

11th APRIL 2010 - James Millar - A New Christianity? Personal reflections on Bishop Spong

## Introduction

Two thousand years ago, so the story goes, a young man whom we know as Jesus of Nazareth, was put to death at the command of Roman Governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. It is interesting to contemplate on this day, a week after Easter, how his disciples must have felt a week after the first Easter. "Where do we go from here?" they may have asked themselves.

Two thousand years later, there are some, like myself and perhaps some of you sitting here today, raised in the Christian tradition who in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can longer accept the teaching of the Holy Catholic Church. "Where do we go from here?" we ask ourselves.

One such man who asked this question and proposed a way forward is Bishop John Shelby Spong, the retired Anglican Bishop of Newark. It is his work that I shall attempt to discuss, albeit briefly, today. Spong was born in 1931 in Charlotte, South Carolina and was educated in Charlotte state schools. From 1955 to 1976 he served as rector of 5 different southern parishes within the Anglican Communion before moving to Newark diocese where he was ordained Bishop, until in retirement in 2000. He has in addition held visiting positions and given lectures at major American theological institutions, most prominently at Harvard Divinity School. He has been the recipient of many awards, including 1999 American Humanist of the Year.

Spong is a radical reformer and prolific writer. The titles of his many works include:-

A New Christianity for a New World.

The Sins Of Scripture,

Jesus For The Non-Religious,

Born Of Woman,

Resurrection, Myth or Reality?

Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism

I like Bishop Spong. I always admire people who are prepared to stand up and speak their minds. I may not always agree with them, but better them than the party hack. Spong is certainly no party hack. Like the little boy in the fairy tale he points out that the emperor has no clothes on. Unfortunately, the emperor does not like being told he has no clothes on. He has stirred up a veritable hornets nest within the conservative Christian community.

Here are some of the comments made about him.....

*"Spong's work is rubbish"; "bilious swill"; "a mishmash of pop-existentialism and flaccid pluralism".*

*"Spong is a rogue priest"; "an Anglican nightmare"; "an embarrassment jousting with the windmills of his past" and, heaven forbid, "a Unitarian".*

The Archbishop of Canterbury has said *"if Spong is right I would save myself a lot of bother and become a Quaker"*.

I take it they don't like him much. No doubt if it was still the practice of the Christian Church to burn heretics at the stake, Spong would have been toast a long time ago. However Spong is not addressing the conservatives. He is reaching out to as he calls *"believers in exile"*. Those liberal thinkers who feel disenfranchised by their traditional faith. I hope you find today's exploration of Spong's ideas of interest.

## Address

"*Here I stand*" proclaimed Martin Luther as he nailed his 95 theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg in 1517 to begin what we now call the protestant reformation. Echoing this, "*Here I stand*" were the words chosen by Jack Spong in announcing his 12 theses, in his 1998 document "A Call For A New Reformation". Spong wrote,

*"The Reformation was not an attempt to reformulate the Christian faith for a new era. It was rather a battle over issues of Church order. The time had not arrived in which Christians would be required to rethink the basic and identifying marks of Christianity itself. It is my conviction that such a moment is facing the Christian world today. The very heart and soul of Christianity will be the content of this reformation."* Spong believes that Christianity must change or die. I disagree. Christianity, according to the World Encyclopaedia Of Christianity, remains the fastest growing religion in the World with a 120,000 new Christians every day as a result of conversion and high birth rates in the third world. One in every three people in the world is , albeit sometimes nominally, a Christian. As journalist Alan Whicker said on reading his own obituary in The Times, "*rumours of my demise are somewhat premature*".

**Christianity is going to be around for a long time yet. In addition, and let's make no bones about it, Christianity is a big business. The Church of England for example remains the wealthiest landowner in England and has in addition to Royal patronage the privilege of seats in the house of Lords. This however palls into insignificance with the wealth and power of the Roman Catholic Church. I cannot see the day when The Pope stands on the balcony overlooking Saint Peter's Square to address the masses at Easter to tell them (in Latin) "listen guys...you'll laugh when I tell you this..."**

No, I do not believe that Christianity is about to change at the behest of Spong or anyone else. Nor should it. The many millions who follow this tradition, which has been established for nearly 2000 years are entitled to their belief system as much as anyone else.

Certainly in the secular West, Christianity is on the wane and it would perhaps nearer the mark to ask if there is an alternative understanding of Christianity that will meet the needs of those who can no longer assent to it's traditional tenets.

A similar situation of a crisis of faith exists within the Jewish community. A recent poll in Israel found that given a choice of identifying themselves as religious or secular, half chose secular. The late rabbi Sherwin Wine (also voted Humanist of the Year), was a man who found himself in a situation very similar to Jack Spong. Wine was a Liberal Rabbi who found his own Secular views incompatible with traditional Jewish thinking, even in the Reform Movement of which he was part. Unlike Spong though, he did not try and convert the whole of Judaism to his ideas, he simply formed his own group, The Society for Humanistic Judaism. Wine was unable to assent to 13 principles of Faith of Maimonides, the Jewish equivalent of the Apostles Creed if you like, so out it went. Unable to accept the authority of Torah the scrolls were reduced to the status of "interesting historical documents" and placed in the library rather than the sanctuary. Unable to believe in a theistic God, God was written out of the various Jewish rituals. Services were created for Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and other Jewish holidays and festivals, often with reinterpretation of the meaning of the holiday to bring it into conformity with Secular Humanistic philosophy. Being Jewish was no longer to be defined by birth but open to anyone who identifies with the history, culture, and future of the Jewish people. Circumcision was done away with. All gender barriers were torn down. Indeed, all those who identify as Jews and

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Now that is taking the bull by the horns and making a faith fit for those Secular Jews disenfranchised by their traditional religion.

Would, I wondered, Spong’s New Christianity for a new world, be anything like that?

Would Spong be proposing, a Society For Secular Christianity? Could Christianity be understood as a civilisation rather than just a religion? Would the traditional creeds be done away with? Would belief in God be done away with or at the very least be given a new meaning? Would Jesus be regarded as a fully human man of his time whose example and teaching were to be followed not as a mythological god-man to be worshipped? Would the great events of Easter and Christmas, the sacraments of baptism and Communion be given new meaning to reflect modern thinking? Would the bible be placed in the library rather than on the lectern? Would it be fully open to all regardless of age, sex, belief or sexual orientation? Let’s find out.

## **Spong's 12 Theses**

- 1. Theism, as a way of defining God, is dead. So most theological God-talk is today meaningless. A new way to speak of God must be found.*
- 2. Since God can no longer be conceived in theistic terms, it becomes nonsensical to seek to understand Jesus as the incarnation of the theistic deity. So the Christology of the ages is bankrupt.*
- 3. The biblical story of the perfect and finished creation from which human beings fell into sin is pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense.*

4. *The virgin birth, understood as literal biology, makes Christ's divinity, as traditionally understood, impossible.*
5. *The miracle stories of the New Testament can no longer be interpreted in a post-Newtonian world as supernatural events performed by an incarnate deity.*
6. *The view of the cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world is a barbarian idea based on primitive concepts of God and must be dismissed.*
7. *Resurrection is an action of God. Jesus was raised into the meaning of God. It therefore cannot be a physical resuscitation occurring inside human history.*
8. *The story of the Ascension assumed a three-tiered universe and is therefore not capable of being translated into the concepts of a post-Copernican space age.*
9. *There is no external, objective, revealed standard writ in scripture or on tablets of stone that will govern our ethical behaviour for all time.*
10. *Prayer cannot be a request made to a theistic deity to act in human history in a particular way.*
11. *The hope for life after death must be separated forever from the behaviour control mentality of reward and punishment. The Church must abandon, therefore, its reliance on guilt as a motivator of behaviour.*
12. *All human beings bear God's image and must be respected for what each person is. Therefore, no external description of one's being, whether based on race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, can properly be used as the basis for either rejection or discrimination.*

## **Discussion**

*Turning to Spong's 12 thesis, there is much I agree with.*

*He of course is not the first to articulate these ideas, nor would he claim to be so, but they do sum up what many have felt for a long time.*

*Spong's New Christianity is inclusive, as he himself has said "it's hard to be a misogynist when you have 4 daughters" and much to the annoyance of many the Anglican Communion he has ordained many an openly gay priest. A big tick from me here but hardly shaking Christianity to the core. Although not the majority position, there are many denominations with female clergy and some denominations, like the MCC, which are quite openly gay.*

*What about God then? Spong takes a non-theistic position and sees God as "The ground of all being". In his book, The Call to Worship, God is redefined as "Transformative Love, the mystery of life, the essence of creation and the music of the atoms within us." This you might think of as ground breaking but is merely reflecting the work of Spong's favourite theologian, Paul Tillich. Tillich is of course widely regarded as one of the greatest Christian Theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Spong's vision of God then is modern but well within the bounds of traditional Christianity.*

What about the Creed? Here Spong really lets loose. Out with the virgin birth, miracles, a physical resurrection and ascension. Now we're getting somewhere.

What about the bible? Spong has written and spoken about the "*terrible texts*" of the bible which promote misogyny, homophobia, and genocide as not being the word of a loving God. As a supporter of Evolution and opposed to Creationism, he rejects any literal interpretation of events like creation in 6 days. He regards the gospels as "*shear make believe*", his words not mine, not as eye witness accounts, but as documents of faith by well established Jewish/Christian communities. They give us not a straightforward historical account, but "*a magnificent interpretive portrait*" of Jesus. The Jesus story was made to fit the Jewish year for liturgical — not historical — reasons. Spong believes in 'midrash,' a Jewish literary device that stresses the meaning behind the mythical framework of the Bible. Lots of ticks here.

So what about Jesus? Spong believes Jesus was fully human, married to Mary Magdalene, very Jewish, who has love for his fellow man was so pure he was raised to the meaning of god.

I'm not sure about the last statement, but I believe he is right about a fully human Jesus. Unfortunately anyone who has made a serious study of this matter quickly realises how little we know about him.

They say that god and nature abhor a vacuum and into that vacuum you will find every conceivable idea of who the real Jesus was. He never existed, he was a Buddhist monk, he was an Egyptian pharaoh, a daoist, the rightful Jewish heir to the throne, the leader of the Qumran community, a Gnostic teacher, a freemason to name but a few.

In science there is a very simple principle. When there are 2 or more competing theories, go for the simplest one. Jesus was Jewish. The academic work done by the Jesus Seminar, reminds us just how Jewish he was, and how Jewish the early church was.

Writing in The Guardian last year, Howard Jacobson commented,

*"Jesus was to the brim a Jew, not incidentally or as a matter of temporal accident a Jew, not, in Jonathan Miller's joke, Jewish, but a Jew by faith, by temperament and by spiritual ambition; a Jew in his relentless ethicising, in his love of quibbling and legalistic, in his fondness - frankly, to the point of tiresomeness sometimes - for extended metaphors and sermons wrapped in parables, and in the apocalyptic urgency of his teaching. A Jew, in other words, on unambiguously Jewish business."*

From what I've read he appears to have been a highly charismatic teacher and healer, a strong supporter of Torah, the written Jewish law and as a typical Galilean of his time, arguing against much of the oral Law which he regarded as putting too much of a burden on people. A lot of his teaching may have been influenced by the more liberal teaching of the school of Hillel, which it is suggested, by Aidan Kelly, he made more radical by promoting a more prominent role for women.

Kelly writes, *"It is conceivable, that if Jesus had not been killed, he would have discouraged attempts to set up a new religion in his name and would instead have been viewed as a Jewish teacher even greater than Hillel."*

Rather disappointingly for Christians, he was not out to save the world but to save the lost sheep of Israel. He was a Jew speaking to Jews. His followers were Jewish and even after his death continued to be Jewish. Their new leader James seems to have been highly regarded within the Jewish community. These Nazarenes probably continued as a sect of Judaism until the destruction of the temple but may have survived independently in the East until being absorbed by Islam. If this picture of the historical Jesus is correct, it find it ironic that the greatest religion in the world today, was established by the followers of a man who had no intention of starting a new religion, especially a Gentile religion that worships him as a god, or as *"raised to the meaning of god"*. It's amazing how quickly things get out of control when they are not managed properly.

If this is the Jesus in whom Spong believes, it begs the question, why isn't Spong a Unitarian? Indeed, Spong holds Unitarianism in high regard. He writes,

*"The Unitarian Fellowship has put the more traditional forms of Christianity to shame with its consistent social witness for justice for all of God's people. Unitarians have championed the causes of racial and gender equality. They advocated for and protected gay and lesbian groups long before other Christian bodies were willing to do so. They have maintained intellectual credibility by their ability to be open to evolving religious truth. Unitarianism actually came into existence as a response to the explosion of knowledge growing out of the enlightenment, while mainline Christian bodies could do no better than fight a slow and costly rear-guard retreat in the vain defence of a biblical or creedal literalism. With a full knowledge of and a deep appreciation for these aspects of Unitarianism, what was there in me that caused me to maintain so quickly, and even a bit adamantly, that I could never be a Unitarian?"*

Why indeed Bishop? What piece of the jigsaw am I missing?

Spong continues,

*"As a Christian I seek to separate the experience of God, which I regard as eternal, from the traditional words used to explain that experience, which I always regard as time bound and transitory. When I reject the traditional interpretation I do not reject the experience that I am certain created the interpretive words. I must, as Solomon did when he built the Temple, take the treasures of the past into the new temple with me. I refuse to turn away either from the hard questions of my day or to ignore the classical Christian symbols of the past. I will wrestle with the scriptures, but I will never abandon the scrip-*

*tures. I will seek to break open the creeds, but I will never reject the creeds. I will fight with doctrines like Incarnation and the Trinity, but I will never dismiss the truth that people were pointing to when these doctrines were first formed."*

This for me was a major disappointment. Spong appears to be too much in love with Catholic Christianity. Unable to give up the creeds, the bible and the trinity, however much he doesn't believe in them. Spong's New Christianity, creedal, bible based and Christ raised to the meaning of God, appears to me not a New Christianity at all but simply pushing traditional Catholic Christianity as far as it can possibly go whilst still being able to call itself Catholic Christianity. For me just won't do. The words of musician Pete Townsend of The Who spring into my mind, *"Meet the new boss, same as the old boss, I won't get fooled again"*.

I am left with the feeling that Spong has missed a great opportunity. Even if he is unable to bring his ideas within the realm of Unitarianism he could have least set up his own denomination as Rabbi Wine did, goodness knows there are 34,000 Christian denominations already, and, like Ezra, led his beloved *"believers in exile"* into his new Christianity, into a church which will let them freely follow their liberal faith instead of leaving them frustrated in Babylon, in a church which will not tolerate their views. However that is a matter for his conscience.

So, returning to my original question, where do we go from here?

That is something you all must decide for yourselves. Perhaps deep down in the very depths of my soul, I am not really looking for a new Christianity.

I think I prefer another view. The larger view. There is no one correct way to be spiritual.

So I will place my bible not in the sanctuary but in the library along with all the other great books by the philosophers, poets, musicians and scientists who have influenced my thinking.

As for the historical Jesus, there is one thing that we both have in common - we are teachers, and as every good teacher knows, the lesson which is taught is more important than the teacher. So I will avoid the dangers of the cult of personality. Following a good shepherd, however good, still requires us to be sheep. I will content myself with his universal message of love, honour his memory and him rest in peace.

I place on my alter no creed to imprison my thoughts, but the principles of reason and freedom of conscience.

I will honour the heritage of European Judeo Christian Civilisation but will not be bound to the past like a slave.

I will demand the right to understand what god means in my own terms, and defend the right of others to do the same.

As a secular man I will promote secular values:

Separation of church and state. A tolerant, pluralistic society committed to ensuring equality of all people and breaking down the barriers of prejudice, where each person should be helped to realize their own particular excellence.

I seek to do this in the faith community I find myself in today. Is what we have today the New Christianity? Perhaps, but I prefer to call it by its ancient name - Unitarianism. As a fellow liberal I wish Bishop Spong well but I say to him today.....

My name is Jim Millar. I am a Unitarian. Here I stand.