

Flight From Transcendence: Bishop Spong's Doctrine of God

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Despite outward appearances, the crisis facing the mainline Christian churches today is not primarily about either sexuality or the politically charged culture wars that it is often construed to be. There is a genuine theological crisis, and the attempt to portray this crisis in political or sociological terms is really a trivialization of more central issues, indeed, a case of idolatry. The central issue at the heart of the division is one of Soteriology. The crucial question is whether the person and work of Jesus Christ are constitutive of salvation, or are instead merely illustrative of general truths that can be discerned elsewhere as well. This radical difference in two visions of Christianity—one that affirms the person and work of Christ to be constitutive of salvation, and one that does not, has implications for every area of theology.

An understanding of the person and work of Christ touches not only on Christology and Soteriology, but also presupposes some understanding of the relation between God and the world, and

of how God is known. The two rival understandings of Christ's person and work represented by constitutive and illustrative Christianity have radically different understandings of God and how God is known, and of how God acts and speaks in the world, or, conversely, rather, how God is silent, a God who does not speak except in the realm of contemporary subjective experience. A noteworthy example of this illustrative theology of salvation embraced by many in the mainline churches today can be found in the retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong's doctrine of God, to which we will now turn.

Why, one might ask, should we focus on Bishop Spong? Despite the notoriety he has gained for his controversial writings, do not Spong's views represent a rather extreme position in the Episcopal Church? Besides, is he not really an amateur rather than a professional theologian?

There are several reasons to focus on Spong's theology as a prime example of the alternative theology in the Episcopal Church. Spong is arguably one of the contemporary Episcopal Church's most prolific authors. He is probably the most well known Episcopal advocate of the illustrative school of Christianity. His books, read by both clergy and lay people, are continuously at the top of the best seller lists. Until the election of Gene Robinson as bishop, Spong was the public face of revisionism in the Episcopal Church. He was the most likely Episcopalian to be interviewed by television programs like *Sixty Minutes* or other media outlets to provide the representative liberal voice in the Episcopal Church. As an acknowledgment of his popularity, Harvard University singularly honored Spong with a one-year teaching assignment on the occasion of his retirement.

While Spong's theology may not be as sophisticated as more academic representatives of illustrative Christianity, his views have a purity that help to make the contrast with constitutive Christianity clear. Spong prefers his Liberal

Protestantism straight, undiluted by the chaser of ambiguity imbibed by many of his fellow bishops. When it comes to revisionist Christianity, Spong is the real deal. He has embraced the illustrative alternative to constitutive Christianity with a whole-hearted and evangelistic enthusiasm. He demonstrates clearly that the claim that there are two incompatible visions of Christianity that mark the Episcopal and other mainline churches cannot be dismissed as the paranoia of an over-active reactionary imagination.

Spong's Doctrine of God



At one time, it might have seemed odd to devote a discussion to Spong's doctrine of God. After all, the controversial bishop made his reputation by publishing books that focused on questions of biblical studies, not systematic theology. Even then, it was clear, however, that Bishop Spong had a doctrine of God, and that this doctrine largely determined *a priori* the conclusions he reached in his discussion of the Bible. This has become increasingly evident as Spong has moved to what he now calls a post-theistic notion of God. To understand Spong's doctrine of God, we begin first with a discussion of his epistemological and hermeneutical agenda.

Mythology

An examination of Spong's notion of mythology yields a concise introduction to his hermeneutic. Spong's approach owes much to the demythologization program initiated in the middle of the last century by the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann. Like Bultmann and other Liberal Protestant theologians, Spong

uses the term “mythology” in the following ways.⁽¹⁾

1) Myth is a way of speaking of the “other world” in terms of this world, the use of this-worldly metaphors or symbols to refer to the divine. We might call this a history of religions definition of myth.

2) Myth explains unusual this-worldly phenomena in terms of divine intervention. Myth is a story of the gods coming to earth. Events on earth are explained in terms of otherworldly causality. This is myth understood as divine intervention.

3) Myth entails a pre-scientific view of natural law. The cosmology of the world is three-storied, with heaven above, earth in the center, hell beneath. Hence Bultmann’s famous statement that no one could use a light bulb or the “wireless” and continue to believe in the miracles of the Bible.⁽²⁾ Spong echoes Bultmann’s fascination with the “three-decker universe,” but has moved beyond concerns about light bulbs and radios to a passion for space flight and rocket ships. This is a pre-scientific world-view definition of myth.

4) Myth is a “fable” or “untrue story.” Ancient people used to make up stories to explain how the universe worked. Today, we know that these stories are not literally true and that “science (or reason) can explain all these things.” Myth belongs to a pre-critical world-view. This could be called the Enlightenment or popular definition of myth.

Spong incorporates all four definitions in his discussion of Scripture, without clearly distinguishing between them. According to Spong, the purpose of identifying the mythological elements in Scripture is to move beyond mythology to a “deeper” appropriation of Scripture. As in Bultmann, Spong’s approach to myth involves a two-step progression. It is only after we have decided in the first step that myth cannot be taken literally that it is then demythologized to provide a deeper (existential or experiential) meaning in the

second step. Spong's discussion of the virginal conception provides an illustration of the approach.⁽³⁾

So Spong argues first that the mythical account of the virginal conception cannot be taken literally (step one):

First, Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the virginal conception are full of contradictions that cannot be reconciled (*RBF*, 209-210). Spong insists: ". . . it is impossible to ignore the fact that mutually contradictory details are present. At the very least, mutual contradiction means that someone is wrong, and it opens the possibility that none of the Gospel writers is correct in the literalness of their assertions."⁽⁴⁾ We are thus free to lay aside the literal meaning of the passages.

Second, the biblical writers had a pre-scientific view of the universe (definition 3: myth as pre-scientific). "The common belief at that time was that God dwelt just beyond the sky, which was not far above the earth . . . this deity seems to have been limited by a Ptolemaic world-view." (*RBF*, 211).

Third, we know better than that now; science has enlightened us (definition 4: Enlightenment and popular definition). "We since then have flown in airplanes many thousands of feet above the earth. Human beings have journeyed to the moon, and human technology has devised the means by which we have viewed with dramatic closeness every planet that rotates around our sun. . . . The inescapable conclusion is that God was bound at the time of Jesus birth to a view of the universe that is today abandoned by every literate human being." (*RBF*, 211-212). Note that Spong does not clearly distinguish between definitions 3 and 4 and uses references to airplanes and rocket ships much as Bultmann earlier had been entranced with light-bulbs and the electric wireless.

Therefore, it is impossible that Jesus could have been born of a virgin (definition 2: myth as divine intervention): "Of

course these narratives are not literally true. Stars do not wander, angels do not sing, virgins do not give birth, magi do not travel to a distant land to present gifts to a baby . . . The virgin birth tradition of the New Testament is not literally true.” (215).

It is important to note the logical jump that Spong makes here: (a) The New Testament writers believed in a three-decker universe (myth: definition 3); (b) We live in a world of airplanes and rocket ships (myth: definition 3, 4); Therefore, Jesus was not born of a virgin (myth: definition 2). Spong also carelessly lumps together several things that might operate on different levels historically, scientifically or theologically— wandering magi, celestial phenomena, virginal conceptions.

Having finished step one, we move to step two.

Because we know that the stories of Jesus’ virginal conception are not literally true, they must convey some other kind of truth (myth: definition 1). “Underneath the level of the fanciful, literal details the message of the birth narratives was and is simple. This was the early church’s way of saying, What we have met and experienced in Jesus the Christ we do not believe human life alone is capable of creating. He must be of God. ” Lest we misread Spong here, it should be noted that he clearly states elsewhere in his writings that he does not believe in the resurrection of Jesus or in the incarnation of God in Christ in any literal sense.⁽⁵⁾ As with Bultmann, the ultimate point of the Jesus-event has to do with my understanding, not with an objective act of God in history. It would seem then that Spong’s approach parallels Bultmanns fairly closely.⁽⁶⁾

A few observations follow from Spong’s discussion of “mythology” in Scripture. The first and most obvious is that Spong does not believe in miracles or “divine intervention” in

any "ordinary language" sense of the terms. This has become emphatically clear in his more recent post-theistic writings. It is only after Spong has decided that texts telling the stories of such interventions cannot be interpreted in a straight-forward or "literalist" manner (Spong's term) that he searches for another "non-literal" way of interpreting them. It also needs to be noted that nowhere in his writings does Spong make a theological or philosophical case against miracle or divine intervention. Rather, Spong deftly misleads his readers to assume that he has actually developed a case against a literal reading of the accounts of divine intervention in the virginal conception or bodily resurrection of Jesus by subtly blurring different definitions of mythology. Thus by asserting the questionable premise that the biblical writers believed in a three-decker universe (which does not fit well with our modern scientific cosmology), and by pointing to the rather obvious fact that the biblical writers never flew in spaceships or airplanes, Spong draws the unwarranted conclusion that Jesus could not have been born of a virgin and could not have risen bodily from the grave. The reader is not meant to notice the obvious illogicality of the argument because Spong has not alerted him or her to the sleight-of-hand move from an imperialistic Enlightenment equation of a pre-scientific world-view as "mythology," to a rejection of divine intervention in history as "mythology."

Such a blatant example of an illogical leap leads the reader to suspect that something else is going on. Just as the stage magician uses misdirection to draw his audience's attention away from what is really happening when the rabbit is slipped into the hat, so we might suspect that Spong's case against mythology may be hiding a more subtle agenda. If his argument against divine intervention is fallacious, might it not disguise his real reasons for rejecting the biblical accounts of the virginal conception or the bodily resurrection of Jesus? I would suggest that Spong's real reasons for rejecting the notion of divine intervention are that he has an a priori

commitment to an epistemology, a notion of religious experience, and a doctrine of God in which the notion of divine intervention “makes no sense.”

Experiential-Expressivism

Spong’s epistemology is a form of an approach to religious knowledge that Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck has dubbed “experiential-expressivism.”⁽⁷⁾ Experiential-expressivism finds its origins in nineteenth-century Liberal Protestant theology, beginning with the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (the “father” of Liberal Protestant theology), who combined the Pietist tendency to interpret the subject matter of Christianity in terms of the experience of faith with a Neo-Kantian theory of knowledge. From Pietism, Schleiermacher borrowed the notion that Christianity is about “me” and my “religious experience.” From the German Idealist philosopher Immanuel Kant, Schleiermacher accepted the fundamental distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena*. Knowledge, for Kant, had a strictly regulative function. There could be no knowledge of the thing in itself (*noumena*) but only of the thing as it appeared to consciousness (*phenomena*). Schleiermacher combined pietist spirituality with Kantian epistemology to conclude that the object of Christianity was religious experience. There could be no knowledge of God in himself but only of God as experienced in human consciousness. The object of Christian religious experience was the “feeling” of absolute dependence on God. In its numerous variations, Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic appeared again and again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the leitmotif of Liberal Protestant theology. Spong’s hermeneutical program is one more variation.⁽⁸⁾

At the heart of Spong’s hermeneutic lies a notion of pure inarticulated and inarticulatable experience. Spong summarizes this view in his book on *The Resurrection*: “What is real, however, is that behind our religious systems, our holy words,

our power claims, and even behind our fears lies an experience that transforms, deepens, and calls us into what Paul Tillich has called 'the new being.' " Spong speaks of this experience over and over again in the most glowing terms. It is an experience that leads into "eternal truth"; it has dramatic power to change lives; it is "mind-altering, consciousness-raising" (*Resurrection*, 37, 44, 100, 244).

Although Spong speaks so rapturously of "religious experience," it is very difficult to discern precisely what he means by this because his notion of experience is ultimately a totally subjective one, incapable of being articulated in any meaningful way. Spong understands this experience to be non-cognitive and pre-linguistic, culturally and historically timeless (*RBF*, 75, 230-231; *Resurrection*, 9, 99).

Of course, human experiences are always conveyed and communicated in terms of particular languages, cultures and historical contexts. Spong is quite aware of this even as he repeatedly rejects any notion that experience can be permanently articulated in propositions. In a significant passage, Spong discusses the relationship between experience and language: "The experience is always primary, the reflective understanding of the experience is always secondary, and the tales that illumine or explain the understanding are always tertiary. . . . An intense experience ultimately has no form. As soon as it achieves form it is distorted. The only means we have to do this is by and through the use of words and symbols." (*BW*, 33). Indeed, the problem of the relation between experience and linguistic interpretation creates a genuine tension in Spong's theology. On the one hand, he knows that there can be no preservation of experience without language; on the other, he seems to believe that there is something inherently evil in the tendency to express timeless experience in propositional terms, and labels all such attempts with his favorite term of opprobrium, "literalism."

Nonetheless, since experience cannot be articulated except through language and propositions, Spong shows himself a true child of post-modernity in embracing whole-heartedly the notions of linguistic and cultural perspectivism and contextualism. Spong repeatedly emphasizes the historically and culturally contingent nature of attempts to communicate human experience. He insists that the writers of the New Testament were very much people of their own times, and thought in a frame of reference peculiar to the first century. "They were bound by the limits and subjectivity of their own language, their own history, and their own way of life." (*RBF*, 228). At the same time, Spong at least concedes that the modern period itself cannot escape from its own entanglement in history and culture: "The formulations of today or tomorrow will be no more eternal than the formulations of first-century people." "To freeze the interpretation of the experience in the words of any era, including our own, would be to guarantee the eventual loss of the truth of the experience." (*RBF*, 169, 231).

How then to reconcile these two claims? On the one hand, Spong speaks of a timeless, pre-linguistic, pure experience. He castigates those who strive to capture this experience in permanent propositions. Yet he insists nonetheless that it is impossible to convey experience except with language and symbols and emphasizes repeatedly that we are all subject to limitations of culture, language and history. The answer to this question is the key to interpreting Spong's religious epistemology and thus his hermeneutic. From the moment that religious experience occurs, there will be an attempt to communicate it to others, although the very attempt to do so freezes the experience in a moment of time and tends to substitute the words for the reality of the experience. This linguistic expression of religious experience is the "interpretation" that comes down to us in mythology, Scripture, and ritual. The interpretation, in words that point to but cannot capture the religious experience, is inevitably

expressed in terms of that limited world-view that provides the context in which the original experience occurs. Like a snowball careening down a slope, the articulated linguistic expression of the original experience, picks up cultural and linguistic baggage as it rolls along. (*Resurrection*, 33, 41; *RBF*, 25, 228).

The modern interpreter's job then is essentially to scrape away the dross, to get beyond but also go through the language that not only stands in the way of, but also provides the only access to the original experience in order that one might recover something of that experience for oneself (*Resurrection*, 31; *RBF*, 31-32, 222). Ironically, while Spong criticizes those who wish to freeze biblical interpretation in the language of literalism, his goal is similar those he criticizes. Despite his endorsement of the language of historicity and cultural perspectivism, Spong is interested neither in history or culture in themselves. On the contrary, his hermeneutic is itself a flight from both. The goal of Spong's hermeneutic is to escape from the vagaries of history to seek a pure timeless experience that is immune from those vagaries. The mistake of literalists is not that they search for unchanging truth but that they confuse the interpretive dross of history and culture with the unchanging reality of subjective experience itself.

In light of Spong's account of religious experience, it becomes evident why he rejects the notions of miracle and divine intervention as mythological. Ultimately, his problem with the narratives of scripture is their very narrativity—a narrativity that speaks in the language of history and cultural conditionedness. To the extent that the biblical stories that witness to God's action in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth point beyond themselves to a timeless moment of pure experience in which Spong and modern people can themselves participate, they have served their purpose. If those narratives are understood as referring to

actual historical events in which God has revealed himself in a concrete and unrepeatable history, they can be of no use to us. Literalists might appeal to scripture in an attempt to speak of a historical revelation, but history is lost in contextualism and the limited culture of a first-century world-view. Literalists pretend to find a definitive Word from God in Scripture, but ultimately language is incapable of communicating divine revelation. To speak of a revelation of God in word or deed is to objectivize the eternal, subjective experience, in which alone (Spong believes) God can be known.

God

There seem to have been at least three decided shifts in Bishop Spong's doctrine of God, of sin, and of salvation. If a future Spong-like historical-critical scholar were to compare Spong's early work *This Hebrew Lord* with his works from the mid-1990's, and, then, finally, his Harvard lectures published as *A New Christianity For A New World*, the scholar would have to conclude that at least two and possibly three different authors had written the works.⁽⁹⁾ *THL* obviously represents a later stage in the development of Spongian theology. It is much more positive in its evaluation of history and language; the doctrines of God, sin and salvation, are closer to that of traditional orthodoxy. At some points, there is a dangerous tendency toward literalism. *THL* is obviously a pseudepigraphal work, written by a Deutero-Spong.

Whether *THL* was indeed written by Deutero-Spong, it is clear that it belongs to a period when its author was still somewhat enamored with the "biblical theology movement" of the mid-twentieth century. He praises Hebrew thought and criticizes Greek thought. Hebrew thought is wholistic, Greek thought dualist. The Hebrews could not possibly have believed in the dualist notion of the immortality of the soul. Rather, they believed in the "continuing life of the whole person," that is, resurrection. In this book, Spong discusses "biblical

concepts" in the manner of the mid-twentieth century "biblical theologians." He notes that the Hebrews believed that God was revealed in history (*THL*, 19, 21-22, 33-36, 64, 69, etc.).

All of this contrasts with Spong's later writings. In his book on *The Resurrection*, Spong rejects the notion of bodily resurrection as "crudely physical" (84). In *Living in Sin and Born of a Woman*, he laments that the God who is portrayed in the Old and New Testaments is an immoral, sadistic and patriarchal deity. Far from believing that God is revealed in history, the later Spong insists that the essence of the biblical message has to do with "timelessness."

Finally, in Spong's Harvard lectures, he seems even more sceptical of the biblical writings. He now seems to believe that only the "Q source" behind the gospels of Matthew and Luke and the pseudepigraphal *Gospel of Thomas* are safe routes to the timeless experience that leads to a post-theistic God.

Rather than indicating the existence of separate writers (as a Spong-like historical-critical scholar might conclude), the noticeable shifts from *THL* to the later works reveal more about Bishop Spong's tendency to embrace the latest trends in fashionable theological and biblical scholarship than anything else. In *THL*, Spong was still under the spell of the liberal wing of the biblical theology movement. In the mid-nineties his authorities tended to be liberationist or radical feminist. More recently he has been fascinated with the Jesus Seminar and the Sea of Faith movement.

That is to say that in his earlier work, Spong may still have endorsed something like an orthodox notion of the transcendence of God. Spong wrote that, "To the Hebrew, God and the world were not antithetical, nor were they identical. God was the creator; the world was the creature. God was bigger than the creation, but the creation revealed the creator's glory." (*THL*, 33). Spong noted with apparent approval that the Hebrews believed that the world was created

ex nihilo, from nothing. All of this seems to have been abandoned in Spong's middle period. Far from believing in a transcendent deity, Spong embraced a position in which God is in some sense identical with the world. The transcendence of God was lost in a kind of radical immanentism (or monism).⁽¹⁰⁾ ". . . I no longer look for God or for ultimate meaning in some distant place beyond this world," said Spong. "I rather seek these realities in every moment and in every relationship. For me the transcendence of God is no longer something different from the immanence of God. Transcendence is always a dimension of the immanent. The immanent is the point of entry; the transcendent is the infinite depth of being discerned behind any moment, beyond any point of entry." (*Resurrection*, 289).

Spong came to identify God with Paul Tillich's "Ground of Being." There were also echoes of Hegel's notion of an evolving deity in Spong's notion of God: "God is the life force that emerges first into consciousness, then into self-consciousness, and now into self-transcendence, and ultimately into we know not what." (*Resurrection*, 290).

Finally, since his retirement, Spong has come to endorse a position he calls post-theistic. Spong insists that he is not an atheist, and much of the baggage from the 1990's is still there. There are still the appeals to three-decker universes, to "timeless" religious experience, and warnings about the perils of literalism. There are the echoes *ad nauseum* of Tillich's equation of God with the "Ground of Being." There are still the occasional endorsements of monism. For example, Spong states, "[W]e can recognize that these two words—human and divine—do not point to separate entities; rather, they are like two poles of a continuum that appear to be separate and distinct, yet when one travels from one to the other, the discovery is made that their shadows blend into and invade each other." (*NC*, 83)

At the same time, what seems to distinguish Spong's post-theistic doctrine of God from the position he held in the 1990's is that he now no longer believes that God is personal in any sense. ". . . I begin a search for the words that will enable me to talk of a post-theistic God, the God who is not a person but the source of that power that nurtures personhood, not a being but the Ground of Being, the source from which all being flows." Spong now suggests that when we use personal language of God, we are personalizing the values by which we live in community. (NC, 240, 66)

The theistic God that Spong rejects in his move toward post-theism is precisely the personal God who exists "outside the universe," who intervenes in the world to perform miracles, who redeems humanity from sin, who answers prayer, who cares about human beings and watches over them. Spong insists that the theistic God is a "delusion that encourages worshipers to remain in a state of passive dependency." There is no such God to hear our prayers: "Prayer consequently perpetuates the primary illusion of theism—namely, that we are not alone, that there is a personal power somewhere, which is greater than the limited power of humanity; and that this personal power can effectively deal with all of those issues that lie beyond human competence to solve." (NC, 58-59, 191).

Of course, this theistic personal God is on almost every page of the Bible, and Spong is honest enough to recognize that. He says, "[T]he stories contained in these [biblical] texts are filled with the traditional-personal-God concepts. The biblical focus is clearly on a supernatural being who watches over human life from some vantage point outside the world." (NC, 66) Spong wants us to be aware that when we abandon theism, we are "jettisoning the primary image of the biblical God, which mean[s] that [we are] also jettisoning all aspects of bibliolatry, including the perception of the Bible as our source of theistic revelation." (NC, 67) If Spong once wrote of *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism*, we might well

wonder whether there is now anything left to rescue.

What has led Spong to endorse first a monist doctrine of God, and, finally, a notion of a post-theistic God that is little more than an impersonal force? One can only speculate here because, as so often, Spong asserts rather than argues his point. I would suggest that a crucial factor in this move is Spong's hermeneutic of religious experience. Repeatedly, Spong suggests that the only pathway to knowledge of God lies in a moment of timeless, pre-linguistic religious experience that cannot be located in either the external world or in propositional statements. This is a move away from transcendence and a move toward interiority because such an experience is in effect an experience of one's own subjectivity. It is a small step from arguing that God is only known through the experience of one's own subjectivity, and identifying that subjectivity in some way with that which it experiences. If God is known in a timeless, experience of the self, might not God be identified in some manner with the self? Finally, might not the God identified with the self be lost except as a post-theistic impersonal affirmation of the self? Spong's Harvard lectures seem to confirm this suspicion. Repeatedly, he ascribes to human beings what the Scriptures ascribe to God. So Spong suggests that the Hebrew slaves who escaped from slavery were "incapable of embracing the maturity of freedom," and so credited their survival to a theistic deity. (NC, 68) In another passage, he suggests that in the "process of coming to know that which we name as divine, the God who is love is slowly transformed into the love that is God." (NC, 69) He says that the purpose of the story of God's appearing to Moses at the burning bush is "to enable us to do what it is not easy to do." The point of the story is that we must "shout [our] 'I am' to the world!" (NC,73) And again, "[I]t is the church, not the Jesus figure, that must itself play the role of the rescuer reaching out to those who appear to be the possessed ones . . ." (NC, 168) One cannot help but think of G. K. Chesterton's wry observation: "That Jones shall

worship the god within him turns out ultimately to mean that Jones shall worship Jones.”⁽¹¹⁾

Although Spong insists repeatedly that experience cannot be captured in language or images, he continually associates the content of religious experience with language of “love,” “life,” and “self.” It is in his explorations of these three motifs that Spong most frequently is led to monist interpretations of the divine nature. In a typical passage, Spong states: “We call life good. We look for and find meaning and divinity, not always so much in an external God as in the very depths of our humanity, but it is divinity nonetheless. We discover transcending spirit within ourselves. We explore the enormous range of our consciousness looking for ways to leap over barriers in every direction. . . . We have come to the dawning realization that God might not be separate from us but rather deep within us. The sense of God as the sum of all that is, plus something more, grows in acceptability.” (*RBF*, 33). Such notions have been taken to their logical conclusion in Spong’s post-theistic reduction of God to a source for human striving and activity, but not one who actually cares for or can intervene in human lives in any way. It seems clear that Spong himself has drawn the conclusion that follows logically from his epistemology of religious experience.⁽¹²⁾

Christ

A monist, or immanentist, doctrine of God has clear implications for Spong’s understanding of Christ. If the entire creation is already in some sense identified with God, then it makes little sense to speak of an incarnation of God in Christ in any literal sense. How can God become a human being, if in some sense all human beings are already identified with God? Any distinction between Jesus of Nazareth and other human beings must be quantitative at best. Spong states: “Jesus must now be defined as differing from you and me in degree but not in kind.” (*NS*, 240) We see in Jesus the

potential that is inevitably in store for all of us. Spong's Christology is therefore adoptionist. Jesus Christ is not God become human, but a human being in whom God was especially present. Spong emphatically denies that St. Paul (or other New Testament writers) understood Jesus to be the God-man of later Christology. Paul would not have said that "Jesus is God"; nor was he a Trinitarian (*RBF*, 123-124, *BW*, 25). For early Christians like Paul, Spong insists, "Jesus the Christ was a special human life through whom God had uniquely acted and in whom God was uniquely present . . ." (*RBF*, 124). Hence when Spong uses incarnational language, he is not speaking of the incarnation of God in a unique sense in a particular human being. Rather, he is identifying God with all humanity (*BW*, 40).

In his post-theistic phase, Spong suggests that "Jesus understood as the incarnation of this theistic deity is . . . without a future." (*NC*, 81) He insists that the Johannine claim that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation has caused suffering so great that it would be hard to measure. (*NC*, 172) It is "an ultimate act of human folly" to claim that Jesus is the only way to God, Spong announces. "I will say, however that Christ is the only way for me, for that is my experience." (*NC*, 239)

Still the post-theistic Spong speaks of Jesus with all the enthusiastic language of a commercial for a new Star Trek movie: Jesus is (or was?) "only a human being," but he is a human being who makes known the "Ground of Being," He is a "source of godly empowerment" who "calls us beyond our boundaries," who enables us to "enter another dimension of humanity," who "opens new and compelling doors," who is the occasion of an "experience" that "draws us deeper and deeper into life." (*NC*, 148) If we only knew what such meaningless abstractions meant, we also might be willing to follow Spong's Jesus to boldly go on an "experience" where no man has gone before. But as Spong himself reminds us, such words have no

literal meaning

Salvation

Given his monist doctrine of God and his adoptionist Christology, Spong's understanding of salvation follows rather predictably. Since the religious experience of "love," "life" and the "self" is to be identified with the very nature of God, so the meaning of the love and life reflected in the mission of Jesus is to be found in Jesus' own self-acceptance. As Jesus affirmed his own self, identical with the Ground of Being, so we are invited to affirm the being that is identical with our own selves. "The biblical portrait reveals a Jesus who had the courage to be himself. . . . He both lived out the meaning of the Ground of Being in his own life and through his love gave to others the capacity to enter their own being at deeper and deeper levels." (*RBF*, 242). Spong insists that Jesus loved life so much that not even the boundaries of death could stop that love. Lest, however, we be led by such enthusiastic language to presume that Spong has finally forgotten that the God he believes in does not act outside the realm of purely subjective experience, Spong makes it clear that he is not talking about the resurrection of the dead Jesus in any literal sense. Resurrection is but one more example of mythological language that is really speaking about a timeless and unspeakable experience. Resurrection is not primarily something that happened to Jesus, but something that happens to us. The resurrection narratives invite us into that "timeless Christ experience where resurrection is not so much an event of history as it is an experience of transcendence, ever available to those whose ability to live reflects the presence of the love that is God." (*RBF*, 240-241).

The nature of salvation is fairly clear then. As Jesus affirmed himself and recognized his own identity with God's presence, so also we are to affirm ourselves and embrace our own divinity. As Spong interprets the message of the Gospel of

John: "How can one worship the source of being, the great 'I Am,' except by having the courage to be the self God created each of us to be? The Christian is the one called so deeply into life, into love, and into being that he or she can say with Christlike integrity, I AM!" (*RBF*, 207). Spong assures us that such self-acceptance leads inevitably to affirming the selves of others as well. "I worship . . . Jesus when I claim my own being and live it out courageously and in the process call others to have the courage to be themselves." (*RBF*, 242).

Of course, one might well ask whether self-acceptance leads inevitably to the love and acceptance of other selves. The earlier Spong seems to have been aware of this problem. Apparently influenced by the doctrine of sin that some in the biblical theology movement discovered in the New Testament, the early Spong endorsed what he called a doctrine of "original sin" found in Paul. He praised the Hebrew notion of creation and the fall that expressed a deep insight into the meaning of life. He saw sin as a basically self-centered attempt at ego-building that results in more separation rather than community (*THL*, 69, 73).

The Spong of the later writings rejects emphatically any doctrine of original sin or the fall. He seems unaware that love can be self-centered or that self-affirmation might not be the road to salvation. He asks for the evidence that creation began good and fell into sin: "Are not the human qualities we now call selfishness or self-centeredness the result of the drive to survive far more than of the fall into sin?" (*RBF*, 34-35). Spong now blames the doctrine of a fall into sin on St. Augustine rather than the "Hebrews' deepest insight," and Paul's understanding of sin is perceived to be pathological—the product of the guilt-wracked conscience of a self-hating homosexual (*BW*, 215-217, *RBF*, 108 ff.).

In his middle period, Spong seems to have recognized only two primary sins—lack of self-acceptance, and lack of inclusiveness. Because it would imply that people are not

acceptable just as they are, it would presumably be exclusive to insist that Jesus' call to discipleship might demand change, perhaps even repentance from sin.

However, in his post-theistic period, Spong has once again returned to the notion of evil, if not sin. Spong seems to see the most evident sign of what we would call evil in anxiety. In language that would warm the heart of a frontier revival preacher, Spong sees the current penchant for tobacco smoking, alcohol consumption (even the occasional social drink), and coffee drinking as symptoms of a chronic anxiety that points to the death of theism in contemporary culture. (Oddly, Spong does not mention card playing, dancing, or movie attendance as sure signs of the devil's work.) Spong argues that the rise of theism itself was the inevitable concomitant of the constant anxiety that was the result of the evolutionary development of human consciousness. As human beings became self-conscious, they became aware of their own mortality, and their separateness from the rest of the world. To avoid the shock of the possibility of non-being, of meaninglessness, and an overwhelming sense of angst, human beings invented the theistic god, a personal power outside the world, and outside the self, that provided security and meaning in a threatening world: "Theism was born as a coping device, created by traumatized self-conscious creatures to enable them to deal with the anxiety of self-awareness." (NC, 49)

As with the notion of a personal theistic God, Spong explains sin in evolutionary terms. It is not as if there were ever a historic fall into sin for human beings who had been created evil. Rather, most of what Christians call sin can be explained as simply a side-effect of the evolutionary struggle for survival. Spong notes that human beings are "a work in progress." They are neither perfect, nor fallen, but "simply incomplete." They do not need to be rescued by a divine savior from a fall into sin that never took place. (NC, 124, 159)

At the same time, Spong is troubled by an irrational dimension

to what we call evil that he feels cannot be explained adequately as the simple struggle to survive, for example, self-destructive addictive behaviors that destroy the self, the irrational evil of dictators like Hitler or Stalin, or seemingly pointless physical suffering of diseases like AIDS. At this point, Spong takes the logic of his pan(en)theist deity to its dreadful logical conclusion—that evil itself must find a home in the nature of deity. Spong suggests that evil must be accepted and “taken into God” and “into ourselves.” Without embracing both good and evil, we cannot be whole. “If we are made in God’s image, then good and evil must be lifted into consciousness in both God and ourselves.” We must allow God and Satan to come together in each one of us. We “must bind good and evil into one. [We] must unite Christ with Anti-Christ, Jesus with Judas, male with female, heterosexual with homosexual.” (NC, 166-167)

Of course, this willingness to embrace good and evil as not only part of ourselves, but part of the divine being, does not mean that Spong has dispensed with sin entirely. In his Harvard lectures, Spong uses the word “evil” to describe human behavior only a few times. He is willing to use the word “evil” to describe dictators like Hitler or Idi Amin. He also uses the word “evil” to describe a religious leader he knows who disapproves of homosexuality, and in reference to Christian missionaries. “We now must see those [missionary] activities as base-born, rejecting, negative, and yes, I would even say evil.” (NC, 178) Clearly Spong’s vicious attacks on the “idolatry” of those he calls “literalists” implies that some at least are outside the pale of salvation (RBF, 170, 232, *Resurrection*, 99). (Yet can there be idolatry in a monist universe? If idolatry is the worship of the creature rather than the Creator, can any behavior be idolatrous in a world in which creatures share in God’s very being?) It would appear that besides dictators like Hitler, the only truly evil people in Spong’s world are those who recognize that they are forgiven sinners, who refuse to embrace the evil in

themselves, and who want to tell others about a personal God who cares about sinners and rescues them from their sin.

Gnosticism

Despite his rejection of the notion of original sin, I would suggest that the later Spong nonetheless maintains a doctrine of the fall, though the parallel to his doctrine is not Christian, but gnostic. Gnosticism was an early heresy that rejected the Christian doctrine of sin and redemption. For gnostics, the existence of evil in the world made the Christian doctrine of creation problematic. Accordingly, gnostics identified the fall with the coming into being of the created realm itself. Although, the highest deity in the pantheon of gnostic being was neither tainted with matter or evil, the god who had created the world was a lower deity who had infected the world with evil by bringing matter into existence. While Spong does not believe that matter is evil, his persistent contrast between timeless pre-linguistic religious experience and the verbal and cultural forms in which experience must be communicated points in the same direction. For Spong, language and culture themselves seem to be a falling away from the pure being of experience. Though language and cultural contextuality are inevitable, the ultimate goal of the religious is to relinquish the realm of language and culture and embrace pure experience. Unfortunately, experience is inevitably expressed in terms of language, culture, and worldviews, so the hope for salvation is somewhat dismal. At the least, however, we can avoid the mistake of literalists, confusing frozen mythologies with timeless experience.

Similarly, in his post-theistic stage, Spong views the rise of theism as coinciding with the evolutionary rise of an alienated self-consciousness. Spong believes that this alienated self-consciousness is a universal characteristic of humanity, but, in actuality, it seems to coincide with a

particular period in history. Historians of religion and philosophy suggest that such an anthropology of world-alienation is characteristic of two historically particular worldviews— gnosticism and modern existentialism.⁽¹³⁾

Also, like the gnostics, Spong believes in a religious hierarchy. The elite are the higher-critical biblical scholars, and those like Spong, who communicate the true gnosis to the unenlightened. Just below this gnostic priesthood are those, who, while not biblical scholars themselves, read Spong's books, and practice the gospel of inclusiveness. Lastly, there are the benighted orthodox Christians— those who have completely misunderstood the true meaning of Christianity, and flail around in the darkness of "literalism."

Trinity

It should now be obvious that Spong's doctrine of God is unitarian. He has no interest in preserving the doctrine of the Trinity. In his middle period, he wanted to embrace the "experience" out of which that doctrine was forged (*RBF*, 232). The origins of Trinitarian doctrine could be traced to the repressive values of a patriarchal world. "God was a male called Father. Jesus the Christ was a male Son. These two male deities made up two prongs of the Christian Trinity." Just to be fair, the Spirit ought to have been female, but patriarchy prevented it (*BW*, 205).

Of course, because Spong is a bishop, on occasion he finds himself in situations where he is required to recite the Trinitarian creeds. In the 1990's, he claimed he could do this with a clear conscience because he applied the same hermeneutic to the creeds that he applied to Scripture. The creeds speak not about something God has done to create and redeem the world, but about human experience. When Spong said that he believes in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth,

he understood this to mean that all human beings are created in God's image and so should not be oppressed. When he said he believes in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, he understood this to mean that God loves every one, even those who "seem intent on killing the love of God when that love is incarnate in human history." When Spong said he believes in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, he understood this to mean that "each of us is created, loved, and invited by the Source of life into the fullness of life, into a heightened consciousness, into having the courage to be ourselves." The more human we are, the more we reveal the divinity within us (*RBF*, 249). So the Creed becomes one more opportunity to recognize God's monist incarnation in all of humanity, and to affirm our own self-worth.

It is no longer clear that the post-theistic Spong can affirm even this much. He now rejects the doctrine of the Trinity and the creeds outright. "The Holy Trinity is not now and never has been a description of the being of God. It is rather the attempt to define our human experience of God. . . . Twenty-first-century Christians must now come to understand that God does not inhabit creeds or theological doctrines shaped with human words." (*NC*, 61). Since the God Spong believes in is not a person, in what sense can human beings be said to be created in his image? Can an impersonal God create? Does it mean anything to say that an impersonal God "loves everyone" or that those who killed Jesus were killing the love of this impersonal God?

Assessment



As we have tried to show above, there is a reciprocal relationship between John Spong's epistemology of religious experience, his biblical hermeneutic, and his doctrine of God. To provide an adequate critique of his doctrine of God, it will be necessary first to assess his account of religious experience.

The Roman Catholic philosophical theologian Bernard Lonergan has pointed out that a common mistake of philosophers is to forget the difference between the way that infants and adults interact with the world. Infants do not use language; therefore their relation to the world is one of immediacy. Adults speak, and consequently their relation to the world is one mediated by meaning and language. Radical empiricist philosophers like the logical positivists tend to forget this and develop philosophies that equate reality with immediate sense perception. In reaction, idealist philosophers, following Kant, recognize the cognitive mediation of knowledge but mistakenly conclude that the object of knowledge is merely phenomenal— that the referent of knowledge is the concept rather than an object external to the self.⁽¹⁴⁾ In Spong's account of religious experience, we find a combination of the errors of both empiricism and idealism. With the empiricists, Spong insists that the object of knowledge is direct and immediate. Religious experience is timeless, pre-linguistic and not mediated by meaning. But with the idealists, Spong equates knowledge with the contents of consciousness rather than with perception of external objects; religious experience seems to be an experience of the self. As we have seen above, Spong makes a radical distinction between experience and interpretation: in the order of knowledge, experience is primary and formless; interpretation is secondary; narratives follow last of all.

In actuality, this is almost precisely the opposite of the way in which adult human beings really come to know. The relationship between language, narratives and experience is

mutually interdependent. Because knowledge is mediated by meaning, there simply are no experiences that are not first made possible by language, narratives, and tradition. Rather than language and enculturation representing an unfortunate secondary interpretive step following on a universal and formless religious experience, it actually works the other way around. Concrete religious traditions with their attendant narratives, conceptual interpretations and understandings make religious experience possible. A religion is, in the words of George Lindbeck, an “external word” that molds and shapes the self and the world rather than the expression of a preconceptual religious experience. As people learn to interpret the self within the over-arching narrative of a particular religion, and become skilled in the symbols and practices of that particular religion, they become religious in a particular way and have concrete religious experiences.⁽¹⁵⁾ Accordingly, while there may be Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and other ways of being religious, there simply is no such thing as the kind of preconceptual, timeless, and prelinguistic religious experience that lies at the heart of Spong’s hermeneutic.

But if one only learns to be religious by interpreting the self in terms of the narratives, symbols, and practices of a particular religion, then, far from providing access to the true meaning of Christianity, Spong’s project of demythologization, of separating off the “mythological” narratives of Christianity from a timeless religious experience, in effect undermines the Christian project. Because he is so intent on interpreting Christianity in terms of an *a priori* hermeneutic of religious experience, Spong is incapable of hearing the Christian message itself. He reduces the saving acts of God in Jesus Christ to their significance for me and divorces them from any objective status outside the self. But if we pay attention to the biblical narratives themselves we discover that God’s saving acts in Christ outside myself are in fact the central message of the New

Testament. Paul's doctrine of justification by faith is not about my self-understanding, but is simply one aspect of Paul's general theory of salvation through the crucified and risen Christ. Paul's understanding of salvation is that of the incorporation of the self into the Christ-event, that is, my being united by faith to the crucified and risen Christ. It is not the reinterpretation of the Christ-event in terms of my own self-understanding.⁽¹⁶⁾ The risen Christ has logical and ontological priority to my own appropriation of salvation.

Similarly, the God of the biblical narratives is a far remove from a monist deity identical with one's own religious experience. At the heart of the biblical understanding of reality is the notion of a God who is radically distinguished from the human self and from creation. The New Testament scholar (now Anglican bishop) N. T. Wright has designated this notion of God as a creational, providential, covenantal monotheism. The biblical God is a God who has freely created and preserved the world, has freely entered into a covenant with the nation of Israel, and has freely fulfilled that covenant and redeemed the world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁽¹⁷⁾ Whether the notion that God had created the world from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) was already present in the Genesis narratives of creation, this notion eventually came to be understood as a necessary implication of the biblical understanding of the relation between God and the world.⁽¹⁸⁾

This notion of biblical monotheism with its corresponding implication of the radical distinction between God and the world has numerous implications that distinguish Christian monotheism from the understanding of the relation between the world and the divine found in ancient pagan religions, pan(en)theism, or the kind of "natural religious experience" embraced by Bishop Spong. ⁽¹⁹⁾

First, God's creation of the world is a free act. Accordingly, God is not dependent on the world for his own fulfillment. God does not need to have created a world and indeed might not have created a world at all. While God's existence is absolutely necessary, the existence of the world is utterly and radically contingent, not merely in the sense that the world might have existed differently, but in that it might not have existed at all. Since God has no need to create the world, that he has created the world must be attributed to an act of sheer and overwhelming generosity. Creation is a gift, an absolutely gratuitous, free and uncoerced sharing of divine goodness and beneficence.

Second, if God is the Creator of the world, then God cannot be one of the items in the world that he has created; nor can God be construed as part of the world, as a monist or pan(en)theist substrate underlying the world's reality. God is present to the world not as one thing is present over against others, nor by sharing in the very existence of the world (as in monism), but in that most intimate and free act in which God gives to the world its very existence. While being utterly distinct from the created realm as its Creator, God is as present to each creature as is its very existence.⁽²⁰⁾

Third, such a God can be known only through covenant, not through general religious experience. The biblical God, in contrast to the gods of paganism, who are identified with the powers of nature, must freely give himself to be known in words and deeds that, while mediated through created realities, utterly transcend them. If the transcendent Deity must communicate in word and deed in order to be known at all, then the notion of divine intervention (and thus miracle) is essential to Christianity. Of course, given the Christian understanding of creation, the notion that God intervenes is a bit of a misnomer. God would only need to "step in" if the world were simply running along independently of the divine causality. We should rather say that when God acts or speaks

in the created realm, he is doing so directly rather than through intermediate created causalities. Nevertheless, the immediate effects of such action are created effects.⁽²¹⁾

Fourth, because God is not part of the created realm, the realm in which human beings come to knowledge, it follows that language about God is a special case. Since human language normally applies to created realities, language about the divine must be either symbolic, metaphorical or analogical.⁽²²⁾ This recognition provides a corrective to the false dilemma Spong poses in demanding a choice between literalism and non-referential relativism. Rather, language use is rooted in the doctrine of creation itself. Human language and knowledge about God and the world are determined by the nature of God as Creator and the world as created. Because the created world exists prior to our knowledge of it, language use is determined by the prior existence of realities to the knower rather than vice versa (*non sermoni res, sed rei sermo subiectus est*). While language will never be able to encompass created reality in its complete intelligibility, language truly refers beyond itself in an isomorphic reflection of created intelligibilities. Though the normal context for human knowing and speaking is created reality, nonetheless, language is also capable of pointing beyond itself to its transcendent Creator because the creation reflects the perfections present in a higher and eminent manner in the God who has brought it into existence from nothing.

We use symbolic, metaphorical and analogical language to speak of God because it is the only language we have; human beings can only speak of spiritual (and uncreated) realities through the use of language whose primary referent is physical observable created realities. Attempts to discard metaphorical language as anthropomorphic or pre-scientific inevitably substitute equally metaphorical language for that rejected.

John Spong is no exception to this rule. Spong, rejecting the

notion of a god who lives in the heaven of a three-decker universe and embracing the Ground of Being instead, merely substitutes imagery of immanence for that of transcendence. But did the biblical writers take the three-decker language literally? While the biblical narratives present God as dwelling in heaven, they see no incompatibility with this statement and the assertion that God is specially present at various sanctuaries (Bethel, Shechem), on Mt. Sinai, in the desert tabernacle, in the Cloud and Pillar of fire that follow the Israelites in the desert, and later in the temple in Jerusalem. Although the special place for worship of Yahweh is Jerusalem, he can be addressed by his worshippers wherever they are. It is impossible to escape from God's presence; he is in heaven but also in deepest Sheol (Ps. 139). He fills heaven and earth (Jer. 12:14); he lays the foundation of the earth and spreads out the heavens (Is 40:12, 48:13).⁽²³⁾ In a classic study, Edwyn Bevan suggests that the reason the notion of God dwelling in heaven specifically came to be associated with Hebrew religion is that height is associated with transcendence. The great divide between religions is essentially that between monist religions and philosophies (like Hinduism and Neoplatonism) and the transcendence of Hebrew religion and Christianity.⁽²⁴⁾ Spong understands correctly that the biblical view of a God in heaven is a threat to his monist enterprise.

It is this doctrine of a transcendent deity that provides the context for the doctrine of the incarnation of God in Christ. Spong rightly perceives that a true doctrine of incarnation is incompatible with monism, and thus he endorses an adoptionist Christology. Neither however is the doctrine of incarnation compatible with pagan notions of divinity. Because the pagan gods are part of the greater whole that is, their appearances are not really incarnations so much as epiphanies; they cannot truly partake of created reality without ceasing to be the gods.⁽²⁵⁾ In contrast, the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation

of God in Christ asserts that God has become human in such a manner that both the integrity of created and divine reality is maintained. Because the biblical God is so radically transcendent— he is neither part of created reality nor a competing nature within created reality— God can become fully human in Christ in such a manner that he does not compromise either the completeness of his incarnate humanity or the completeness of his transcendent deity.

Contrary to Spong's assertions, the context of the doctrine of the incarnation is not pagan divinity but the question asked by Cyril of Alexandria: "Is Jesus Christ a god-filled man or God become a man?"⁽²⁶⁾ The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ does not so much tell us something about Jesus as it tells us something about God and his nature. If Jesus Christ is truly God become human, then Jesus is not merely the prime example of God's love for human beings, but is himself the self-communication of the divine love to human beings. It is because the personal identity of Jesus Christ is that of God incarnate that he is able to save sinful humanity. The word of grace that Jesus communicates to us is the very life of God, not merely the word of a God-like or God-filled creature.

In contrast, given Spong's adoptionist Christology, the most that Jesus can provide for us is an example to be emulated if we are able to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, but one incapable of providing us with assistance if we are not. For in spite of Spong's attempt to bring deity closer to us in an immanentist monism, he has actually succeeded only in removing God to an unreachable distance. Because Spong's god is incapable of acting or speaking, he(it?) is incapable of showing forgiveness or mercy. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who has become incarnate in Jesus Christ can and does.⁽²⁷⁾

We have seen already that Spong reduces the Christ-event to an excuse (or demand) for self-affirmation and equates divine presence with a universal immanence. As pointed out above,

however, in the New Testament, salvation is not a matter of interpreting the gospel in terms of my own self understanding, but of incorporating the sinful and redeemed self into the reality of the crucified and risen Christ. So, in the New Testament the doctrine of grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit are never separated from the saving life and deeds of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is not just another way of speaking about God's general immanence in the world. We are justified by faith in Christ. In baptism, we are united with Christ's death and resurrection. The eucharist is the body of Christ through which, in partaking, the Church becomes the body of Christ. Spong's monist immanentism and his adoptionist Christology simply cannot adequately take account of the fact that the NT portrays salvation as the incorporation of the Church into the corporate humanity of the Son of God who is incarnate as the crucified and risen Christ. Salvation is not found in an escape from history and culture into a "timeless experience," but rather is mediated linguistically and sacramentally through the incarnate and revealed Word, the concrete enculturated community of the church, and reception of the sacraments.

Similarly, the distinction between God and the world associated with the notion of creation makes possible the Christian doctrine of grace. The New Testament understanding of salvation and grace makes no sense apart from the Christian doctrine of the creation of the world by a transcendent God, for it involves not simply a new self-understanding, but the actual transformation and re-creation of redeemed humanity as, through faith and the sacraments, it comes to share in the divine life mediated through the humanity of the risen Christ. If, as in Spong's immanentism, created reality is insufficiently distinct from divine reality, then salvation in the biblical sense is unnecessary because human nature is already (in some sense) identical with the divine nature. It is also impossible because the monist post-theistic god is incapable of acting in the created realm. On the other hand,

if we construe Deity as merely a competing reality set over against other realities in the created realm, the transformation of human nature by divine grace would lead to the destruction of humanity, since no two finite natures can meaningfully occupy the same metaphysical space. It is really only the Christian understanding of creation, in which God gives existence to the created world, but neither competes with nor is a part of it, that enables the graced transformation of redeemed humanity so that, in the words of the scholastic dictum: "grace perfects but does not destroy nature."

The three different ways in which God is present to humanity in creation, incarnation, and grace point to the triune identity of the biblical God. The doctrine of the Trinity, while not spelled out explicitly in scripture, nonetheless is the inescapable implication of what the New Testament does tell us about the God who is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the history of Israel, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the transforming presence of the Spirit of grace in Christ's Body, the Church. The New Testament writers do not (generally) refer to Jesus as God because they know that God is the one Jesus called Father; nonetheless, they do not hesitate to speak of Jesus in ways that in the Old Testament only refer to Yahweh. They apply to Jesus the divine name of kurios; they identify him as the Creator.

The doctrine of the Trinity follows inevitably from the principle that God must be in himself who he has revealed himself to be in his revelation. The God who truly has given himself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation must be Triune in himself if that revelation in history is to be a true revelation of his identity.⁽²⁸⁾ The love that God has lavished upon us in creation, redemption and transforming grace reveals an internal love shared between Father, Son and Holy Spirit from all eternity, even apart from

our own existence and the existence of the world. Our own salvation is the gift that enables us to become participants in this eternal love.

Far from separating God to an infinite and unknowable distance, it is precisely the distinction between the transcendent God and the world implicit in the doctrine of creation that enables our own participation (by grace) in the triune life of God. If the Son and Holy Spirit were perceived to be lesser divinities, somewhere in the vast distance between God and creation, then at most they could provide pointers to an unknown God beyond themselves. But if the revelation of God in creation, redemption and grace points to the triune identity of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then that revelation reflects a genuine giving of himself to humanity. It is the orthodox doctrine of the transcendence of God that enables God truly to communicate to us his life and love.

1. A good account of Bultmann's demythologization program can be found in Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 205-292; an older but indispensable account is Hans Werner Bartsch, ed. *Kerygma and Myth* (London: SPCK, 1957).

2. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (London:SPCK, 1957), 5.

3. John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992); The identical pattern occurs repeatedly in Spong's writings. It can be found in more detail in his discussions of the virginal conception and the resurrection in *Born of a Woman and Resurrection. Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992); *Resurrection: Myth or Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins,

1994).

4. The case here is not so clear-cut as Spong claims. For an older account by another Anglican bishop that argues that the accounts are consistent, see Charles Gore, "The Virgin Birth of Our Lord," *Dissertations on Subjects Connected With the Incarnation* (London: John Murray, 1907) 2nd ed.

5. "I do not believe that the experience Christians celebrate at Easter was the physical resuscitation of the three-days-dead body of Jesus Since I do not see God as a being, I cannot interpret Jesus as the earthly incarnation of this supernatural deity, nor can I with credibility assume that he possessed sufficient Godlike power to do . . . miraculous things. . . . Nature miracles, I am now convinced, say volumes about the power that people attributed to Jesus, but they say nothing about literal occurrences." John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity For A New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and How a New Faith is Being Born* (NY: HarperCollins, 2002) 4-5.

6. Although Spong suggests that Bultmann was "wrong" in his approach to demythologization, Spong's own approach is virtually indistinguishable from Bultmann's. *RBF*, 237.

7. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 20 ff., 30-45.

8. Accounts of Schleiermacher's influence on Liberal Protestant theology broadly in agreement with the above would include (in addition to Lindbeck): Karl Barth, "Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century," *The Humanity of God* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1960); Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith, Volumes One: Prolegomena, The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974), 42-49; Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982);

Anthony Thiselton. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 204-236.

9. John Shelby Spong, *This Hebrew Lord: A Bishop's Search for the Authentic Jesus* (New Edition) (San Francisco: 1993); originally published in 1973.

The "progress" (if that's the right word) in Spong's doctrine of God parallels changes in his doctrine of Scripture. In *THL* he praised "Hebrew thought." In the early 1990's he wrote of *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism*. One of his latest books bears the title *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

10. In all honesty, monist tendencies were already evident in Spong's earlier writing (*THL*, 144).

11. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1908, 1936), reprint Doubleday (1959, 1990), 76.

12. Or perhaps illogically. What could it possibly mean to say that God is "the sum of all that is, plus something more." If God is the sum of all that is, there is nothing more.

13. See, for example, the discussion on "Subject-Alienation" in Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997), 24 ff.

14. Bernard Lonergan, "The Origins of Christian Realism," *A Second Collection* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 240 ff.

15. Lindbeck, 34 ff.

16. E. P. Sanders, *Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 44-76.

17. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 248 ff.

18. For a helpful discussion of this issue, see David B. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1993), 7-26.
19. Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 34-44.
20. Thomas Aquinas points out that God is not present to things as part of their substance, but as an agent who gives them existence. *Summa Theologiae*, 1.1.8.2
21. The "scholastics" expressed this distinction in terms of "primary" and "secondary" causality.
22. The classic discussion is Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* 1.12. "On the Names of God."
23. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961, 1975), 1: 104, 110 ff. For a contemporary discussion of related issues, see Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (NY: Macmillan, 1992).
24. Edwyn Bevan, "Height," *Symbolism and Belief* (Allen & Unwin, 1938), 21-81.
25. When Zeus becomes a swan, he does not literally take on the fulness of swan nature. Rather, he appears as a swan who is really Zeus, not a true swan.
26. Cyril of Alexandria, "Five Tomes Against Nestorius," Tome 1.
27. The point is borrowed shamelessly from Karl Barth, who first said it about Schleiermacher. *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 51.

28. Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark) 1/1: 295-489 and Karl Rahner's *The Trinity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974) are the two pioneering works that initiated the late twentieth-century revival of Trinitarian theology. For the biblical argument, see Arthur Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962). Against the Hellenistic corruption hypothesis, see Bernard Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea: The Dialectical Development of Trinitarian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).