

On Defining Terms

Davidson Loehr

The inability or unwillingness of both Sarah Stewart and Christopher Hinkle to define their key terms gives away the fact that they are using these words for their feeling, not their meaning. The word "Christianity" is obviously an emotionally important word for both; and for Hinkle, the word "God" seems to be a kind of touchstone. But the words are used as unexamined feeling-words. It's important to ask what either writer means by them.

Take the notion of gods. The gods of the ancient Hebrews were tribal chieftains projected outward, given the imaginative powers of approval and punishment, of establishing behavioral boundaries for the extended "tribes" the way local chieftains did. At a deeper level, the father-gods were projected Alpha Males--we're one of thousands of species that seem hard-wired for this form of deference. Anthropomorphic attributes were given to these gods, and people quickly became used to imagining them as seeing, hearing, loving, rewarding, punishing--the whole list of human attributes loaded onto the deities we created.

One of several important tasks for those who would keep theistic thinking coherent and relevant today is to reframe the word "God" for our world where--as Feuerbach taught us over 160 years ago--these are projections of our own likes and dislikes. Without filtering out the initial projection, we're left (to switch footnotes) with Peter Berger's 2nd and 3rd stage of religion (in *The Sacred Canopy*): positing an external deity/lawgiver of great significance while forgetting that this God began as only one of many of our possible projections.

It doesn't sound like Hinkle wants to get stuck in this old tar pit. But it does feel that he wants to keep the old attributes without mentioning the anthropomorphic deity--like trying to keep the smile, without the cat.

For a couple centuries--at least since Schleiermacher--we've been vaguely aware that this word "God" has changed from an external being, a Guy in the Sky, to a concept. That, in turn, has shifted the center of the theistic language-game. God-talk is now just one of many ways of talking about our enduring questions. Granted that our deep yearnings, hope and fears are still a part of us, why does Hinkle think that God-talk is a good, or even adequate, way of referring to them when it has so easily numbed him into uncritical uses of it? What parts of these enduring, pre-theistic, human questions does this idiom let us articulate? Or is it just to be a feel-good nostalgia game?

And how would Hinkle's imperialistic notion that religion or life are about this old God, or trying to feel its/his presence--how could this open useful dialogue with non-theistic idioms of religious expression, whether Buddhist, Taoist, or secular? Or is it just meant to circle the wagons around an old way of talking, without bothering to explain just what it is that old way of talking is talking about? How would he, for just one example,

describe the difference between his yearning for "an experience of God" with the Buddhist notion that the point of religion is simply to wake up--and we're not awake until we can give up our illusions, including the comforting ones? Hinkle, like Lindbeck, seems trapped within an idiom of expression that limits rather than expands the possibilities of expression.

To say that "Christianity is no more like Buddhism than badminton is like chess" is, I think, willful ignorance. All were created to express and provide a grammar for enduring human fears and hopes that seem species-specific. Christians and Buddhists have found many deep similarities beneath their different idioms of expression. Marcus Borg, an influential Christian apologist, has written a book on Buddha and Christ, in which he lists many parallel sayings to show a deep sympathy between the two very different sages. Marcus has said that if he had been raised in a Buddhist culture he could easily and happily be a Buddhist. His choice of Christianity was due to an accident of birth multiplied by years of time immersed in the expressions peculiar to Christianity rather than those of Buddhism. And the last time I heard former Catholic nun Karen Armstrong (*A History of God*) at a Jesus Seminar meeting, all she wanted to talk about was the Buddha. Granted, Christianity is concerned with adopting certain linguistic illusions of relationship, while the most austere Tibetan Buddhism yearns to wake up by outgrowing the need for such illusions. But when thinkers the caliber of Borg, Armstrong, even Thich Nhat Hahn find obvious and deep family resemblances between Christianity and Buddhism, Hinkle's failure to do so looks less like insight. And the result of this refusal of depth is--to use Hinkle's own phrases against him-- "a sophomoric theology, a superficial practice, and a shallow spiritual life."

I would urge both of these authors to spend some time unpacking the key words. What is the use and meaning of the word "God" once it has been stripped of its old anthropomorphic projections and has just become--again, as I think it has through Tillich back at least to Schleiermacher and Schelling--a concept, an idea? Religion doesn't rest on "an awareness of God." The phrase "an awareness of God" is part of a provincial language game within which its players are taught that peculiar way of talking about feelings far deeper, and far older, than all gods and religions.

Similarly with the word "Christianity." It is used as though it were important, and as though its meaning must be obvious. But what do either Hinkle or Stewart mean by the word?

It's not referring, I assume, to the religion Paul invented, in which he turned the man Jesus into a supernatural savior and mediator.

Is it, as the Jesus Seminar has it, reclaiming the man Jesus for the wisdom tradition, defending his sayings--at least a few of them--as insights into the human condition too essential and wise to pass over? Then what would any of this have to do with the religion of Christianity? If the man Jesus is to be one of the wisdom figures, just what wisdom has been found there and how does it seem important? His existential notion of the "kingdom of God"? (I'd vote for that one.) What wisdom, how and why is it important

or useful? And what connection can be made between the teachings of Jesus and the religion which was named after Paul's mystical "risen Christ"--a religion Jesus surely would have loathed?

Is "Christianity" to be code for a personal mystical sense of union with an ultimate (or at least seductive) sense of genuine worth--what used to be called "justification"? If so, what are these feelings, how do they work for these authors, and do they think that such feelings--or just yearnings: it isn't clear to me from these papers--are too personal and idiosyncratic to explain or share? Even so: if they're claiming to have the "eyes to see and ears to hear" the music of the spheres, what do they think or feel this music is? Does it add something important to spiritual questions beyond a kind of linguistic self-medication? How could they translate these learnings or yearnings into an ordinary language that might communicate beyond those bewitched by that idiom of expression?

The most seductive idols are made not of gold but of words. It felt to me like the words "God" (for Hinkle) and "Christianity" (for both of them) weren't being used to articulate or communicate. It felt like the words themselves were being propped up as icons. Part of any critical religious enterprise, though, is iconoclasm: shattering idols that have taken the place of honest inquiry. Without that critical step, the "peace" religion can bring doesn't pass understanding, it bypasses it. The gap between those words needs to be bridged with the hard work of examination and articulation, not just missing the smile when the cat's long gone.

Religion isn't about "God"--it's about deeper, more authentic, more responsible living. "God-talk"--like any other religious jargon--is only useful to the extent that we and others actually know what we think we're talking about. To do that, we who use the jargon must be able to translate it into ordinary language. Otherwise, religion is reduced to little more than wanting to feel good without having to think at all. That isn't sufficient.