogether. What remains are forms of aestheticism, moralism, and engagement or disengagement with society. We end with stages that have the whimsical titles Slipping Away, Life Everlasting and Good Night, but on the whole Cupitt avoids whimsy and homespun wisdom, though not entirely so.

It is only in the last sixth of the book, however, that we get down to the non-realistic form of religion that Cupitt assumes is all that can be plausibly sustained in the post-modern age. He is at his most intriguing when playing with some of the ideas of Foucault and I would have willingly done without the exposition and criticism of those early stages that make up the first five-sixths of the book, to have a more detailed and scholarly discussion of his own position.

It is in this final part that the author suggests that we must de-centre or disperse God and de-centre ourselves. I am not sure what he means by this. How does de-centring differ from dissolution? For though I have seen Cupitt write elsewhere that we must criticise

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theism in a way which is not reductive, God does seem to be dissolved in this book. Now Paul Tillich many years ago criticised theism, in his own individual sense of 'theism', to make space for a God who does not exist, in his own individual sense of 'exist', and Tillich did this in order to make space (perhaps without realising it) for the traditional God of medieval theology. But Cupitt does not seem to be making space for God in any traditional sense of the word 'God'. He inevitably seems to have dissolved God in dissolving the world outside language, and as such I do not think that he can be anything other than reductionist.

Cupitt is, as the reader would expect, pluralist, though in practice, as he admits, he is only in a position to describe a plurality of Christian options. He is also relativist but he accepts the kind of criticism of relativism that Peter Berger suggested some years ago that to be a relativist is itself a relative position. So Don Cupitt accepts the relativity of his own relativist position with the result that he accepts the 'truth' (in what I would regard as an odd sense of that word) of all the religious positions that he has described and criticised in his sixteen-fold taxonomy. Even though a Metaphysical Realist (stage four) would condemn Don Cupitt's relativist pluralism with (I think) no God and certainly no life beyond the grave, Cupitt is bound to regard their's as an acceptable and true form of religion — relatively. Small wonder he says his book is ironic, for if truth resides everywhere it resides nowhere.

As a result it is difficult to get into a serious debate with Cupitt. If only one could find a specific issue that he regards as true or false in an absolute sense with which one could disagree. Indeed Cupitt is so nice and liberal and tolerant and condescending that it sets your teeth on edge.

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'IF CHRIST BE NOT RISEN...' ESSAYS IN RESURRECTION AND SURVIVAL. Edited by Elizabeth Russell and John Greenhalgh (St. Mary's, Bourne Street, London. 1986. £2.50.

This is the third in the series of *Tracts for Our Times.* A distinguished group of writers contributes on a variety of themes more or less focussed on resurrection and afterlife. The aim is the restatement of traditional Christian belief in a broadly Anglo-Catholic mode. Each essay is short and most attempt to make one or two clear points.

John Macquarrie opens the book with a competent presentation of the historical context of resurrection in Judaism, a discussion of its meaning which focusses on the the new integration of physical and spiritual in the 'spiritual body', and an argument for accepting faith in the resurrection on the grounds of testimony from the past and of present experience. He is the only contributor to take any major twentieth century theologians with a degree of seriousness—he briefly argues against Rudolf Bultmann, Gordon Kaufman and Edward Schillebeeckx. This is the piece that comes nearest to a theological overview of resurrection, and it succeeds to some extent—but it would have been good to have had some handling of the modern revival of eschatology and of the connection of resurrection with the understanding of the Trinity, the church and ethics.

The latter is, however, dealt with in a fascinating essay by Richard Harries, 'The resurrection in modern novels'. He faces the moral challenge of the resurrection: how can Christ's 'triumph over suffering be presented in a way that is sensitive to people experiencing "the deep and awful and irremediable things"? Or so that it does not take away from the profound effect of a Christ who shares our bitter anguish?' (p. 40) He argues that Tolstoy's *Resurrection* fails both as literature and as theology, but that Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment,* Patrick White in *Riders in the Chariot* and William Golding in
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