

When John Spong met Don Cupitt ...

The names of John Spong and Don Cupitt are familiar to many who read books about Christianity. They attract coverage in newspapers and magazines, television and radio because their views on Christian belief are controversial; and also, no doubt, because their rhetoric commends itself as “correct” to media staff and readers steeped in the liberal vision of modernity: both authors wave the flag for honesty in place of self-deception, openness in place of judgementalism, humility in place of pride, courage in place of the dependence and false security, autonomy in place of authoritarianism, reason in place of irrationality.

Now although John Spong and Don Cupitt share much rhetoric against orthodox Christianity, they are at odds with each other on one fundamental matter. Bishop John Spong sees Christian doctrine as a human construct throughout, but he nevertheless holds firmly to the reality of the God about whom doctrine attempts to speak. Don Cupitt, by contrast, has moved to what he calls a “non-realist” position, arguing that the very concept of God is as much a human construct as any of our doctrines about God. The same move has been made by Lloyd Geering in New Zealand.

It now becomes interesting, how Spong and Cupitt see each other. Usually, of course, what we hear from them is their view of orthodox Christians – rather than the view each has of the other. But the latter was laid wide open for reflection when, in 1995, the Sea of Faith Network in the U.K. invited Bishop Spong to speak along with Don Cupitt at its National Conference.¹ What they said then raises lively questions for all who are interested in the issues between orthodox, liberal realist and non-realist thinkers.

A spark was ignited when in the middle of his opening address at the Conference, Don Cupitt made a statement to which John Spong took strong exception. Listing reasons why, in his opinion, the Churches reject his own “non-realist” understanding of God, Cupitt said:

In religion, as in many other areas of life, we have a very ancient, long-established culture of dependency. People reckon that they must have something out-there to lean on, however minimally. It can happen that a well-known philosopher of religion like John Hick will go almost all the way with me in admitting the human and historically-evolved character of all religious language, in admitting that our experience is moulded by our beliefs and so on. But he won't go all the way, because like so many others he clings fiercely to that tiny speck of objectivity, that feeling that there is, there must be, something Real out there to which all the symbolism refers, even though we cannot say anything about it. People cling fiercely, desperately to that last sliver of objectivity...

Now this got right up John Spong's nose, as we shall see. Most of Spong's own prepared address which followed moved over familiar ground, seeking to refute a literal interpretation of Christian doctrine, and in particular of the resurrection of Jesus. This part of his speech ended with Spong describing the Sea of Faith Network as his ally and supporter as it forces the church to be open and honest about its faith formularies. But now, said Spong, the line of division for him comes into view. “The essence of Christianity that our words seek to describe”,

“Now this got right up John Spong's nose...”

he said, “is for me more than a human construct”. He prefaced what followed with the words “This may be the Spong version of John Hick's ‘last vestige’, but hear me out”. He then testified to a God who was “supremely real” to him. “I dismiss the literalism of every religious symbol, I cling to the reality to which those religious symbols point me”, he said. And he spoke of “a God who is real beyond my constructs of the divine one and a God who constantly impinges upon me as I open myself to that in-breaking presence and as I walk in the wordless wonder of that reality”.

Later, in his closing address to the Conference, Spong returned to Cupitt's remarks quoted above. He said he detected a bit of hostility that seems to surround some comments when God has been referred to as if the person speaking still found great meaning in that word or that concept. Even to suggest that a person is hanging on to “only a sliver” is a bit perjorative. A sliver of God means that your point of view has almost prevailed but there's this single little hook that has caught one or two people who are not brave enough, strong enough or free enough of their paternal needs or parental needs to take that final step into the glorious promised land of non-realism. May I suggest you might look at that language and check the perjorative quality that is in it. Perhaps there's another way of looking at that. Perhaps it's not a sliver at all. Perhaps what has happened is that through the years we've been able to break open the symbols and remove the barnacles and perhaps we've gotten down to what is an essence that has been hidden from us for years, not a sliver but an essence in its pristine beauty that we might look at in a different way.

Spong went on; if the Sea of Faith finally turns out not to be the wave of the future, if it sinks into oblivion

beyond the sunset because it has no unifying principle that would endure, I would like to suggest that if that day comes I hope that I will be around in a life-raft and I hope that somehow I'll be representing an institution that because of the work you've done has scraped itself much cleaner than its ever been before, and it's there ready to offer a divine invitation and a welcome....

Now whether or not these remarks by Spong are apposite, they surely contain irony. Consider firstly his objection to the perjorative tone of Cupitt's remarks. Spong himself customarily relies heavily on perjorative, stereotyping rhetoric against the motives of his orthodox opponents rather than dealing fairly with their points. Maxine Hancock, analysing the rhetoric of a public debate which she moderated between John Spong and John Stott, concluded [Spong's] use of perjorative words...and of sweeping generalisation was clearly designed to undermine a biblically-serious stance by means of generalisation and perjorative terminology, without the necessity of offering either substantive evidence or logical argument.²

Consider secondly his image of a future day when he hopes he may be around in life-raft to "bring on board" his floundering Sea of Faith critics. But one can just imagine what he would say of orthodox Christians who spoke of a future day when they might be around in a life-raft to "bring on board" Spong himself. He would find this the most appallingly patronising, dismissive response to his criticisms. It is ironic that he makes the same response when criticised himself.

So we are left with some puzzles. On the one hand, if Cupitt is right to use against Spong the same perjorative rhetoric that Spong uses to stereotype critically the personal attitudes of orthodox Christians, then Spong's *theological position* is apparently no proof against his sharing the same *personal attitudes* he criticises. In which case, we might ask whether even Cupitt's *theological position* is sufficient proof against these attitudes? Indeed it is not. Which is precisely

the point of the mickey-taking "press release" printed on the cover of Conference report. Written by a prominent Sea of Faith member, it begins:

Bishop confesses: "I believe in God"

Shock and horror swept through a meeting of the devoutly godless Sea of Faith movement when a Bishop publically confessed: "I still believe in God".

Members were stunned as the Bishop mounted his outspoken attack on their idea that God is an idea.

"I am stunned," said one stunned member.

Some godless vicars – who support Sea of Faith's traditional view that God is a cultural construct – wept openly at what they called a betrayal of their faith.

"This is a betrayal of our faith," said one. Others described the Bishop's views as "outrageous".

"It is outrageous," said one priest who asked not be named, "that this man should brazenly challenge everything we hold most dear..."

In short, the *personal attitudes* which Spong and Cupitt attack among orthodox Christians are not necessarily cured by adopting the *theological positions* held by these authors.

On the other hand, if Spong is justified in dismissing as unwarranted the perjorative rhetoric which Cupitt directs against himself on the basis of his (Spong's) *theological position*, then this raises the possibility that orthodox Christians are justified in dismissing as unwarranted the same rhetoric when Spong directs it against themselves on the basis of their *theological position*.

When all the hats can be swapped around in this way, it begins to look as if a person's *theological position* and their

"You cannot talk about God; you can only address Him."

personal attitude (honesty, courage etc) are simply independent of each other. And there is surely truth in the suggestion that either good or bad personal attitudes can accompany the range of theological positions. I find that both Spong and Cupitt, by contrast, move too easily between disapproval of someone's personal attitude and rejection of their religious beliefs. They seem too easily to assume that because they themselves find certain beliefs incredible, those who hold them must be driven by a bad attitude such as fearful insecurity – instead of allowing the fact that a belief is deeply held to challenge their own ideas of what is credible. Or again, they assume that because some people who are insecure use religious beliefs as a security blanket, this is all that these beliefs ever represent – instead of allowing that these beliefs may nurture in believers a more mature and fearless trust in God.

And yet if this split between theological position and personal attitude is taken too far, it presents us with an impossible choice. It forces us to decide whether God is the One who is concerned with right theoretical beliefs and not "right" attitudes, or the One who is concerned with right attitudes and not "right" theoretical beliefs. *Either* we have a God who does not mind what is our personal outlook so long as we have the right beliefs, *or* we have a God who does not mind what we believe so long as we are good people. We have to choose between theoretical doctrinal absolutism and theoretical doctrinal relativism. And this, we are bound to say, is an impossible choice.

We gain further insight into the issues between orthodox Christians, John Spong and Don Cupitt if we ask how it is that some liberal theologians such as Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering have moved easily from realism to non-realism in their theology – letting go without a problem that "last sliver of objectivity" – while other liberals such as

John Spong and John Hick have resisted this step as a total denial of their faith.

In order to explore this, let us reflect for a while on a famous saying of Martin Buber, "You cannot talk about God; you can only address Him." This truth has a strong bearing upon liberal theology. It is open, however, to more than one interpretation; and it is here that critical issues arise for liberal theology.

What Buber means by this saying is enlarged when, using the vocabulary he has himself formed in his book *I and Thou*, we read "God is the eternal Thou, which by nature can never become an It".³ When Buber says "You cannot talk about God; you can only address him", what he means by "talking about God" and by "addressing God" are to be found in his extended meditations on the "I-It" and the "I-Thou" as ways of relating to the world.

So let us enlarge upon the "I-It" and the "I-Thou". Here I shall draw both from Buber and from wider Christian reflection on his themes.

Firstly, what does it mean to "talk about" something in Buber's sense of addressing something as an "It"? On investigation this has two distinct parts. Firstly, we bring to something a prior framework or world of meaning and value to which we are committed by way of presupposition. Our bringing this "to something" also implies a presupposition of "something there", a *referent* about which we now talk from within our framework of meaning and value.

Secondly, in our "talking about" something we *test* our referent in terms of the framework of meaning and value we bring, forming statements which *match* the truth regarding the referent. These two things – our prior commitments and our testing for correspondence – are distinct. Whereas the latter concerns what we see as "out there" before us, the former is largely a matter of our hidden presupposition.

The point I want to emphasise about this is that it all takes place within a prior world of meaning

and value – our viewpoint from which we register what is before us – and that it *leaves this intact*. "I-It" talk is therefore about information available in principle for us to use to our own (prior) ends. It is theoretical knowledge of possible instrumental value. What Buber declares is that *with regard to God, the question of such knowledge does not arise*.

Let us turn now to what Buber means by "addressing God". At first hearing, "You cannot talk about God" seems to prohibit speech. But this is not so. There is speech which is a personal avowal spoken before God and addressed ultimately to God.⁴ By such an avowal, we who listen are led beyond grasping at information about God and are drawn with the speaker to address God for ourselves. We might speak of religious utterance as *irreducibly indicative*; it refers us to something by pointing in a direction in which we must ourselves look in order to see what is meant.

What is distinctive about this "looking", as an act of addressing God? It is an act to which we find ourselves summoned *precisely by the reality of God*, and an act in which we *give ourselves unconditionally*. Let me expand on this.

On the one hand, *the reality of God summons us*. Where we have adopted merely a detached theoretical, instrumental outlook, now the presuppositions entailed in this are opened up to be remade in new reference. Our taken-for-granted references give way to a new disclosure of the real breaking in upon us, dawning upon us, present and beckoning to us. In this our prior world of meaning and value is taken up and given a new and truer meaning with reference to the mystery of God. Here God himself vouches personally and immediately for himself as our referent. It must be added, there is no going "beyond" this self-revealing action of God. There is no question of our moving beyond it to possession of God as a taken-for-granted referent. It is rather God's reality which possesses us in ways partly beyond our present understanding.

On the other hand, *our address of God is our fullest, most unreserved self-giving personal act*. For us to address God is not to throw something, so to speak, in the direction of a God whose reality we already grasp, but to throw ourselves without reserve into engaging with God. This is from beginning to end something we must do for ourselves; we must look for and listen to God for ourselves; and we must offer up our whole world of meaning and value to be renewed by God in this moment. In so doing we take nothing for granted, we leave nothing to God; we take full responsibility for God in our situation. Or more precisely, we participate in God's act of taking responsibility for himself and for us.⁵

Therefore Buber's saying "You cannot talk about God: you can only address Him" is not a blanket prohibition of doctrinal statements. What it prohibits is the misuse, or misunderstanding, of doctrine as information which leaves our own world of meaning and value intact, and which we may use to our own ends. Rather it commends doctrinal statements as *more than* such "talk about God": as words uttered before God and addressed to God, in a radically self-giving response to the ever new self-revealing mystery of God, in which all that we bring is offered up to God.⁶

Let me emphasise that when we say, with Buber, that we can "only" address God we are not saying that we can do no more than this with regard to God, but that *we can do no less*. We are not saying that all we can do is ask and answer our own questions about the reality of God because that reality does not make itself known. Rather we are saying that the reality of God makes itself known and in so doing empowers us precisely to take responsibility for itself. We face here the paradox of grace, that God's reality is known to us not in our passivity but in our most lively personal activity.

Light is shed here on some issues raised earlier in this paper. Firstly, we see that Spong's and Cupitt's rejection (in effect) of "I-It" talk of

God and their insistence upon the role of human activity in talk of God need not be at the expense of belief in a real God who reveals himself. Not, that is, if we take seriously the paradox of grace. When Cupitt says "When it comes to God, it is we who do all the talking" we may reply "and it is we who do all the listening, too; and our talking is grounded in our listening".

Secondly, we see that the split between theological beliefs and personal attitude, which when made absolute presents us with an impossible choice, is overcome in the act of truly addressing God. The meaning of doctrine, we have seen, is found in such address; but such address entails a distinctive personal attitude of unconditional responsiveness to the reality of God and responsibility taken for God in our situation.

Let us turn now to the question which brings to the fore, critical issues bearing upon liberal theology. Buber's saying has in view all "talk about God". But is it not *itself* "talk about God"?

Notice that to pursue this simple question is to mirror, in a sense, the great sweep of Western culture through modernity to postmodernity. Modernity has fed upon supposedly impartial descriptions of the world and of human life, universal in scope, but which as descriptions have too often reflected a specifically European, male viewpoint. Again, in modernity the voice of the artist, musician and poet has too often been drowned by the voice of the critic speaking from a viewpoint supposedly superior to, because more objective than, theirs; and the truth of events has too often been concealed by those who craft the news story. And yet we have been growing aware of these hidden perspectives so widely at work.⁷

"There is no view from nowhere", we say today. We have grown wary of universal claims, suspicious that they reflect a particular perspective, a particular prior world of meaning and value – at least, that is, when we notice them and when it suits us. So today we are inclined to ask of the

universal claim: where is the speaker coming from? What viewpoint is reflected here?

So now we ask: when Buber says "You cannot talk about God; you can only address him", does he not implicitly claim for himself, and for his words, a viewpoint above the language of which he speaks, a viewpoint from which he surveys God on the one hand, and human talk of God on the other? If so, then although Buber forbids "I-It" talk about God, he engages in it himself precisely as he speaks.

Now here we are confronted with one possibility which we have to reckon with as we approach liberal theology in general: that precisely in the act of pronouncing invalid "I-It" talk about God, a liberal author may engage in such talk – and in so doing, implicitly pronounce his own talk invalid. So long as he remains unmoved by this, his words will be haunted by this inner contradiction, with its nihilistic threat to his world of meaning and value.

But there is another way of understanding Buber's saying – one which is more faithful to God and our talk of him. Buber's saying can be understood as itself an address of God, a personal avowal spoken before God which invites us to join in addressing God – "You are indeed the One about whom we cannot talk, the One whom we can only address" – words summoned from us by the reality of God, to which we respond in fullest self-giving. We now find Buber's saying is itself consistent with what it says. And there is here no implicit claim to a detached, superior vantage-point from which Buber "talks about" *address* of God either. Rather Buber *testifies* to such address as a participant; and he calls us to participate similarly in addressing God.

With these considerations in mind, let us return now to John Spong and to Don Cupitt. Let's take Spong first. He, like Buber, is concerned to deny the possibility of "I-It" talk about God – talk which puts the truth of God in our possession for use to our own ends. But he

employs different terms to deny this possibility. He claims that *all talk of God is symbolic rather than literal, and is humanly constructed from our limited cultural experience rather than reflecting the objective truth of God.*

Now we must ask whether this claim is, like Buber's, itself included consistently within its own account of address of God. Or does it presume for itself a superior vantage-point? This is to ask: when Spong says all talk of God is a symbolic human construct, is this itself a symbolic human construct, culturally determined? He would surely say not. He would surely say it is the objective truth of God. And yet he would surely be bound to affirm that he knows this truth *from his own limited human experience of God.*

So Spong has a problem here. Considerations of self-reference imply that he has a presupposed referent which he calls "God" and which he brings with him to his account of talk about God. This is Cupitt's challenge to him. How can he respond? He could abandon God as a referent, accepting that this referent is as much a symbolic human construct as is (according to him) the content of doctrine in general. He could go the way of Cupitt. He could let go of this referent as what Cupitt called the "last sliver of objectivity". To do this would be for Spong to take a stand upon his claim that all talk of God is a symbolic human construct to the point of allowing it to override his claim on the reality of God.

Another response would be for him simply to refuse to abandon God as a referent. He could simply brush aside the considerations of self-reference. But their threat will not go away; his own rhetoric accuses him. He remains vulnerable to the charge that he clings unreasonably to what his own thesis subverts – a last illusory sliver of objectivity.

But there remains another alternative open to Spong. He could take his stand upon his experience of God, and with greater faithfulness let this challenge the modern liberal presuppositions he brings to God

and to talk of God. He will then have to let doctrine do the same: he will no longer assume that when a doctrine challenges his own prior world of meaning and value, its only truth must lie in a symbolic meaning which does not challenge this world. Instead he will allow the possibility that God himself breaks through in doctrine to challenge his presuppositions.

What now of Cupitt's position? Cupitt, like Spong, shares Buber's prohibition of "I-It" talk about God. But unlike Spong, he sees as a human construct not only what we say, but our very reference to God in the first place. However, the same questions arise for him, *mutanda mutandis*, as for Spong. We must ask whether Cupitt's claim, like Buber's, is itself included consistently within its own account of address of God. Or does it presume for itself a superior vantage-point? This is to ask: when Cupitt says that all talk of God is a human construct, is this itself a human construct? He would surely say not. He would say that this (i.e., that talk of God is a human construct) is the objective truth of God; and yet he would maintain that this is a truth about God *known to himself personally*.

So Cupitt has a problem too. Considerations of self-reference imply that he has a presupposed referent in "we who construct God", which he brings with him to his account of talk about God. How is he to respond to this? He could abandon this reference to a coherent, creative, autonomous human agent, accepting that it is itself as much his own construct as is God? There are those among postmodernists who go this way. Baudrillard sees meaning not as a coherent whole constructed by and referring back to creative, autonomous agents but as a web of free-floating signs which refer only to each other and themselves.⁸ Where Cupitt has spoken of the void beyond ourselves, now we meet the void already within our very selves. Cupitt has rightly been challenged to let go the language of creative, autonomous agency if he is serious

about his own theological programme. Perhaps in the face of this challenge he clings fiercely, desperately to a "last sliver" of subjectivity?⁹

But again there remains another alternative open to Cupitt. He could take his stand upon his experience of God, and with greater faithfulness let this challenge his presupposition of a coherent, constructive human agent which he brings to God and to talk of God. He will then have to let doctrine present the same challenge. Instead of dismissing as a human construct any doctrine which challenges his own prior world of meaning and value, he will have to allow the possibility that God here breaks open this world and gracefully renews and empowers him as a coherent, constructive agent.

To conclude. Buber's saying, "You cannot talk about God; you can only address him", commends a truth bearing upon liberal theology. The question of its self-referential consistency, in particular, highlights issues for liberal theology. We have seen how it sheds light on what was happening when "all the hats changed round" at the 1995 Sea of Faith Conference in England. We now see that not only orthodox Christians but also liberal realists and non-realists may cling to a prior world of meaning and value rather than offer up their world to God. Liberal realists and non-realists, however, face the nihilistic subversion of their position by their own rhetoric. They have to choose ultimately between this rhetoric and the God who they experience. To choose the latter will be for them to take a more faithful stand on God, allowing God to challenge their own liberal presuppositions. They will then find their rhetoric returned to them scraped cleaner than ever before, because it is no longer applied universally but with discernment; and they will be opened anew to orthodox testimony to the mystery

of God in Christ.

Endnotes

1. *Sea of Faith* (Quarterly Magazine of the Sea of Faith Network), 23, (October 1995).
2. Maxine Hancock, 'Some reflections on the use of language in the Stott-Spong dialogue', *Crux* xxix, no. 4 (December 1993), pp28-33.
3. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 1937.
4. Karl Barth, who wrote more words about God than most, avowed that "all theology is prayer" – that is, all theology is addressed to God.
5. On this see Gerhard Ebeling, "Rudimentary reflections on speaking responsibly of God", in his *Word and Faith*, (SCM, 1963), 333-353, esp 345-6.
6. For a perceptive account of the logic of religious language in general, see Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language*, (SCM, 1957). The "offering up" of language to God is also testified in Pannenberg's account of "doxological" language. (See Pannenberg, "Analogy and Doxology", *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol 1, 211f). Although Pannenberg contrasts "doxological" with "analogical" language, arguably when analogical language is religious it is precisely its doxological character which constitutes it so.
7. Especially memorable is George Steiner, *Real Presences*, (Faber & Faber, 1989). The first section of this book is titled "A Secondary City".
8. Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, (Columbia University Semiotext, 1987).
9. See, for example: "Cupitt's appeal to be 'free to create whatever moral reality is most fitting for it' uneasily combines ...the heroic modern self seeking 'autonomy' and the de-centred postmodern self." Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1995), 107.



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