

**THE SEMANTICS OF STORY-TELLING
A SECULAR SERMON FOR THOSE "ALL AT SEA"
IN THE SEA OF FAITH
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"some having swerved, have turned aside unto vain jangling . . . understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm." (First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to Timothy, 1:7)

The bad old story of God and his son

Once I was a Bible-believing Baptist aspiring to follow in the footsteps of my forebears by becoming a minister or a missionary. I wanted to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. And in pursuit of that goal, I studied the *Bible* and (from the age of 11) the works of fundamentalist theologians, preached sermonettes at Bible Class camps, and (so I was told) even saved the occasional soul.

Yet, by the time I was 18 years old, I no more believed in the existence of God, or the divinity of Jesus, than I did in Santa Claus.

Worse still, in the opinion of family and friends, I had come to the conclusion that the central beliefs of Christianity were both morally obnoxious and intellectually pernicious.

Why morally obnoxious? Because the God of the *Old Testament* is not, as Saint Anselm described him, "that than which no greater can be conceived." Rather, he is that than which no *viler* can be conceived. And, as Mark Twain, pointed out, the divine Jesus of the *New Testament* outdid his father by inventing the doctrine of a fiery hell as a place in which all those who don't believe in him will suffer eternally while "the smoke of their torment ascendeth forever and ever."¹ If you want to tell, or re-tell, the stories of God and Jesus while concealing those facts, you are not being, so to speak, honest to God or honest to Jesus.

Why is Christian doctrine intellectually pernicious? Because, as David Hume so eloquently put it: "reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity; and whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding."²

I now deplore the very idea of faith, and deplore especially the intransigent faith-based *unreasoning* that I find displayed in most Christian thinking, new as well as old.

Retelling the old story, liberal style

What is my take on the new theologians, those who retell the Christian story in a more sanitized fashion: the likes of liberal Christians such as Paul Tillich, Bishop John A. T. Robinson, Bishop John Spong, and Don Cupitt?

First, the good news. I applaud their attempts to demythologise the old stories and drag orthodox Christians out of their pre-scientific beliefs and attitudes. I applaud,

too, the attempts of some, especially Bishop Spong, to make Christian conservatives adopt more liberal values. But that's about it.

When it comes to their theological pronouncements, I despair. I am tempted to echo the words of the inimitable Sir Peter Medawar who, in the first paragraph of his review of Pere Teilhard de Chardin's much-lauded book *The Phenomenon of Man*, wrote that the greater part of what Teilhard asserted was "nonsense, tricked out with a variety of metaphysical conceits", and went on to add that "its author can be excused of dishonesty only on the grounds that before deceiving others he has taken great pains to deceive himself." As for Teilhard, so for Tillich, Robinson, Spong, and Cupitt. And that's being charitable.

My view of the proponents of the new theology is that they are playing with words, that they've sold their Christian birthright for a mess of philosophical verbiage, that they've been seduced into making assertions whose meaning and implications they haven't thought through, and that the whole point of the exercise is doomed to failure since their liberal interpretation of the old stories will never catch on except among a handful on the fringes of faith.

Bishop Spong recently described many of the doctrines of orthodox Christians as "not only literal nonsense but also little more than theological gobbledygook."³ I will follow suit and describe many of his assertions, and those of other liberal Christians, as virtually *incomprehensible* and no more than *philosophical mumbo jumbo*.

I will argue that the new theology builds on some extremely bad philosophy. For my own part, I can't make sense of most of it. And I doubt that you can either, once you pause to think carefully about what their words and sentences really mean rather than just letting them wash over you like stream-of-consciousness poetry. Or, if you can make good sense of all this stuff, and can explain why you think it is worth paying attention to, perhaps you'll tell me at the end of my little talk.

There's hardly a page in the writings of these four authors that isn't littered with sentences I find so opaque in meaning as to be virtually unintelligible. But I can't examine them all. Just one or two examples from each of them will have to do, each example being representative of one of the main themes the author wants to promote.

I'll start with a quote from the philosophical theologian who, in doctrinal matters, seems father to the other three:

Paul Tillich

In his *The Shaking of the Foundations* (1948), Tillich provides a new definition of the word "God", thus:

The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is *God*.⁴

In order fully to understand what's going on here, one would need to know a lot about the history of western philosophy from Parmenides down through Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger to contemporary exponents of Existentialism and

Postmodernism. And I'm not going to treat you to an exposition of all that. Suffice it to say a few brief words about Tillich's own metaphysical views.

Tillich, like Heidegger, contraposed the ideas of Being and Nothingness. Picking up on a Freudian theme, Tillich argues that Nothingness confronts us when we comprehend our own finitude, fear our own deaths and, in an introspective mood, wonder what causes us to *be* in the first place. We exist. But our existence, like that of all finite beings, cannot ultimately be caused or sustained by other finite beings. Our finite being must be caused or sustained by Being itself, an infinite being, otherwise described as "the ground of all being". And the name "God", properly understood, refers to this infinite and inexhaustible ground of all being.

With me so far? You'd better be, because that's what Tillich and company claim that the name "God" actually means. If you can't buy into all this abstruse verbiage and abstract reasoning then you can't buy into being a liberal Christian. Not one of their sort anyway.

So, for the moment at least, I'll just assume that you know what Being itself is, and that you know well enough to be able to explain it to me. And while we're at it, perhaps you'll tell me what difference, if any, there is between, on the one hand, Being itself, and what Tillich calls the "depth and ground" of all being.

At one point in his exposition of Tillich, Bishop Robinson substitutes the word "goal" for "depth", as in the phrase "the ground, source and goal of our being"⁵ Does this mean something different? Am I missing here? Or is the good bishop just playing with words?

Returning to Tillich himself, I have other problems, too. What exactly does Tillich mean when he says that the ground of all being is "infinite and inexhaustible"? Those who are familiar with traditional theism will know that the theistic God, conceived as the Old Man in the sky, is supposed to be infinite and inexhaustible in his power, in his knowledge, and in his goodness. That's what it means to talk of God's omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness, respectively. But Tillich doesn't think of God like that, as a personal being endowed with human-like qualities to the highest degree imaginable. So in respect of what properties is Being itself supposed to be infinite and inexhaustible? I know what the term "infinite" means when it is used in Cantor's set theory. What does it mean here? And why "inexhaustible?"

Then there's another problem. When, in his theologising, Tillich argues that the existence of finite beings cannot "ultimately" be explained in terms of the agency of other finite beings, are we to understand this to be a rehash of one of Saint Thomas Aquinas's versions of the cosmological argument, the argument from the contingency of all finite beings to the necessary existence of an infinite one? Or should we understand him as producing something like a First-Cause version? I know of no philosopher since Kant who thinks either argument convincing. Does Tillich think he can answer Kant's devastating criticisms of both versions?

Now let's turn to a bishop who, so far as I know, did more than anyone before him to bring the new gospel to people in the pews. I refer to

Bishop John A. T. Robinson

In his well known book *Honest to God* (1963), Bishop Robinson claims that, in speaking about God, Tillich is speaking about "our ultimate concern", i.e., about "what we take seriously without reservation."⁶

Is this supposed to be a factual claim about what people mean when they talk about God? If so, the claim is just plain false. Many people who talk about God don't take God at all seriously. And hardly anyone I know takes talk of "Being itself" seriously. I for one do not. So what exactly is Robinson claiming?

An American theologian, one of Tillich's students, once told me that Tillich is saying only that whatever it is that an individual regards as their ultimate concern, whatever it is that they take most seriously, is what counts as God for that person. If you aspire to be the best golf-player in the world, or the richest man, or a member of Al Qaeda, then that passion or object of desire just *is* your God. So he and some others have said. But this is absurd. Maybe there's a way of speaking that does permit us to talk this way. But it is metaphorical talk, not metaphysical talk. It is certainly not about anything as abstract as the philosophically spawned notion of Being-itself.

Next we have this little gem from Robinson:

God is, by definition, ultimate reality, and one cannot argue whether ultimate reality *exists*.⁷

On the face of it, Robinson treats the noun "reality" as synonymous with "Being". So what is the meaning of the adjective "ultimate" as it occurs in the expression "ultimate reality"? Does "ultimate reality" stand to "reality" in the same sort of way as "ground and depth of all being" stands to just plain "being"? Is the term "God" to be identified with the first of each of these pairs as opposed to the second? I can't work it out. Yet until I can work it out, I don't know whether he's right when he says that one can't disagree with him about the existence of "ultimate" reality.

Here's my predicament. If the two expressions mean the same, and "reality" plain and simple means what I and most other people mean by it, then Robinson is right. I certainly won't argue with him over whether reality *exists*. In order to dispute that, I would have to, as they say, "lose touch with reality". For, as I use the word, reality just is the totality of all states of affairs that have ever existed, now exist, or will exist. In brief, reality is the sum-total of all that exists (where "all" encompasses states of affairs as well as things, and "exists" is used in a so-called timeless or tenseless sense). But if "ultimate reality" is supposed to mean something different from just plain-Jane "reality", then I don't know whether or not to argue about whether ultimate reality exists. I just don't know what is supposed to make some realities ultimate and others not. I'm certainly not going to agree if Robinson is then going to cap off our little exchange with something like, "So there, you see, you agree with me after all that God really exists." In short, I'm not going to agree that ultimate reality exists if he's going to use that agreement as evidence that I agree that God exists. I simply refuse to fall for that sort of sophistry.

On reflection it seems to me that Robinson is offering us a cheat (and I do mean "cheat" not "cheap") version of the old ontological argument. Saint Anselm thought he could prove God's existence (the existence of the *theist's* God, that is) by simply defining the term "God" as "that than which no greater can be conceived" and then effectively challenging anyone who thought that God, so defined, might not exist to explain how a God that did not exist could be as great, or perfect, as one who did exist. After all, he argued, if God existed only as a concept in our minds, he wouldn't be as great as a God who also existed in reality. Ipso facto, God exists in reality. Anselm tried to *define* God into existence, to conjure his God's Being out of his immaculate conception.

Robinson takes a much quicker route. God exists because he, Bishop Robinson, has so defined him! Fall for that one and you'll fall for a proof of the existence of anything you like: a woman than whom no more beautiful can be conceived; a man than whom no more handsome can be conceived; and so on.

Robinson also claims that fundamental reality, that is to say Being itself, ultimately has what he calls "the character of love."⁸ Is he serious? Is he saying that the real world is all lovey-dovey, cosy and comfortable, and that hate and cruelty, disease and disaster are all illusions? If he's saying that, then what he's saying is false. And if, when he says it, he means something else, why doesn't he say clearly what he does mean? I realize, of course, that in saying this he is trying to provide a non-theistic translation for the verse "God is love." But so much the worse either for his translation or for the verse of which it purports to be the translation. For myself, I can find no way of construing his claim that does not make it literal nonsense, i.e., outrageously false. And the situation is made only worse if we take account also of Don Cupitt's claim, "To say that God is love is in effect to say simply that love is God." Add love to the list of identities already asserted and we start to move from identifying God with reality and Being itself to identifying God with a human feeling, desire, affection, or emotion.

Let me move on, now, to a couple of things that Bishop Spong has to say about God.

Bishop John Shelby Spong

Here's a quote from Spong's *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (1999).

There is no God external to life. God, rather, is the inescapable depth and centre of all that is. God is not a being superior to all other beings. God is the ground of Being itself.⁹

The last three sentences are just a restatement of Tillich. But consider the first sentence, "There is no God external to life." If I am to take him literally, I am compelled by logic to say that he thinks that nothing at all, no being or Being, no reality (ultimate or otherwise), exists external to life, i.e., that nothing exists that is not alive. I can understand why he might want to say that of the personal "living" God of traditional theology. But why would he want to say that of the non-personal God that is identical with Being itself, with reality, the God whose name is synonymous with all that exists? Or does he not think that inanimate things exist? Does he think that the universe itself didn't exist until sentient beings had evolved within it? Does he think

that everything that exists in the physical universe--from subatomic particles to galaxies--is in some "deep" or "ultimate" sense alive? Is he, perhaps, embracing some form of metaphysical idealism either of the subjective kind espoused by Bishop Berkeley, or the objective kind espoused by the likes of Hegel? I am simply at a loss to understand what Spong means or why he thinks he's saying something true.

My sense of puzzlement deepens when I turn to a passage from his most recent book *Jesus for the Non-Religious: Recovering the Divine at the Heart of the Human* (2007). There he writes:

One of my shaping theological teachers, Paul Tillich, referred to this God as "Being itself" which meant to me that my search for God would be identical with my search for my own identity.¹⁰

Once more my mind reels. Note the expression "identical with." If someone says that his search for X is identical with his search for Y, then he is committed to saying that X and Y are identical. Logic compels us to conclude, then, that in Spong's view Spong's identity (by which he surely means Spong himself) is identical with God. I'm fairly sure that Spong didn't *mean* to say that he is identical with God himself. But if he didn't mean that, why did he say something that implies it?

Spong's move to a subjectivist account of God and reality is mirrored in his subjectivist account of language when he tells us:

Human words do not describe reality outside human experience. The word "God" does not exist outside the human use of that word.¹¹

I have no difficulty with the second sentence. It expresses a near tautology. But consider the first sentence again, "Human words do not describe reality outside human experience." Presumably this is just another way of saying that human words can only refer to, or describe, things *within* human experience, i.e., things of which we have some experience or other.

Well, pause for a moment and ask yourself exactly what that is supposed to *mean*. Does it mean, for instance, that the word "singularity", when used in the formulation of Stephen Hawking's version of Big Bang cosmology, refers to something that some human or other has experienced? If so, his claim is false. Has Spong, perhaps, fallen into the philosophical trap of Phenomenalism? Is he saying that words, whether taken singly or in combination with others, can only refer to our subjective experiences of things, never to things themselves? In that case he may to be refuted by pointing out that when he sits on his chair he is in fact sitting on his *chair*, not his *experience of* his chair. Or has he fallen into the trap of the Ideational Theory of Meaning according to which words can only refer to our ideas of things not to things themselves. If that is his meaning, then he may be refuted by pointing out the absurdity of saying that he is sitting on his *idea* of his chair, not the chair itself.

Now for another doyen of the new theology, the philosophical anti-realist

Don Cupitt

Spong's strange views about how language functions are mirrored in some of the things said of it by Don Cupitt. I have time to discuss just two examples out of many.

In one of his writings (I've forgotten where) Cupitt claims:

Being cannot be made a subject of objective enquiry; it is revealed to the individual by reflection on his own concrete existence in time and space.

This can come only from someone who, like Cupitt, turned his back on scientific method, the paradigm of objective enquiry, before he really knew anything about it and became preoccupied, first with the gobbledygook of theology, and then with that of the worst kind of continental philosophy. Is he saying that science can't tell us anything about reality and that we can only learn about how the world works by introspecting or, perhaps, by reading Carl G. Jung and following it up by lying on a couch for a session of deep psychotherapy? Does he really think we should close down research labs, put an end to science education, and spend public funds on the pseudo-science known as psychoanalysis. Only in that way, he seems to be saying, is an individual going to learn about what Spong called his own "self-identity" and what Cupitt calls his own "concrete existence in space and time." But surely that's not all there is to the investigation of what exists in reality?

Now for another of the countless absurdities that adorn nearly every page of his book *After God* (1997).¹²

In that book he advances what he calls "a new linguistic theory of religious practice and religious objects", one of whose four main theses is this:

The invisible world is the world of words and other symbols.¹³

Construe the word "is", as it occurs in this sentence, as the "is" of identity, and his claim is manifestly false, to the point of absurdity. The world of the invisible is patently not identical with the world of words and symbols. Atoms, for example, aren't visible. Neither are gravitational fields. Yet none of those are words, even though we have words *for* them. Construe him, then, as saying only that words and symbols are *among* the things that make up the invisible world, i.e., that all words and symbols are invisible. That, too, is manifestly false. If it were true, I could not be reading the words I am composing on my computer as I write this, and you would never be able to read the words of the book in which he expressed this crazy claim. Why say such preposterous things?

One explanation might be that, consciously or unconsciously, he is trying to cash in on what I call *the presumption of profundity*, the presumption that when an established author says something obscure, absurd, or preposterously false, there *must* be something deep and meaningful that he is getting at, something that can best be divined by purchasing and pondering over his whole book. But explanations of this sort are for psychologists and psychoanalysts, not philosophers to give. So I'll give a more charitable one.

I suspect that Cupitt has fallen victim to what Ludwig Wittgenstein one called "a main cause of philosophical disease--a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with

only one kind of example." This diagnosis, I suggest, is more to the point. One of the main themes of Cupitt's book is that the ancient spirits of religion "are" (in some elusive sense) nothing but words, and that for a writer like himself words are typically "at the forefront of one's mind, on the tip of one's tongue, somewhere on the interface of subjectivity and the public world."¹⁴

Now we can agree that we do, on occasion, use the word "word" in this way and that when we so use it we are not referring to anything visible. The word that is in the forefront of my mind as I read his stuff is not visible to anyone. And just as well, too. But to suppose that this is the only permissible reference of the word "word", and to conclude that all words are invisible, is to be a victim of the philosophical disease that Wittgenstein was talking about. Cupitt is in need of philosophical, not psychological, therapy. And maybe a little linguistic therapy while he's at it.

I could go on ad nauseam with this piecemeal detection and dissection of examples of philosophical gobbledygook. But instead I want to offer three more general diagnoses of the philosophical diseases from which, in my view, the writings of Tillich, Robinson, Spong, and Cupitt all suffer.

Philosophical malaise number 1: Reification.

By reification I mean the fallacy of treating all nouns, even abstract nouns, as names of things. The disposition to reify or hypostasise (to use another term for it) has been present among philosophers from the time of Parmenides, if not before. The nominalisation "being" of the verb "to be" was one of the earliest to lend itself to this process. There is, you see, a use of the verb "to be" in which it attributes existence or being to some object of reference. "There be dragons" is a way (albeit an archaic way) of saying that dragons exist. And if one were to say, "There not be dragons", one would be saying that dragons do not exist.

From the nominalizations of these two expressions one obtains the abstract nouns "being" and "non-being". It then becomes plausible to ask, as did so many early philosophers, about the character of Being itself and how it differs from its opposite Non-being. It becomes plausible, even urgent, to ask how if at all Being can come out of Non-being; that is, how change can occur. Parmenides argued that change *cannot* occur, that Being is one and changeless. And his follower Melissus of Samos argued further that Being has no beginning or end. It can't have a beginning, he said, because it cannot have begun from Non-being. It can't have an end because it is impossible for Being to change into its opposite, Non-being. Like Tillich and company he conceives Being as being "infinite and inexhaustible."

Countless philosophers since then have allowed themselves to get caught up in this sort of whirling ballet of bloodless abstract nouns. And with dire consequences, as I see it, for the way they conduct their thinking.

Nowhere are these consequences more evident than in the continental tradition to which Heidegger and Tillich belong. Heidegger suffered from a particularly virulent strain of the disease, even going so far as to pronounce such inanities as "The Nothing nothings." Sadly, he seems to have transmitted the disease, by close contact, to his associate Paul Tillich who, as I've already pointed out, couches much of his own early

thinking in terms of the abstract nouns "Being" and "Nothingness", treating both as if they were names of things and then throwing "God" (the word, that is) into the conceptual stew for good measure. And so the virus has spread, through Robinson, Spong, and Cupitt, to all those who read this sort of stuff and nonsense and think they are learning something profound and perhaps edifying.

A passage from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* provides an effective counter to this sort of thinking. The King, referring to two messengers, says:

"They've both gone to the town. Just look along the road, and tell me if you can see either of them."

"I see nobody on the road," said Alice.

"I only wish *I* had such eyes," the King remarked in a fretful tone. "To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it's as much as *I* can do to see real people, by this light!"

English philosopher Peter Heath, in his *The Philosopher's Alice*, (1974), draws the moral of this little story thus:

This passage, and its reprise a page or two later, are a perennial standby for philosophers who wish to horrify their readers with the dangers of hypostasising [that is reifying] the null class, and so fabricating nonentities. Because *nobody* functions grammatically very like *somebody*, there is a temptation to believe that it is the name of a peculiar, diaphanous sort of somebody, who is then unnecessarily added to the world's inhabitants. In such a way does the language of abstraction darken counsel, corrupt communications, and beget bad philosophy, a theme much insisted on by Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, and their many modern successors.¹⁵

Would that Tillich and company had learned a little from these conceptually astute philosophers. Or from Lewis Carroll.

Philosophical malaise number 2: Conflating "is"s.

The little word "is" can give rise to still other philosophical diseases. You may remember Bill Clinton's contribution to semantics when, in answer to a question about the Monica Lewinski affair, he said, "It all depends on what the meaning of 'is' is." It was a response worthy of a good philosopher not just a quick-witted politician. It might have struck many of his listeners as absurd. But it reminded me of Dr. C. E. M. Joad's standard response to questions when he was a member of BBC Radio's Brain's Trust during the 1940s. Astute enough to recognise that many of the questions he was invited to answer were ambiguous in ways that the questioner usually hadn't realised, he would almost always begin with his catchphrase "Well, it all depends on what you mean by *so-and-so*." Maybe Slick Willy had picked up on this technique for disambiguation when he was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. Or maybe he'd read his Aristotle.

Aristotle, you see, was the first philosopher I know of to take extraordinary pains to disambiguate words and the sentences in which they occur. One of his aims was to get rid of the conceptual confusions that had been engendered by the rhetoric of the Sophists who'd preceded him. "It is the business of language," he said, "to distinguish."¹⁶ And so he undertook, in his treatises on the conceptual foundations of diverse subjects such as logic, ethics, politics, government, biology, and zoology, to detect differences in meaning that others tended to ignore or conflate. The best philosophers since then have followed in his footsteps and have contributed to both understanding and wisdom by doing so. The worst, in my view, have been careless with words and conflated concepts, and have contributed to neither.

Now one of the first words to receive the benefit of Aristotle's careful analysis was that little word "is". Aristotle himself wasn't averse to using the verb "to be" in its nominalised form. Indeed, much of his own thinking was couched in terms of an enquiry into the nature and categories of Being itself. But he was careful to distinguish that use of "is" from various others. In particular he took care to distinguish it from those uses in which "is" functions as the copula in predicative sentences, and those in which it functions within assertions of identity.

Consider the three sentences: "Cicero is", "Cicero is eloquent", and "Cicero is Tully". The word "is" in "Cicero is" is the "is" of existence or being. The word "is" in "Cicero is eloquent" is the "is" of predication; its function is not that of asserting Cicero's existence but of linking him with a certain property, that of being eloquent. The word "is" in "Cicero is Tully" functions in still another way: to assert the identity of the man called Cicero with the man called Tully.

A simple set of distinctions when one comes to think of it. Yet, as Aristotle pointed out, many philosophers seem not to have thought of it and have got themselves in what he called a "pother" because of their failure to bear them in mind. Parmenides and Melissus, in his view, were among those whose metaphysics was corrupted by conflating these different senses. And I'm sure he'd have diagnosed the same cause of philosophical disease had he been aware of the way in which Heidegger, Tillich, Robinson, Spong, and Cupitt run these senses together.

The import of the distinction between the "is" of predication and the "is" of identity should be obvious. In the case of the "is" of identity, one can reverse the order of the referential terms "Cicero" and "Tully". Indeed, as a matter of logic, if Cicero is identical with Tully, then it follows that Tully is identical with Cicero. Compare this with the "is" of predication. From the predicative statement that Cicero is eloquent one cannot validly infer that the abstract property of eloquence is identical with the concrete man Cicero.

Consider, now, the thinking of those who suppose that from the statement that God is our ultimate concern it follows that whatever is one's ultimate concern *is* God (or perhaps is God for that person). The mistake here is that of treating the word "is" as the "is" of identity. One consequence of this mistake is that one finishes up with the absurd claim that most people, theists included, think the word "God" refers to whatever happens to be most on their mind, most of concern to them, at the moment. Another consequence is that one is then led to claim that there are as many different Gods as there are objects of one's ultimate concern.

Or consider Robinson's claim that God is love. As used in *1 John 4:6*, the sentence "God is love" asserts that God has the property of loving us. The "is" here is the "is" of predication. Yet Cupitt writes, "To say that God is love is in effect to say simply that love is God." His inference would be sound if the property of love were identical with the God who has that property. But nobody in his right mind, not even a traditional theologian given to gobbledygook, would say that.

The absurd consequences of conflating predication with identity become even more painfully obvious when these authors' assertions are exposed to the *logic* of identity statements. It is a law of identity that if two things are identical with a third, then they are identical with each other. I've already exposed the absurd consequences of Spong's claim that his search for God is "identical" with his search for his own identity, namely that he, Spong, is identical with God.

Now presumably Spong wouldn't claim that his search for his own identity is unique in this regard. Presumably he would be charitable enough to allow some other God-besotted bishop, like Robinson, to make the same claim. That is to say, presumably he'd allow Robinson to claim that *his* search for *his* identity is identical with *his* search for God. So far, so good. But now comes the crunch. For according to the logic of identity, if Spong's identity, that is Spong, is identical with God, and Robinson's identity, that is Robinson, is also identical with God, then it follows that Spong is identical with Robinson.

But worse is to come. For, as we have seen, both Spong and Robinson identify God with Being itself, i.e., with all that exists. But if Spong and Robinson are identical with God and God is identical with Being itself, then--by a further application of the law of the transitivity of identity--it follows that both bishops are identical with all that exists.

Now I don't suppose for a moment that Bishop Spong suffers from such delusions of grandeur. Nor do I suppose for a moment that he would condemn to the "outer darkness" of Non-Being all those of us who do not identify so closely with God. But I would like to suppose that, by reflecting on these implications of the things he says, he might be made to cease and desist from saying them.

The problem for Spong, and for my understanding of him, gets further complicated when we try to put his talk of Jesus into the picture. In the Prologue to his most recent book he says that Jesus is "The Ground of Being, a doorway into the mystery of holiness."¹⁷ He goes on to talk about seeing in Jesus "the fullness of both God and humanity."¹⁸ He says that Jesus "is what God is",¹⁹ that Jesus "becomes the revelation of God and even the bearer of all that God means", and continues by asserting "That is the Jesus I want to serve, the Jesus I call Lord, the Jesus who both entices me and compels me."²⁰ Construe each of these claims in terms of the old theistic conceptions of Jesus as God-incarnate, etc., and they make some sense. So I guess they'd go down well with orthodox Christians, and even with most liberal Christians. But try to construe them in terms of the new theology to which Spong subscribes, and you've got real problems. What, we need to know, is the precise relation between Jesus and the God who is identical with the Ground of all Being, identical also with reality, and with love, and with one's ultimate concern and, at a stretch, with Spong's self-

identity? Try to substitute definiens (the defining expression) for definiendum (the expression to be defined) in any of the above sentences and you get literal nonsense, incomprehensible gobbledygook.

And just to make things even more complicated, it turns out that the Jesus that Spong is talking about most of the time is some barely detectable residuum of the gospel stories, the little (if anything) that is left after Spong has done a thorough, and much needed, job of stripping away the miracles and myths, and has dehistoricized most of the personages, events, and sayings that the gospels report interpreting them as liturgical retellings of older Jewish myths. True, Spong still thinks that there *was* an historical Jesus despite the fact that his none of the more than forty secular historians writing about the period even mentions him; and despite the obvious fact that the Jesus story, too, is arguably nothing but a retelling of older pagan myths about dying gods who rise again. Why Spong wants to breathe new life into the bearer of the name "Jesus", I simply do not understand. For all we know, such an elusive figure, if he existed, may not even have been *called* "Jesus"! Yet that figure is the one Spong identifies with God, and thereby identifies with the ground of all being, and ultimate reality. It is that figure to which Spong addresses effusive devotional poems at the beginning and end of his book. It is that figure that Spong wants to serve and call "Lord." In short he worships and wants to serve the totality of all that exists. Make sense of that if you can.

Philosophical malaise number 3: Playing Humpty Dumpty with words.

Maybe it is time to turn from this heavy-duty logical stuff to something a little lighter. So let's go back to the topsy-turvy land of *Through the Looking Glass*.

At one point, Alice is frustrated in her attempts to converse seriously with Humpty Dumpty. We take up the story just after Humpty Dumpty has made the comment, "There's glory for you."

'I don't know what you mean by "glory",' Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't--till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all."

Alice was too much puzzled to say anything; so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. "They've a temper, some of them - particularly verbs: they're the proudest - adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs - however, *I* can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability! That's what *I* say!"

"Would you tell me, please," said Alice, "what that means?"

"Now you talk like a reasonable child," said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. "I meant by 'impenetrability' that we've had enough of that subject, . . ."

Now let me ask three simple questions. First: Which of the two parties, Alice or Humpty Dumpty, fails to use words so as to communicate easily and clearly? Second: Which of the two parties doesn't really understand what "glory" means? Third: Which of the two is playing trivial word games?

I'm going to presume that you'd name Humpty Dumpty every time.

Okay. Now let's replay the first part of that little dialogue with one change of character and two changes of vocabulary.

"That's God for you," said Tillich.

"I don't know what you mean by 'God'," Alice said.

Tillich smiled contemptuously, "Of course you don't--till I tell you. I meant 'There's infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being for you!'"

"But 'God' doesn't mean 'infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being'," Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Tillich said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Tillich, "which is to be master - that's all."

Now let me ask those three questions again, this time reflecting the change of character and of subject matter.

Here they are. First: Which of the two parties, Alice or Tillich, fails to use words so as to communicate easily and clearly with others? Second: Which of the two doesn't understand what "God" normally means? Third: Which of the two is playing trivial word games?

I'd like to presume that you'd name Tillich every time. If not, I clearly have a lot of work still to do and, I confess, not a lot of patience (or time) for doing it.

Be that as it may, I'm going to offer a brief comment on what's going on here.

Humpty Dumpty, who seems to me the personification of Tillich and company, has got it wrong. Having mastery over words does *not* mean having the power to make them mean what you want them to mean. Words have the power to resist those who try to usurp their authority. It is we the people who, by consensus, confer that authority--the authority to mean what they ordinarily mean--upon them, granting to each its own assigned role and responsibility in communication. Such is the power of convention and common usage. Those who try to set up their own little fiefdoms of linguistic meaning are likely to be met by blank stares of incomprehension. They have to say something along the lines of Humpty Dumpty's "Of course, you don't know what I mean -- until I tell you." And they then have to provide a translation manual revealing the new meanings they've assigned to the old words of ordinary language. Having mastery over words means precisely *not* having to explain what you mean by them.

Consider the word "God" (capital "G"). You all understood me when I said earlier that by the age of 18 I no longer believed in God. You understood that I was saying that I didn't believe in the existence of a supernatural deity responsible for creating the world and then loving his creatures. You didn't for a moment think that I was saying that I no longer believed in the existence of the infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being.

Now I'm not so naive as to suppose that the word "God", in English, is properly used only to refer to the god of theism. In fact I am fully aware that even the phrase "the God of theism" covers a multitude of sins. And I'm well aware that the name "God" has been used by deists, pantheists, and miscellaneous reification-prone philosophers, to talk about entities very different from any of the theistic gods. I'm so aware, in fact, that when someone tells me they believe in God, my first reaction is usually "Which God?" I haven't yet come across anyone who has answered that they are referring to Hegel's God, or Tillich's, or Robinson's, or Spong's, or even Cupitt's. So I balk when I'm told by the latter lot that "God" is the name of the infinite and inexhaustible, etc. I balk, again, when I discover that this very same infinite and inexhaustible entity is one that they go on to describe in terms that are associated with the God of theism: that it has the character of love, for example, or that it is the ultimate cause and sustainer of all that is finite. And I balk, even more, when I reflect on the fact that all this sophistry is being performed in the name of rescuing Christianity (of all things!) from the death that some of us would love to see.

To all those who want to retell the theistic stories about God and Jesus in the language of the new liberal theology, I offer a simple piece of advice. Don't.

If you say that "God" means "the infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being", you are making three mistakes.

First, people won't understand you. Philosophical hocus-pocus won't do the trick. You will deceive no one but yourselves. Maybe you *think* you know what the new definition means. But that's only because you graft on to it all the associations that belonged to the words they are supposed to redefine. Under pressure, you'll probably have to confess that, as Saint Paul would put it, you have "swerved aside unto vain jangling", that you understand neither what you say, nor whereof you affirm.²¹

Second, you are saying something false. The word "God" doesn't mean that. You know that to be a fact, and so do others. Once more, you will deceive no one but yourselves. You will simply betray your ignorance of how language functions.

Third, it simply won't work. Ardent believers in the supra-God of theism and the divinity of Jesus aren't going to be conned out of their beliefs by the sophistries of Humpty Dumpty word games. Nor are atheists like me going to be conned *into* belief in God by the device of persuasive redefinition.

So here's your predicament. You don't want to tell the old theistic story because it won't go down with educated people in the twenty-first century and, if told honestly, would scare the b'Jesus out of the kids. And, for the reasons I've just given, if you retell it in the gobbledygook language of the new theology you'll be charged with philosophical fraud.

What to do? Heed your mother's advice and don't tell stories at all unless they are true. And if you want to have faith in something, place it in the power of evidence-based reason to relegate the Christian God to the graveyard of forgetfulness and his

son Jesus to the same status as all those other God-men that graced the myths of pagan religions.

¹ *Revelation*, 14:11.

² David Hume, "On Miracles", *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1902, p. 131.

³ John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious: Recovering the Divine at the Heart of the Human*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007, p. 8.

⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, New York: Scribner, 1948, p. 63.

⁵ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963, p. 59.

⁶ Op. cit., p. 46

⁷ Op. cit., p. 29.

⁸ Op. cit., p. 53.

⁹ John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: a Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998, p. 70.

¹⁰ John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious: Recovering the Divine at the Heart of the Human*, 2007, p. 11.

¹¹ Op. cit., p. 213.

¹² Don Cupitt, *After God*, London, HarperCollins, 1997.

¹³ Op. cit., p. xv.

¹⁴ Op. cit., p. 17f.

¹⁵ Peter Heath, *The Philosopher's Alice*, London: Academy Editions, 1974, p. 201.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Topics*, Bk. V, sect. 2.

¹⁷ Op. cit. p. 3.

¹⁸ Op. cit., p. 67.

¹⁹ Op. cit., p. 263.

²⁰ Op. cit., p. 264.

²¹ *1 Timothy*, 1:7. (Although I attribute these words to St Paul, I'm inclined to agree with most liberal New Testament scholars that Paul probably didn't write them.)