

God Beyond Theism? Bishop Spong, Paul Tillich and the Unicorn

Gregory W. Dawes

Abstract: John Shelby Spong has recently advocated belief in a “God beyond theism”. While rejecting traditional theism, he also distinguishes his position from atheism. Spong suggests that there is a divine reality, which may be described as “being itself” and which reveals itself in our commitment to unconditional ideals. It is argued that this notion of God is vacuous, the product of a confused belief that “being” is a characteristic of individual beings which may be universalised. Belief in such a God is also unmotivated, since there exist naturalistic explanations of the phenomena to which Spong appeals.

JOHN SHELBY SPONG, retired Episcopal Bishop of Newark, is a prolific writer. His seventeen books – ranging from *Honest Prayer* (1973) to his most recent *Here I Stand: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love, and Equality* (2001) – along with his numerous articles and public appearances have won him a wide following. Interestingly, that following extends well beyond the bounds of the established churches: it includes many whose affiliation with any form of traditional religion is minimal or non-existent. His recent visit to New Zealand attracted audiences far in excess of that which one would normally expect for a theological discussion, while he also received considerable attention in the electronic and print media.

Given the controversial and populist nature of Bishop Spong’s work, it is easy for those engaged in the academic study of religion to hold it in some contempt. It is true that his books are not closely argued and his claims are not well documented. On occasions he is guilty of egregious errors, as when he attributes the abandonment of the “God hypothesis” in modern science to the work of Sir Isaac Newton.¹ (In fact, of course, Newton was not only a devout, if unorthodox, Christian, but his physics

1. See John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1998) 34; “Is God [a] Miracle Worker?”, *The Voice* (Diocese of Newark Newspaper) <http://www.dioceseofnewark.org/vox30999.html> (19 June 2001).

actually required occasional divine interventions to shore up the mechanism of the universe.²) But despite these signs of sloppy scholarship, many of Spong's central ideas have a respectable intellectual pedigree. Therefore what he is saying deserves closer scrutiny by students of religion. In what follows I want to illustrate this claim by reference to one of Spong's most recent themes: the idea that our understanding of God must progress beyond the "theism" of Christian history.

In his espousal of belief in a "God beyond theism", Bishop Spong is clearly dependent on the work of the twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich.³ It was Tillich who first spoke of the need for Christianity to transcend "theism in all its forms", so as to begin speaking about "the God above God", who is the ultimate source of our "courage to be".⁴ So if we are looking for a developed form of the views held by Bishop Spong – one which is worthy of intellectual engagement – we may find this in the work of Paul Tillich. In what follows I will use Tillich's work to interpret Spong's views, before posing a few questions.

I will not spend much time on the critical side of Spong's work, with which (as it happens) I am fundamentally in agreement. I am sympathetic to the view that "the gods" are nothing other than what Tillich calls "images of human nature or subhuman powers raised to a superhuman realm".⁵ To this extent, I would accept the classic modern criticism of religion, dating from the time of Ludwig Feuerbach, which regards the gods as creations of human beings, projections of elements of human experience into an unseen world. I am happy to accept the "postmodern" claim that many of the entities posited by the modern sciences must be seen in a similar light. These, too, draw upon analogies in everyday experience to create models which are used to explain the underlying reality of the world.⁶ The difference – and it is a key one – is that the models created by the sciences are subject to a rigorous process of criticism. In other words, any such model will eventually be abandoned if it is not performing its explanatory role. I therefore regard the modern sciences as the most reliable means we have of arriving at a knowledge of reality, without (I think) falling into a kind of uncritical realism about their results. Religions, on the other hand, are notoriously resistant to criticism, being inclined to the view that their models are divinely revealed and therefore the subject of certain knowledge.

2. See Stephen F. Mason, *A History of the Sciences* Revised Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 205-6.

3. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die*, 64-65.

4. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Welwyn, Herts: James Nisbet & Co., 1952) 176.

5. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Combined Volume* (Welwyn, Herts: James Nisbet & Co., 1968) vol. 1, 235.

6. See Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on magic, religion and science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 321-27.

I am also inclined to agree with Bishop Spong that since the emergence of the modern sciences in the seventeenth century – with their impersonal models of explanation and their tradition of critical rationality – there is little point in trying to explain the way things are by reference to a divine being.⁷ Indeed insofar as religions employ personal rather than impersonal models to describe the underlying reality of the world, their claims simply fall outside what Michel Foucault would call the “episteme” of modern knowledge.⁸ It is this realisation that lies behind Spong’s references – not entirely accurate, as we have seen – to Sir Isaac Newton, to suggest that the modern sciences have gradually made appeal to divine activity redundant. It lies behind the claim made by New Testament scholar turned atheist Michael Goulder and endorsed by Spong, that “the God of the past ‘no longer [has] any real work to do.’”⁹ It also explains Spong’s attitude to prayer, expressed in the tenth of his Twelve Theses (apparently modelled on Martin Luther’s), where he writes that “prayer cannot be a request made to a theistic deity to act in human history in a particular way”.¹⁰ For if one can no longer appeal to a divine being to explain the course of events, then any attempt to persuade that deity to alter the course of events is obviously doomed to failure. While others may wish to debate these views, their defence would be the work of another day. For the moment, I need only note that I have no serious disagreement with Spong’s more substantive conclusions.

Where we differ is in the consequences we draw from these conclusions. If one accepts the critical arguments outlined above, the obvious consequence would seem to be atheism. One would not need to adopt a “strong” atheism, which would deny the existence of God outright. But these arguments do seem to entail at the least a “weak” atheism, or (if one prefers) a strong agnosticism, which denies that we have sufficient reason for affirming God’s existence. For if belief in God can be accounted for in purely naturalistic terms and if appeals to the actions of God are no longer a plausible way of explaining the existence and shape of the world, it is hard to see what other grounds we could have for affirming his reality. Yet Bishop Spong claims not to be an atheist. He continues to use religious language and his words imply that this language has a distinctive referent, albeit one about which we

7. John Shelby Spong, “Can One Be a Christian Without Being a Theist?”, *The Voice* (Diocese of Newark) <http://www.dioceseofnewark.org/vox21096.html> (19 June 2001).

8. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966; New York, NY: Random House, 1970), xiv, xxii, and passim.

9. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die*, 44, 54; “The God Beyond Theism”, *The Voice* (Diocese of Newark) <http://www.dioceseofnewark.org/vox31099.html> (19 June 2001).

10. John Shelby Spong, “A Call for a New Reformation” <http://www.dioceseofnewark.org/jsspong/reform.html> (19 June 2001).

can say very little. For instance, Spong speaks of “experiencing God” in terms which suggest that this is an experience of something, or someone, who cannot be simply identified with the other objects of our experience. He says that this God is the “ultimate reality” in his life, that he lives in “a constant and almost mystical awareness of the divine presence”.¹¹ He says that he is among those who “cannot cease believing”, since God is “too real” to allow them to do so.¹² But what is this reality? Where is it to be found? How can we know about it?

It is at this point that Spong’s language becomes both “elusive and allusive”.¹³ Often his position looks like yet another retreat to religious experience, a tactic characteristic of liberal theology since the time of Friedrich Schleiermacher. We can (it seems) no longer speak of God, in any traditional sense, but we can continue to speak of our “God-experiences”. Yet Spong’s position is not identical with that of theological liberalism. He does speak of an experience of God, which is the basis of his faith, but it is a very particular kind of experience. God is the source of human love which (or whom) we know in the very act of loving wastefully; he is the Ground of Being which (or whom) we come to know when we ourselves have the courage to be.¹⁴

For the philosopher, of course, such expressions are infuriatingly vague. (Indeed one is tempted to say that their vagueness is their strength, since Spong’s readers can find in them whatever meaning they want.) But they take on a more precise meaning in the work of Tillich. We may begin with Tillich’s analysis of human rationality, which he understands in a very broad sense, as encompassing all of our cultural life. Tillich argues that there exists a depth dimension to human reason, which precedes the division into knowing subject and known object.¹⁵ This takes the form of a quest for an limitless and unconditioned reality, which is implicit in our all dealings with the limited and conditioned objects of experience.¹⁶ In the field of cognition, this involves a striving for what Tillich calls “truth itself”, a truth that is not relative and partial but absolute and complete. In the field of aesthetics, it takes the form of striving for “beauty itself”, a striving which underlies every artistic work. In the field of law, this depth dimension has the form of a striving for “justice itself”, while in the field of personal relations it takes the

11. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die*, 3.

12. Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die*, 18.

13. Rodney Stark and Roger Fink, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000) 275.

14. See Spong, “The God Beyond Theism” and *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die*, 68-70.

15. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 88.

16. See Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 179.

form of a striving for “love itself”.¹⁷ These are all examples of what Tillich famously calls our “ultimate concern”.¹⁸

The existence of this ultimate concern raises the central question of religion. Is there a way in which the conflicts which arise in the exercise of reason – conflicts between the conditioned and the unconditioned – can be overcome?¹⁹ Revelation answers this question in symbolic language. It does so by way of insights received in what Tillich calls a state of “ecstasy”. A state of ecstasy is a “state of mind in which reason is beyond itself, that is, beyond its subject-object structure” and thus capable of grasping the reality for which it is striving.²⁰ The reality it grasps is that of the ground or power of being,²¹ which Tillich identifies with God.²² As the ground or power of being, God is “being itself”.²³ Incidentally, it is because God is “being itself” that He cannot be thought of as a being among other beings, whose existence could be a matter of dispute.²⁴ Even to talk about God as the “highest being” is to reduce Him to the level of other beings and to deny His true nature.²⁵ To speak of God as a “person” without due qualifications is to fall into the same trap.²⁶

What can we make of these ideas? Let me begin with some positive comments. I believe that, at least in the first part of this argument, Tillich (and by association Bishop Spong) have identified something of philosophical interest. If we assume the most plausible view of human origins we have, namely the Darwinian one, there is something remarkable about our commitment to certain ideals – let’s call them the ideals of truth, beauty and goodness – in a world in which they seem impossible of realisation. At first sight this commitment is not readily explicable as the product of an evolutionary process which has no other “purpose” (loosely speaking) than the successful propagation of organisms. Indeed at least two contemporary philosophers have suggested that it simply cannot be accounted for on evolutionary grounds at all.²⁷ This is not a question I wish to adjudicate. All I wish to note is that there is a question here worthy of investigation.

17. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 88.

18. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 14.

19. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 104.

20. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 124.

21. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 126.

22. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 261-62.

23. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 264-65.

24. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 262.

25. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 261.

26. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 271.

27. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 216-37; Anthony O’Hear, *Beyond Evolution: Human Nature and the Limits of Evolutionary Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

However, there is a theological tradition dating to the time of Immanuel Kant which goes further. It suggests that the existence of at least some of these ideals implies the existence of God. Loosely speaking, it is this tradition to which Tillich and Bishop Spong seem to belong.²⁸ More precisely, for Tillich the experience of the finitude – the limited and conditioned character – of human existence raises the *question* to which the Christian revelation of God is the symbolic *answer*. As “being itself”, God is the implicit goal of our strivings for truth, beauty and goodness. He makes possible a life lived in hope in pursuit of these goals, a life which Tillich describes as the “New Being” of faith-filled existence.²⁹

Such claims seem to go far beyond what is warranted by the evidence. First of all, there are some philosophical objections to the way in which both Tillich and Bishop Spong describe the reality of God. As we have seen, Tillich’s preferred designation of God is “being itself”, a phrase which Spong also uses.³⁰ This is, of course, a very traditional designation of God. No less a figure than Thomas Aquinas refers to God as *ipsum esse subsistens*: “being itself existing”.³¹ But at least as used by Tillich, this expression seems to be the product of a twofold confusion. The first mistake is that of regarding the word “being” as a descriptive word, capable of picking out some characteristic which all beings have in common.³² The problem here, as Kant pointed out, is that “being” is not a descriptive term.³³ I take nothing away from the idea of a unicorn – I deprive it of none of its characteristics – if I judge that no unicorns exist. A second error lies in imagining that “being” can be meaningfully spoken of as a universal, as having some kind of quasi-independent existence, so that one can speak not just of the being of individual beings, but of “being itself”.³⁴ It is true that Bishop Spong seems to prefer what is for Tillich an equivalent term,³⁵ namely “ground of being”.³⁶ At first sight, this suggests a very traditional conception of God: an infinite, necessary being who sustains the world of contingent, finite beings. Yet such a God is nothing less than the God of “theism”, which Spong and Tillich reject.³⁷

28. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 91 n.1.

29. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 55.

30. See Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die*, 57.

31. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia qu.4 art.2 ad 2.

32. See Sidney Hook, “The Quest for ‘Being’”, *Journal of Philosophy* 50 (1953), 718; A. M. Macleod, *Tillich: An Essay on the Role of Ontology in his Philosophical Theology* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973) 88-99.

33. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787) transl. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), A598-99; B626-27 (504-5).

34. See H. A. Craighead, “Paul Tillich’s Arguments for God’s Reality”, *Thomist* 39 (1975), 309-18; Hook, “The Quest for ‘Being’”, 718.

35. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 261.

36. See Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die*, 215-19.

37. See Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die*, 46; Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 232.

Secondly, on the very grounds that Spong has brought forward, it is not clear why we need to use this word "God" at all. For Spong's mysterious "ground of being" is apparently not responsible for the way the world is. As we have seen, Spong has already argued that the sciences have made such explanatory appeals to divine action redundant. If, with Tillich, Spong wishes to see mystical depths in our strivings for truth, beauty and goodness, then it is not at first sight clear why we need God in this context either. We can regard such ideals as simply projections to an ideal limit of qualities which we happen to value for all sorts of ultimately practical reasons. In this case, they are no more pointers to a divine "ground of being" than is the mathematician's parallel creation of the idea of infinity.³⁸ Incidentally, to recognise that all these ideals are our creations – that they are to a certain extent fictions, to which no reality completely corresponds – is not necessarily to undermine their force. A world without God, contrary to much theological (and even "postmodern") polemics, is not necessarily a world without truth or value.³⁹

In a word, what is most problematic about Spong's position is not his criticism of traditional religious language. It is the fact that he continues to use language about God, when that language seems to have been emptied of its content and stripped of its necessity. Spong will not only need to show his theological opponents that this "God beyond God" has religious power. He will need to show his philosophical opponents that we *need* to continue to speak of God, in a world in which entirely naturalistic explanations are on offer for the phenomena to which he appeals. He will also need to show that the term "God", which he continues to employ, is something more than an empty abstraction. For there are good reasons to believe that a God so stripped of all the characteristics of an individual being has, in fact, no reality at all.

38. See Hook, "The Quest for 'Being'", 719.

39. For an assertion of the importance of ethical values in the context of a very strongly naturalistic explanation of their origins, see J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* ([1977] London: Penguin, 1990).