

APOLOGIA[©]

THE JOURNAL OF THE WELLINGTON CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS SOCIETY (Inc.)

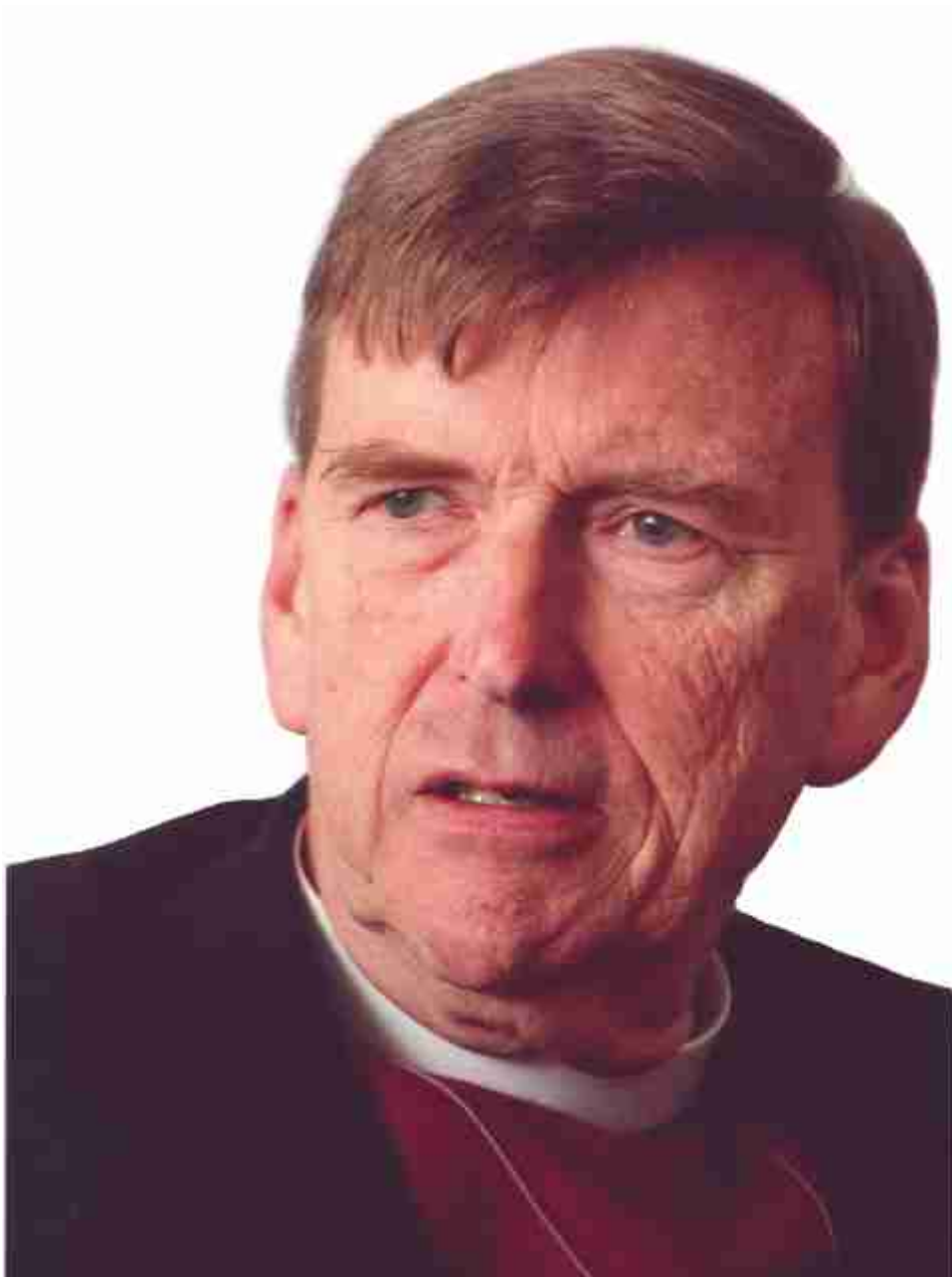


Photo of Bishop John Shelby Spong : Courtesy of *The Evening Post*, 8 October 1997

FOCUS ON JOHN SHELBY SPONG

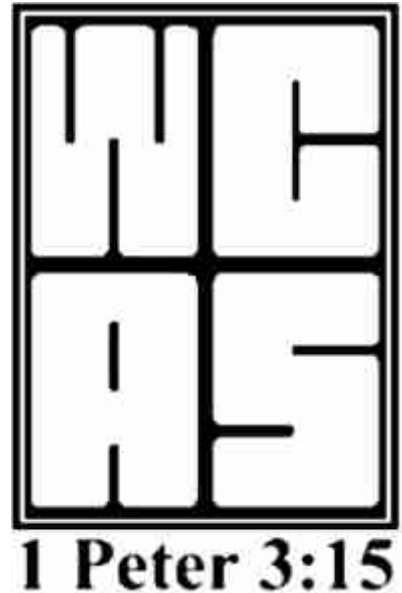
RETIRED EPISCOPALIAN BISHOP
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Fides quaerens intellectum

VOLUME 7 (2/3) - 2000

The Wellington Christian Apologetics Society (Inc.)

Statement of Belief



We believe in:

- The divine inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible as originally given and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. The Bible comprises the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament.
- The eternal, everlasting, self-existing nature of the Godhead, Who is the Maker of the universe, which is separate from, but being finite is completely dependent on Him; Who is both transcendent of and immanent within His creation; Who is the great I AM and Immanuel of the Christian Scriptures; Who is Creator and Saviour, Judge and Lover of humankind.
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- The universal sinfulness of human nature and the universal guilt of mankind since the Fall, rendering all humanity subject to God's wrath and condemnation.
- Redemption from the guilt, penalty and power of sin only through the sacrificial death on the Cross (as Representative, Substitute, Victor etc.) of the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God.
- The bodily (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:44) resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead understood to be an actual event, subjectively experienced by Jesus Christ and presenting objective evidences open to observation and evaluation; as an event integral to God's saving and cosmic action in Jesus, revealing and completing the victory of the Cross.
- The necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing about God's purposes in the Lord Jesus Christ, which are: to bring salvation to people and to establish, sustain and perfect God's Kingdom.
- The indwelling and work of the Holy Spirit in the believer.
- The expectation of the personal future coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the completion of His Kingdom.

Wellington Christian Apologetics Society (Inc.)



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Hard copy manuscripts should be double-spaced (preferably in MS Word 95 or 97 format) and if possible should be supplied on disc or by email to

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For further copies or back issues of the journal contact the editor.

Apologia aims to stimulate rational reflection on, and reasoned defence of, the Christian faith as truth. Since human opinion is always corrigible and meaningful assertions imply conditions under which they may be falsified, *Apologia* is written in the belief that truth is ultimately independent of opinion. The opinions and views expressed in *Apologia* are not necessarily the views of the committee, nor do they necessarily wholly reflect the Society's stance. They are simply deemed to be worth publishing for readers to consider, evaluate, respond to, etc. A careful effort is made to ensure that no article is published that promotes or defends any doctrinal view contrary to our statement of faith. In such cases where views are expressed that are contrary to our beliefs, this is only done so as to provide an opportunity for a critique of erroneous doctrines.

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Editorial



It was at a public lecture in the Religious Studies Department at Victoria University, Wellington, in 1997, that I first met Bishop John Shelby Spong. An articulate speaker, strong on rhetoric and full of ingratiating charm, he cuts an imposing figure at the lecture podium bedecked in

ministerial attire. Not one to mince words, he has little time for those who seek to uphold the orthodox beliefs of the Christian faith and always generates sufficient controversy to ensure that the secular press effectively market the growing list of books he has authored and his public lectures. According to his New Zealand publicist he is scheduled to visit our country in July 2001.

As he is one who revels in controversy and appears flattered by any form of publicity he receives, whether good or bad, I had assumed that he would have been delighted to engage in dialogue over his theological position. However, this proved not to be the case, at least when it came to the questions I put to him publicly.¹ Having called for “dialogue” at the commencement of the lecture he seemed quite affronted that I dared to disagree with his views and question his authority. He made a bee-line for me outside the lecture room and seemed intent on settling the score. With the solemnity of a funeral cortege and his long arm outstretched towards me, he declared “I’m John Spong, who are you?” Having determined my name, he turned disconcertingly hostile, charging me, in front of witnesses, of being “full of evangelical rubbish”. His hectoring tone and pugnacious body language sent a clear message - I was not welcome at any more of his public lectures - and he strode off.

Notwithstanding, I followed him and lecture organiser Rev. Dr James Veitch, at a distance, and joined a small tutorial group to listen to his second presentation to students. Sitting within arm’s reach of him, I was determined to get the inside running on this ecclesiastical celebrity and discover the secret to his effective communication. “I live and walk in the divine mystery, the essence of holiness, which is beyond all traditions of worship”, he declared. “We need to learn to love wastefully” was his constant catchcry.

When asked by an earnest honours student what he understood the death of Jesus to mean or signify in spiritual terms, he was unable to give any guidance. “I’m working on that one” was his enigmatic answer. Beguiled perhaps by his own rhetoric, he seemed genuinely alarmed that a student had exposed the shallowness of his own thinking on such a fundamental

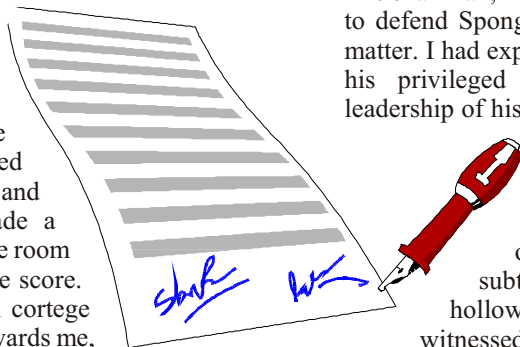
aspect of the faith. But quickly he turned from declared ignorance to ‘factual certainty’ by launching an attack on the evangelical Anglican Minister of All Souls Church, London, the Rev. Dr John Stott.

John Stott, so we were told, was dishonest and so lacking in integrity, that he exemplified all that was wrong in the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church and with conservatives in general. The only evidence he put forward was Dr Stott’s performance in a public debate he had with him in Vancouver and the claimed ‘doctoring’ of the transcript of the debate in the published version of it in the evangelical journal *Crux*,² produced by Regent College, Vancouver. Familiar with these charges, which he has made on numerous occasions, and which he even regurgitates in his more recent autobiography, I had taken with me to the lecture a copy of the published transcript, a full rebuttal of the charges by an independent adjudicator at the debate and other background material. Following Spong’s vindictive and very personal attack on Rev. Stott, I sought to rectify the injustice by quoting from the transcript and reports³ during the discussion period. The chairman, Rev. Dr Jim Veitch, immediately leapt in to defend Spong and shut down any dialogue on the matter. I had experienced at close range a bishop using his privileged position to personally attack the leadership of his own Communion and a fellow liberal minister rising to close down debate.

“My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love and Equality”, the subtitle of his recent autobiography, has a hollow ring to it when I reflect upon what I witnessed of his personal style. Perhaps it could be argued that these are only minor faults, hardly reflective of his overall ministry. However, the rancour and dissension he has generated in the 70-million strong Anglican Communion and beyond fits the same pattern I observed. Those who disagree with him are labelled “ignorant fundamentalists”, “lacking integrity”, “dishonest”, “homophobic”, “bigoted”, or “full of evangelical rubbish”.

This issue of *Apologia* contains a careful analysis of Bishop Spong - the man and his message - from a conservative Christian perspective. In an effort to redress the imbalance - the excessive fawning devotion to the man exhibited by the secular media and liberal wing of the Church - we have at times not minced words. The Bishop no doubt would commend this direct approach, for he and his ‘acolytes’ appear to applaud their own candidness and see it as evidence of their own integrity. We do not see candidness per se as a paramount virtue when it is delivered at the expense of truth.

While there is sometimes a fine line between argument that is ad hominem and a rigorous critique, we have sought to avoid charges/accusations of dishonesty, stupidity, hypocrisy, and the like, even though the



subject of our investigation regularly directs such barbs at his critics. Our focus should be the theological/philosophical position promoted by Spong and his impact upon the wider Christian community. In his autobiography *Here I Stand*, he states in his preface: "I have been forced to make judgments about people and events. ... I hope I have not been unfair in doing so...My goal has been to hold up a mirror to friend and foe alike and, when the reflection was visible, to say this is how you looked to me" (p. ix).

Stripped, we hope, of the subjectivity of such an approach, in a sense this is akin to what each contributor has done. But unlike Spong, whose plumb-line does not appear to be the Biblical framework, our focus is an assessment based on the traditional Christian teachings and the revealed and authoritative Word of God. The task of Christian apologetics, while directed at seeking to give a rigorous defence of "the faith once delivered", must combat error as well as holding up the truth in a

positive (rather than a solely defensive) manner. We are exhorted to "judge righteously", to "discern the truth", and to "expose unrighteousness and error". While John Spong is entitled to his opinion, he cannot expect to go unchallenged when he knowingly or unknowingly misrepresents and distorts Christian teaching.

This issue of *Apologia* brings together a range of analyses of his work, some of it original and some is republished with permission. The editorial committee wishes to express its sincere thanks to all contributors and we encourage readers to contact the editor if they would like to respond to issues raised or would like their written responses considered for publication in our next issue. Finally I wish to thank members and friends of the Society who have provided valuable editorial assistance and references.

David H. Lane

Editor

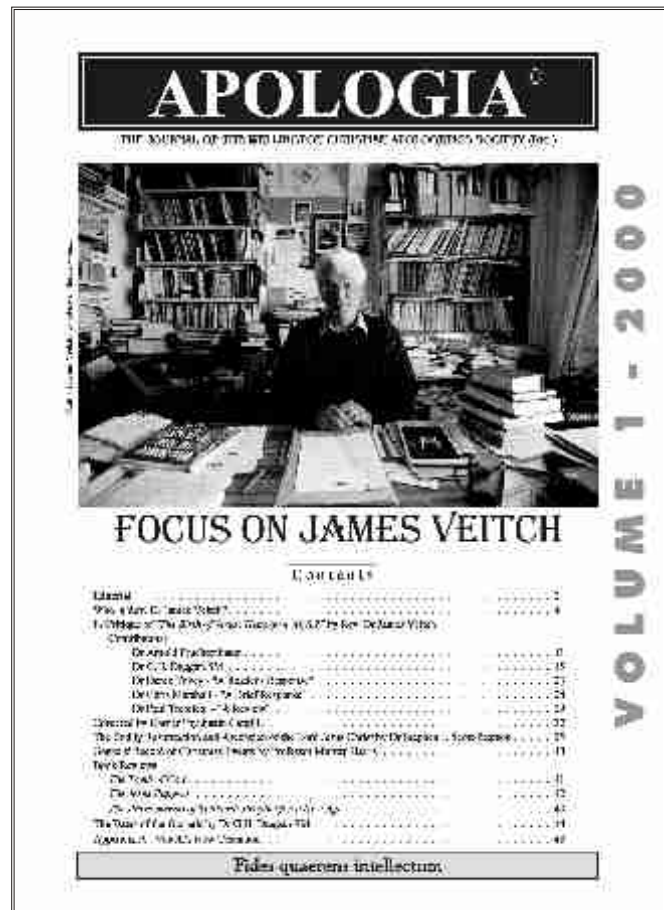
Endnotes

- ¹ For transcript of this interchange see 'Dialogue at the University', in "Redefining God in Man's Image," this volume, p. 19
- ² See *Crux* Vol. XXIX, No. 3 (Sept. 1993), 18-31; No. 4 (Dec. 1993), 28-39.
- ³ See 'Who is Intellectually Dishonest?' in "Redefining God...", this volume, p. 23.

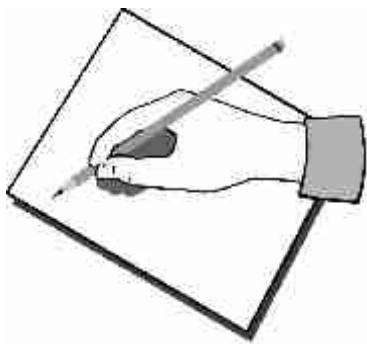
Have you
got yours
yet?



FOCUS ON
JAMES VEITCH



Letters to the Editor



July 4 2000

Dear Editor

... I've read with some amusement Noel Cheer's critique of my article on James Veitch's book in *Apologia*. Cheer blandly assumes that the Rationalist prejudice which refuses to admit the possibility of a miracle or the supernatural is obviously true - a philosophical position which can be refuted by rational argument.

Like many others, Cheer blandly forecasts the disappearance of Christianity from the human scene. He assumes that the Gospels date from 70-100 and would probably be surprised to learn that a growing body of scholars put them much earlier....

Yours sincerely in Christ
G.H. Duggan SM
Silverstream

6 April 2000

Dear David

Thank you for sending me two copies of the latest issue of *Apologia*, featuring the work of Jim Veitch.

I've kept one copy for myself and the other in our Church Library.

I must confess I hadn't realised just how liberal Jim Veitch had become. It's pathetic, really, because he began as an able evangelical scholar, who has been seduced by academic peer-pressure or something, to end up writing unscholarly as well as un-Christian drivel.

Sometimes I also wonder if we pay these characters too much attention. They are darlings of the media, but very unrepresentative of the church.

Keep up the excellent work.
Yours in our Lord Jesus
Senior Presbyterian Minister
[Name withheld - letter on file]

12 March 2000

Dear Editor

Many thanks for *Apologia* Volume 7 (1) 2000, which I received during the week. Congratulations on the new format, which should pay dividends in terms of prestige.

I can't say I was impressed by Dr Murray Rae's review of your book. "Reactionary" is a loaded pejorative term for anyone who rejects your views and is too dogmatic for your taste. [Dr Rae had stated: "Lane relies rather too heavily on *reactionary* critics {of Teilhard} while ignoring the mainstream of Catholic theology represented in such figures as Rahner].

Rahner of course was a Neo-Modernist and committed to a Nestorian Christology, as Cardinal Siri, the Bishop of Genoa, pointed out in his book *Gethsemane*. The "alleged" dependence of Teilhard on a modernist world view was in fact quite real [as Lane states]. There is no real doubt that he borrowed his evolutionary pantheism from Bergson, who was in fashion early in the century when Teilhard was in his 20's. This was Teilhard's philosophy and he decked it out with notions borrowed from Christianity and so adapted as to render them quite incompatible with the Christian faith as set out on page one of *Apologia*, and defended by G.K. Chesterton in *Orthodoxy* and C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*.

I read with especial pleasure Arnold Fruchtenbaum's contribution having listened to and met him last year...

Yours sincerely
G.H. Duggan SM
Silverstream

P.S. I feel a bit sorry for Veitch but he provoked this severe criticism from various quarters. In boxing terms they call it leading with your chin.

13 March 2000

Dear Mr Lane

Thank you very much for sending me a complimentary copy of *Apologia* "Focus on James Veitch". It arrived this morning. As a Christian Minister and theologian I am always glad to read research which aims to clarify the mystery and meaning of Jesus for today. Shall we ever unravel the whole truth?

God with us
The Very Rev John S Murray
[Retired Minister, St Andrews-on-the-Terrace]
Raumati

(Letters continued on page 131)

Who is John Shelby Spong?

Retired Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark

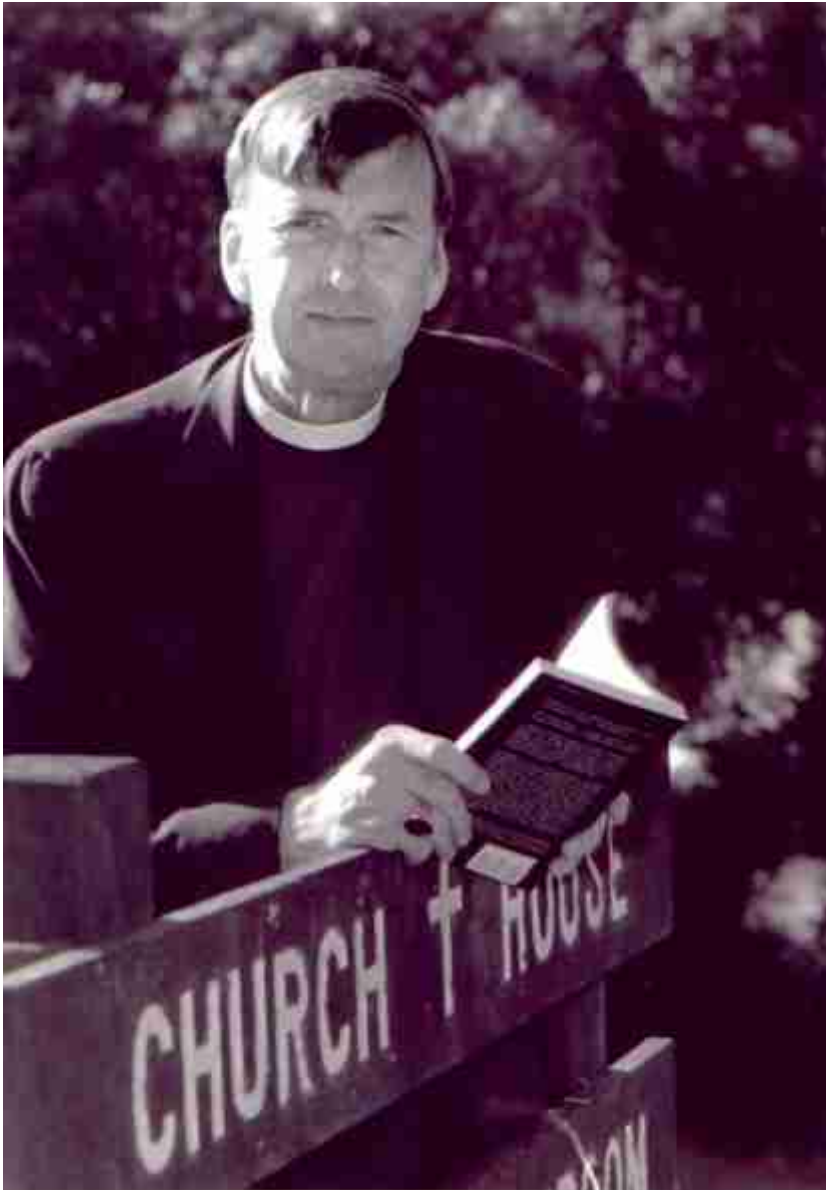


Photo by Dave Hansford, Courtesy of The Dominion, 7 August, 1991 .

John Shelby Spong, scholar, author and bishop, is the most published member of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church in the United States. He is the author of fourteen books. His published articles now number in excess of ninety.

Bishop Spong stands in the tradition of Anglican bishops that has included Will Scarlett, John E. Hines, Angus Dun and, to some degree, James A. Pike in America and William Temple, Hensley Hanson, John A. T. Robinson and David Jenkins in England. He is a frequent lecturer at conference centers and on college campuses. On four occasions he has been the guest speaker at Chautauqua in western New York State.

Born in 1931 in Charlotte, North Carolina, Bishop Spong was educated in the public schools of Charlotte, was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1952 and received his Master of Divinity degree in 1955 from the Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia. That seminary and St. Paul's College have both conferred on him honorary Doctor of Divinity degrees. He served as rector of St. Joseph's Church in Durham, North Carolina from 1955 to 1957; rector of Calvary Parish, Tarboro, North Carolina from 1957 to 1965; rector of St. John's Church in Lynchburg, Virginia from 1965 to 1969; and rector of St. Paul's Church in Richmond, Virginia from 1969 to 1976. He was consecrated bishop on June 12, 1976.

Bishop Spong has served on a wide variety of diocesan committees and commissions, including being editor of *The North Carolina Churchman*, president of the Standing Committee and three times deputy to General Convention. He has been president of the Alumni Association of his seminary and a trustee, both of his seminary and of St. Paul's College. He has also been president of the New Jersey Council of Churches.

Nationally, he has been a theological consultant to the Episcopal Radio and Television Foundation, a consultant to the Standing Liturgical Commission and a member of the Overseas Review Committee of the national church. In 1973 he was elected by General Convention to a six-year term on the Executive Council, the highest

governing body of the Episcopal Church, other than the General Convention. In 1986, under Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning, he was appointed to serve on the Standing Commission on Human Affairs and Health. He has served on the House of Bishop's Theology Committee.

Bishop Spong has always had an active interest in sports and was at one time a play-by-play announcer for radio stations in Tarboro, North Carolina, and Lynchburg, Virginia, covering football, basketball and baseball. He also served as sports editor for *The Daily Southerner* in Tarboro. In 1991 he was elected the Quatercentenary Scholar at Emmanuel College of Cambridge University and in 1993 was a guest lecturer at Oxford University in the United Kingdom.

Publications by John Shelby Spong, Episcopal Bishop, Diocese of Newark

BOOKS

- 1973 **HONEST PRAYER** Seabury Press/New York
- 1974 **THIS HEBREW LORD** Seabury Press/New York
- 1988 Republished: Harper & Row/San Francisco
- 1993 Republished: HarperSan Francisco
- 1975 **CHRISTPOWER** Hale Publishing/New York
- 1975 **DIALOGUE: IN SEARCH OF JEWISH-CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING**
Co-authored with Rabbi Jack D. Spiro Seabury Press/New York
- 1976 **LIFE APPROACHES DEATH: A DIALOGUE ON ETHICS IN MEDICINE**
Co-authored with Daniel H. Gregory, M.D. Richmond/Virginia
- 1980 **THE EASTER MOMENT**
Harper & Row/San Francisco
- 1987 Republished: Harper & Row/San Francisco
- 1983 **INTO THE WHIRLWIND, the Future of the Church**
Harper & Row/San Francisco
- 1986 **BEYOND MORALISM, a Contemporary View of the Ten Commandments**
co-authored with Denise G. Haines, Archdeacon
Harper & Row/San Francisco
- 1987 **CONSCIOUSNESS AND SURVIVAL, an Interdisciplinary Inquiry into the possibility of Life Beyond Biological Death**, Edited by John S. Spong, Introduction by John S. Spong.
An Institute of Noetic Sciences Book/Sausalito, California
- 1988 **LIVING IN SIN? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality**
Harper & Row/San Francisco
- 1991 **RESCUING THE BIBLE FROM FUNDAMENTALISM: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture.**
HarperSanFrancisco
- 1992 **BORN OF A WOMAN, A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus**
HarperSanFrancisco
- 1994 **RESURRECTION: MYTH OR REALITY? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity**
HarperSanFrancisco
- 1996 **LIBERATING THE GOSPELS: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes,**
HarperSanFrancisco
- 1998 **WHY CHRISTIANITY MUST CHANGE OR DIE: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile**
HarperSanFrancisco
- 2000 **HERE I STAND: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love and Equality**
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- 2) Mar. 1973: **"Vietnam Peace; Why Was There No Celebration?"** *The Virginia Seminary Journal*
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- 4) Sept. 1975: **"This I Do Believe"** *The Living Church*
- 5) Sept. 1975: **"Journey"** *The Virginia Churchman*
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- 9) Sept. 1980: *The Christian Century*
- 10) Nov/Dec 1980 *The Ecumenical Bulletin*
- 11) Nov/Dec 1981 *The Journal of Religious Education*
- 12) Jan. 1981: **"Abortion: A Plea for Wisdom"** *The Living Church*
"Evangelism, When Certainty is an Illusion"
- 13) Jan. 1982: *The Christian Century*
- 14) Mar. 1982: *Cathedral Commentary*
- 15) Feb. 1982: **"Vocation is Stronger than Nationalism"** *The Witness*
- 16) July 1982: **"Ambassador Non-Committal: An Interview with the Ambassador from South Africa About Bishop Desmond Tutu"** *The Witness*
"Sexual Stereotypes in the Life of the Church"
- 17) Nov. 1982: *Ecumenical Trends*
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- 20-31) **"Selected Sermons"** *Seabury Press*, annually from 1976 - 1986 (11 times)
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- 35) Sept. 1984: **"The Urban Church - Symbol and Reality"** *The Christian Century*
- 36) Dec. 1984: **"Can the Church Bless a Divorce?"** *The Christian Century*
- 37) Jan. 1985: **"John E. Hines - A Moment of Grace in the Life of the Church"** *The Witness*
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- 39) Fall, 1985: **"Choosing a Vision - Church Sets Its Agenda for the Future"** *Jubilee*
- 40) Oct. 1985: **"Watching the Tragedy of South Africa"** *The Witness*
- 41) Jan. 1986: **"Understanding the Gay Reality"** *The Christian Century*
- 42) Mar. 1986: **"The Powerless Christ"** *The Witness*
- 43) Summer 1986: **"Worship and the Scientific Revolution"** *The St. Luke's Theological Journal*, Sewanee, Tennessee
- 44) May 1986: **"In Many Tongues, with a United Heart"** *The Episcopalian*
- 45) Dec. 8, 1986: **"Women - the Crux of Ecumenism"** *Christianity and Crises*
- 46) Jan. 1987: **"The Powerlessness of Jesus Christ"** *International Christian Digest*
- 47) Feb. 1987: **"Sexual Ethics: No Longer a Matter of Black and White"** *The Episcopalian*
- 48) Apr. 26, 1987 **"Changing Patterns of Sexuality"** *The Living Church*
- 49) May 31, 1987: **"The Bible and Sexual Ethics"** *The Living Church*
- 50) 1987 **"The Witness of an Easter Faith"** an article in a collection of reflections on the Christian year by bishops of the Anglican communion, *You Will Bear Witness*, published by Anglican Book Center, Toronto, Canada
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- 54) July 1988 **"The Day the Bishop Got Mugged"** *The Episcopalian*

- 55) July 1988 **"Why the Bishop of London Is Wrong"** *The Independent*, London, Eng.
- 56) Sept. 28, 1988 **"Steps Toward a Fuller Humanity"** *The Independent*, London, Eng.
- 57) Spring, 1989 **"Living in Sin? Revisited!"** *The Seminary Times*, published by Wyndham Hall Press, Inc.
- 58) April, 1989 **"An Invasion of Privacy"** *The Episcopalian*
- 59) Spring, 1989 **"In the Limelight"** *Books & Religion*
- 60) 1989 **"America's Survival Depends on Patriotism's Death"** *American Values*, An Anthology, Greenhaven Press, Inc., San Diego, California
- 61) Apr. 18, 1990 **"Breaking Definitions"** *The Integrator*, Newsletter of Integrity, Toronto
- 62) Oct. 1990 **"Dying Priest Wanted Secret Told"** *The Episcopal Life*
- 63) Sept. 21, 1990 **"Bishop, Please Tell My Congregation I Was Gay"** *The Church Times*, London, Eng.
- 64) April, 1991 **"No Outcasts"** *Update*, Presbyterians for Lesbian/Gay Concerns, New Brunswick, NJ
- 65) Nov. 1991 **"The Oldest Debate in Christian History"** *More Light Update*, New Brunswick, NJ
- 66) Spring, 1992 **"Anglican/Roman Catholic Union - A Cause I Can No Longer Support"** *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Charlottesville, VA
- 67) Mar. 8, 1993 **"From Waco to the World Trade Center"** *New York Newsday*
- 68) Mar/Apr. 1993 **"A Glimpse into the Twenty-First Century"** *The Human Quest*
- 69) Feb. 1993 **"Monogamy"** *Christian*, Guildford, Eng.
- 70) July/Aug. 1993 **"Essence of Religion: Serving Humanity, Not Fundamentalism"** *The Human Quest*
- 71) Sep/Oct. 1993 **"National Health Issues Should Include Human Values. The Debate Is Theological, Not Political"** *The Human Quest*
- 72) Sept. 16, 1993 **"In Unity There Is Progress"** *The Vancouver Sun* - Opinion Page Vancouver, B.C.
- 73) Sept. 1993 **"A Dialogue on Christian Sexual Ethics"** with John R. W. Stott, *Crux* A Quarterly Journal of Christian Thought and Opinion, Regent College, Vancouver, B.C. Canada
- 74) Nov/Dec 1993 **"Christmas Symbols and Jewish Midrash"** *The Human Quest*
- 75) 1993 **"Nature and Role of Dissent in the Christian Church"** Originally a conversation among Prof. Don Cupitt, Prof. Emeritus Lloyd Geering and Bishop John Spong, and a broadcast on Radio New Zealand, later published in booklet form by St. Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion & Society, titled "Frontiers of Faith."
- 76) Apr. 1994 **"Most Biblical Interpretation Illogical"** *The Human Quest*
- 77) Jan. 1994 **"From Waco to the World Trade Center"** *Newsweek* Education Program
- 78) May/June 1994 **"Judas Iscariot - A Creation of Prejudice?"** *The Human Quest*
- 79) Dec. 1994 **"Catholics for a Changing Church"** *Renew*
- 80) Jul/Aug. 1994 **"United Church of Canada's Leadership Contrasts with Deadly Traditionalism"** *The Human Quest*
- 81) Sep/Oct. 1994 **"Why I Am Not a Unitarian"** *The Human Quest*
- 82) Nov/Dec 1994 **"Sunset for the Episcopal Synod of America"** *The Human Quest*
- 83) Jan/Feb 1995 **"Mr. Clinton: It's Time To Name the Demon"** *The Human Quest*
- 84) May/June 1995 **"Our Moral Breakdown"** *The Human Quest*
- 85) Sep/Oct. 1995 **"John T. Robinson Remembered"** *The Human Quest*
- 86) Nov/Dec. 1995 **"Education or Propaganda"** *The Human Quest*
- 87) 1995 **"Religion As a Human Creation?"** *Sea of Faith Quarterly Magazine*, Loughborough, U.K.
- 88) Jan/Feb. 1996 **"The 'Christian' Political Agenda"**, *The Human Quest*
- 89) Mar/Apr 1996 **"Heresy! This Church Is On Trial"**, *The Human Quest*
- 90) Feb. 2, 1996 **"The Bible Is Wrong to Condemn Homosexuality"**, *Morristown Daily Record*
- 91) May/June, 1996 **"In Defense of Assisted Suicide"**, *The Human Quest*
- 92) July/Aug, 1996 **"The Graceful Life of Helen Orwig Hines"**, *The Human Quest*
- 93) Mar. 14, 1996 **"Christian Church Is Heresy Trial's Real Defendant"**, *The Star Ledger*
- 94) Aug. 1996 **"In Defense of Assisted Suicide"**, *Prime Time Monthly*
- 95) Nov/Dec, 1996 **"Being Christian Without Theism"**, *The Human Quest*
- 96) Jan/Feb. 1997 **"Will Christianity Survive the New Millennium?"**, *The Human Quest*
- 97) Mar/Apr. 1997 **"On Tour with Liberating the Gospels"**, *The Human Quest*
- 98) Spring 1997 **"The Strange Dance of Religion and Sexuality,"** *Sea of Faith Magazine*
- 99) May/June 1997 **"Farewell, My Friend - Bishop John Elbridge Hines,"** *The Human Quest*
- 100) July/Aug 1997 **"Life is Not a Rehearsal,"** *The Human Quest*
- 101) Sep/Oct 1997 **"The Shortness and Uncertainty of Human Life,"** *The Human Quest*

Jack Spong's mission to the Church alumni

Anglican bishop and author John Shelby Spong made his third visit to New Zealand in October [1997]. As the first Geering Lecturer for the St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society, he undertook a national tour of lectures and seminars and introduced his latest book "Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes". He spoke with Peter Davis.

Republished from the Anglican Times (Advent 1997), p. 5.

At 65, America's most controversial bishop shows no signs of slowing up. As a seasoned media practitioner (and former sports commentator) he responds quickly to questions such as What does Bishop Jack Spong actually believe? "I find God in the face of Jesus of Nazareth. I'm quite sure Jesus was one of those gigantic figures in whom God was experienced as uniquely present. I'm one of those who loves the Lord".

He's equally quick to remind you of his roots. "I grew up a racist, male chauvinistic and homophobic personality in the fundamentalist part of the southern USA. My dialogue with God has lifted me above those limiting barriers".

Overcoming the barriers has produced some 15 books which invite a reader's assessment of inherited traditions of biblical faith and a questioning of attitudes and behaviours that have shaped the Western Church. These include biblical literalism and fundamentalism, the creeds in their traditional form, long-held Church attitudes to sexuality and what he sees as prejudices and control mechanisms throughout the Church's history.

His most popular titles include "Into the Whirlwind", "Living in Sin", "Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism", "Born of a Woman", "Resurrection: Myth or Reality" and his latest book, "Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes."

"I see the Gospels as portraits painted by Jewish artists, not as photographs of what Jesus did nor recordings of what he said. People may say 'That's pretty flimsy'. I say if you've got four magnificent portraits then you can assume that behind them was a real life. The person is there. All that got in the way was how he was interpreted".

Strongest reaction has come from his writings on issues of prejudice, gender and sexuality. "The way we've treated women, gays, blacks, left-handed people or mentally retarded people are not minor occurrences. They're a dagger aimed at what I think the Gospel is all about. I can't deal with people who say women are not human or gays are really sick. I don't know what the gay reality is. I know it's a fact that these people are 5 to 10

percent of the population at any time. The task of the Church is to make it possible to live in that reality. You don't do that by bashing them.

"The Church became the biggest closet in history. I think we ought to rejoice in that and be enhanced by it. I get interpreted as a liberal, out there marching for one more social justice issue. I don't mind that. But for me it's far deeper than this.

"I can't worship God and discriminate, because it violates my understanding of God. I want my mission to be one of creating a world where you and everybody else can live fully, love wastefully and be who they are".

Part of that mission is aimed directly at what Jack Spong calls the "Church alumni" - those who have left. "I spoke to packed audiences in Sydney, even though the churches were closed to me. What the Church hierarchy don't understand is that the choice is not about going back to evangelical religion or leaving the Church. The choice involves realising that the stuff will never translate into the world young people live in.

"I have a daughter with a Ph.D. in physics from Stanford University. She says, 'Dad, the answers the Church keeps giving are to questions we don't even ask any more'. That's where the chasm is. There's an enormous hunger in the world for things of the spirit. I see it everywhere I go. The tragedy is that young people don't see the Church as a place where you can look for that any more. The deadest churches today are the mainstream ones".

In sharp contrast, he speaks with enthusiasm about U.S. inner-city churches, particularly those of his diocese, Newark, in New Jersey. "I call them outposts of the Kingdom of God. In the city you've got to live together with vast differences. You have to find a way to make the Church a beacon of light. You build a family that is black and white, Asian, gay and straight, young and old, rich and poor. They all gather around the table of the Lord. And they get energised to transform the neighbourhood".

Not surprisingly, Jack Spong regularly attracts the wrath of televangelists, accusations of heresy, and receives letters from some who pray for his death. He has even been physically assaulted in church.

"The hostility I get is overwhelmingly from Christians who are threatened by my attempt to address those issues. After a book comes out I get hostile mail for about six weeks. And I get mail from people who've read the book. That's an enormous support. I must have got 5000 letters for each of the last few books.

There are more books to come. "Why Christianity Must Change or Die" will be published next year. An autobiography is already under way.

Part 1: Focus on Bishop John Shelby Spong

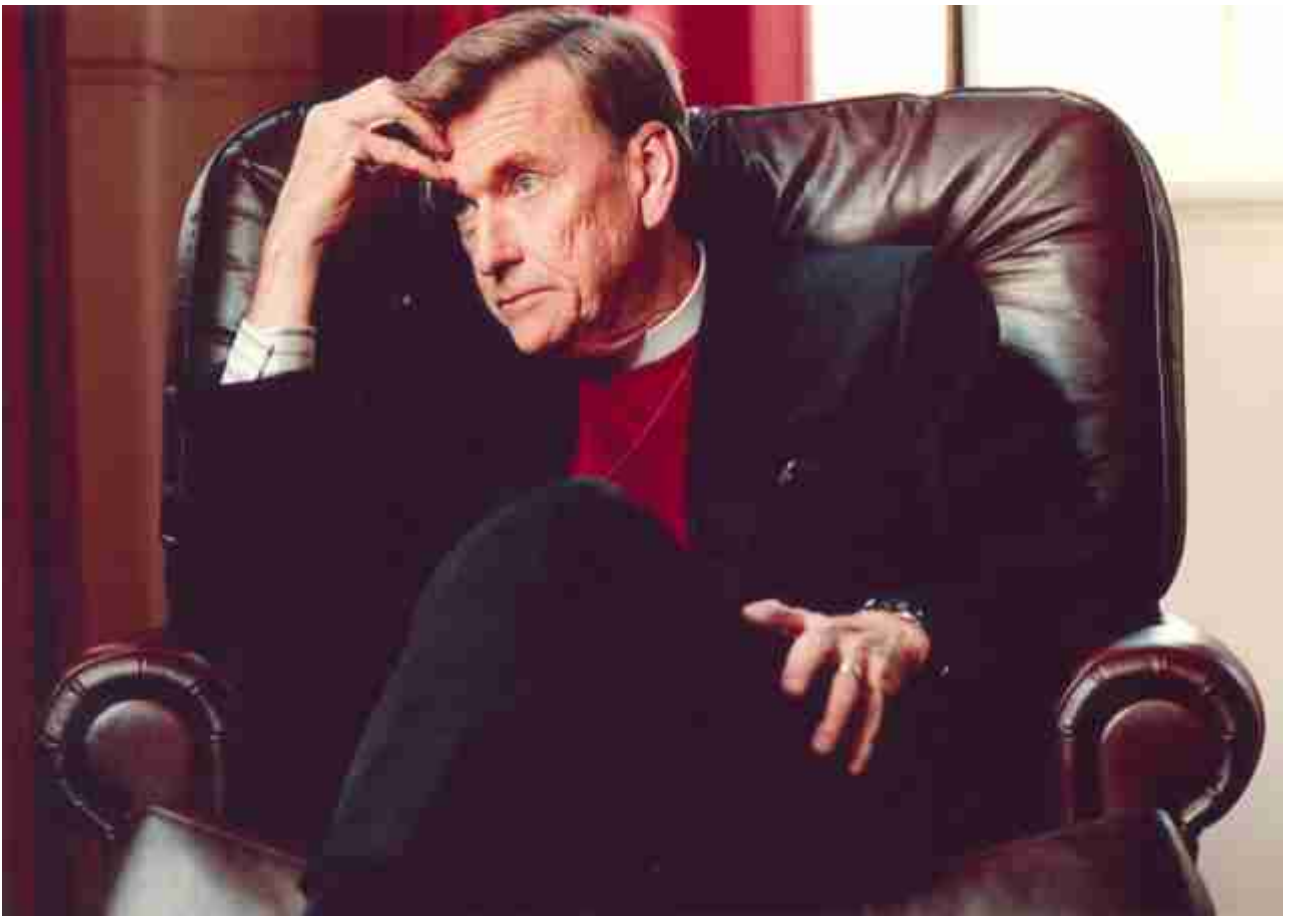


Photo by John Selkirk, Courtesy of The Dominion, 4 October, 1997.

The Man and his Message A Major Critique

A Call for a New Reformation



***Drawn from John Spong's book
Why Christianity Must Change or Die:
A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile**

1. Theism, as a way of defining God, is dead. God can no longer be understood with credibility as a Being, supernatural in power, dwelling above the sky and prepared to invade human history periodically to enforce the divine will. So, most theological God-talk today is meaningless unless we find a new way to speak of God.
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 the divinity of Christ, 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 that must be dismissed.
7. Resurrection is an action of God, who raised Jesus 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 crucial, objective, revealed standard writ in Scripture or on tablets of

stone that will govern our ethical behavior 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 behavior-control mentality of reward and punishment. The church must abandon, therefore, its reliance on guilt as a motivator of behavior.
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.

In his autobiography *Here I Stand*, Spong comments on these theses: "These theses posted for debate are inevitably stated in a negative manner. That is deliberate. Before one can hear what Christianity is one must create room for that hearing by clearing out the misconceptions of what Christianity is not. Why *Christianity Must Change or Die* is a manifesto calling the church to a new reformation. In that book I begin to sketch out a view of God beyond theism, an understanding of the Christ as a God presence and a vision of the shape of both the church and its Liturgy for the future. When I publish the Harvard Lectures sometime in 2001, which I will deliver as the William Beldon Noble lecturer in 2000, I plan to present a fuller, more positive understanding of what the Christianity of the future will be like."

A Brief response from theologian Dr G.H. Duggan SM



Spong's theses are garbage. He writes: "Theism as a way of defining God is dead" (thesis 1). This is a bold assertion and obviously contrary to fact. There are one billion Christians and the same number of Muslims - for whom Theism is very much alive. Plenty of Christians much

more intelligent than Spong are convinced that there is good evidence for the existence of a Creator, an intelligent Efficient Cause who brought the universe into existence and maintains it in existence as is asserted in the first verse of Genesis. Dr Stanley Jaki (who holds earned doctorates in both theology and physics) has shown that acceptance of this doctrine by the medieval thinkers accounts for the fact that it is only in Western Christendom, and in no other culture, that science as we know it has come into existence.¹ (Science being a self-supporting enterprise dedicated to understanding the visible universe in terms of laws discovered by the use of observation and reason). Spong's reference to "Dwelling above the sky" is a childish caricature of the Christian idea of God. Many of his subsequent theses are simply corollaries to his initial denial of Theism.

Thesis 4: "The virgin birth makes the divinity of Christ impossible" Comment: Nonsense.

Thesis 8: "The story of the ascension assumed a three tiered universe" and therefore after Copernicus we must reject it. Comment: More nonsense.

Thesis 9: Comment: The natural law is to govern human behaviours for all time. It is written in the first place in the human heart, as St Paul wrote in Romans 2:15.

Thesis 10: Comment: He has to reject prayer and the universal instinct that prompts it.

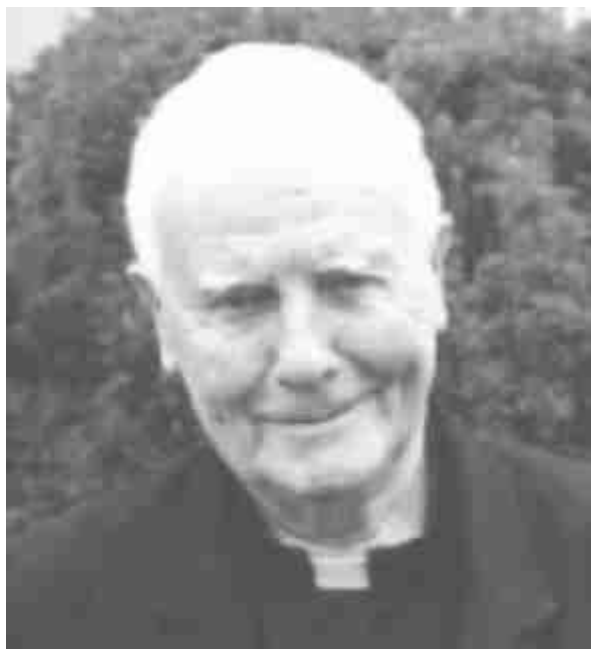
Thesis 11: Comment: The sense of guilt and the threat of punishment for evildoing is necessary to secure observance of the moral law for most human beings.

Endnotes

¹ See Stanley L. Jaki, *The Road of science and the ways to God* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978). Originally presenting his ideas as the Gifford Lectures for 1975 and 1976, Jaki maintains that the birth of a viable scientific enterprise could take place only when, in the High Middle Ages, natural theology had become steeped in Christian faith. Through proclaiming both the rationality and the contingency of the universe, natural theology then helped form a cultural matrix in which science could rise and prosper. Jaki also points out that whenever in later times rational belief in a Creator, as based on the classic proofs of the existence of God, has been radically criticized, the results have usually been at least potentially disastrous for the cultivation of science. He has concluded that modern science "owes its very birth and life" to the once nearly universal belief in a Creator". See Jaki, S.L., *Science and Creation: From Eternal Cycles to an Oscillating Universe* (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1974), p. viii.

Commentary on the Lecture Tour of NZ by Bishop Spong

by Dr G.H. Duggan SM



Dr G. H. Duggan

Outline

1. The favourable reception of the speaker.
2. His gross inconsistency in dealing with the Gospels; (a) His acceptance of the moral teaching of Christ; (b) His rejection, on philosophical grounds, of Christ's transcendent claims and his bodily Resurrection.
3. His unwarranted acceptance of the thought of Darwin.
4. The explanation of the favourable reception by his audiences and the media.
5. Appendix on Fundamentalism

1. The favourable reception of the speaker.

The Right Reverend John Shelby Spong, recently retired Episcopalian Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, gave 40 lectures in New Zealand during October (1997), attracting audiences of up to 550 people, most of whom reacted favourably, and some enthusiastically, to his message. His lectures, like those of Don Cupitt, the Oxford don, a few years ago, were sponsored by the St. Andrews Trust, and they included the Geering Memorial Lecture. He also received wide and favourable publicity from the media.

2. Gross inconsistency in dealing with the Gospels

Bishop Spong is the latest, and one of the least impressive of a long line of "gainsayers" (Titus 1:9) - that is, intellectuals attacking the Gospels, that stretches back to Celsus, whose book *True Discourse* published about the year 180, is the earliest literary attack on Christianity of which details have survived. Like most of the books of that time it has disappeared, but nine-tenths of the text has survived in the *Contra Celsum* a refutation written by Origen about seventy years later.

Celsus had a great influence on later anti-Christian controversialists, such as the philosopher Perphyry (d. 304), the emperor Julian (d. 363) and even on some in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In modern times, the Rationalist, or anti-supernatural, attack on the Gospels began, in England, with Lord Herbert of Cherbury (d. 1648), Charles Blount (d. 1693) and John Toland (d. 1723), and others.

In Germany, the attack came in the 18th century, beginning with Reimarus (d. 1768). In a work published posthumously, he rejected miracles and divine revelation unreservedly, and sought to convict the evangelists of conscious fraud, innumerable contradictions, and fanaticism. Lessing (d. 1781) and Kant (d. 1804) both put the essence of religion in moral conduct and rejected any positive divine revelation.

In the 19th century, the Rationalist attack on the reliability of the Gospels was carried on in Germany by D.F. Strauss (d. 1874) and Ernest Renan (d. 1892) in France.

In the 20th century, we have had scholars who have denied that Jesus Christ ever existed as an historical personage. This was the view of Drews in Germany, Couchoud in France, and Wells in England.

This was tantamount to an admission that all the attempts to present a plausible account of a purely human Christ had broken down.

Giuseppe Ricciotti sums up his excellent account of the Rationalist assault on the historical reliability of the Gospels, by pointing to this breakdown. He writes in his *Life of Christ* (p. 212):

"One thing is very evident to anyone reviewing the multiple experiences of gospel criticism from Reimarus to the present: once we begin to rub out one part of the picture of the historical Jesus presented to us in the Gospels, either the result is a portrait which is

historically absurd and therefore soon abandoned, or we eventually erase the whole thing. The various features of the Gospel are so intimately related and interwoven that one inevitably implies the others. Hence they must be left as they are or they must be erased without exception."

G.K. Chesterton in his book *The Everlasting Man* (Part 2:ch.), summarising various modern rationalistic attempts to present plausible accounts of a merely human Jesus, shows how they have all broken down.

Bishop Spong, undeterred, has presented Christ as the teacher of a sublime morality, while rejecting the Gospel witness to His transcendent claims and to his bodily Resurrection.

To establish Christ's preeminence as a moral teacher, he takes as factual the Gospel account of His attitude to various classes of people. These show, Spong points out, that Christ rejected the exclusivism of his Jewish contemporaries, who would have nothing to do with Gentiles, Samaritans, tax-collectors and sinners, in this way, Spong claims, revealing God's unconditional love for all human beings.

On the other hand, he rejects the texts, and there are many of these, both explicit and implicit, in which Christ is shown as making transcendent claims - to be one with the Father, to possess an exclusive knowledge of the Father, to work as the Father works, and to be the Supreme Judge, the King, who will separate sheep from goats at the end of the world.

It is interesting that in discussing Christ's moral teaching, he pointed out that it was from the text in Daniel (7:13) that Christ took the phrase "the Son of Man", by which, in the Gospels, He nearly always referred to Himself. Now this was the text which Christ cited in his trial before Caiaphas, when challenged to say who he was. "Are you", Caiaphas asked, "the son of the Blessed One?" "I am" Jesus replied, "and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One, and coming on the clouds of heaven". This claim led the Sanhedrin to condemn Him to death for blasphemy (Mark 14).

If these claims were false, it is nonsensical to speak of Christ as a great moral teacher. For if He knew they were false, He would have been telling a lie, and if He mistakenly thought they were true, He would have been the victim of an hallucination.

Spong rejects the bodily Resurrection of Christ, despite its being clearly attested by the Gospels and St. Paul in his First letter to the Corinthians, written in 53, less than 23 years after the event. He has maintained that the Gospel accounts of the appearances to the women and the disciples were an adaptation of St Paul's account of his experience on the road to Damascus, about which we have not enough details to give a clear account of the event.

But St. Paul tells the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:3) that the account of the Resurrection which he had given to them was the one that had been given to him at the time of his reception into the Church after he was baptised. At that point, probably in 33 or 34, it was obviously a set

formula, part of a brief summary of the Christian faith. Later, the evangelists will provide more details of the bodily appearances stressing, as St. Peter does in Acts 10:41, that He appeared in bodily form.

It is reliably reported that when Spong was challenged about his inconsistency in accepting that the Gospels are a factual report when they tell us of His claims and His bodily Resurrection, Spong fell back on the theories of D.F. Strauss and R. Bultmann that the Gospel accounts of Christ's life and teaching are myths invented by the early Church to glorify its Founder.



David F. Strauss - In 1835 he published his 'Life of Jesus Critically Examined' in which he adopted a radical approach to the Bible's historical claims.

Strauss put the composition of the Gospels at some time after 170 A.D. but he admitted that if they were written in the first century, his theory would collapse as this would not allow enough time for the elaboration of myths.

The theory of Strauss was revived by Rudolf Bultmann earlier in this century and he undertook the task of "demythologizing" the

Gospels. We would take Bultmann more seriously, C.S. Lewis commented, if we thought he knew what a myth is. The Gospels belong to a totally different kind of literature. They are more like the work of reporters as Marie-Christine Ceruti-Cendrier has argued in a book of 371 pages published in 1995.¹

It is important to realise that Bishop Spong's rejection of the bodily Resurrection of Christ is not derived from a critical examination of the New Testament evidence, but as with so many others, from philosophy, which he has described as "post-Darwinian".

That such a rejection was based on antecedent assumptions, or philosophical prejudices, was pointed out over a century ago by B.F. Westcott, the great Anglican biblical scholar. He wrote:

"Taking all the evidences together, it is not too much to say that there is no single historic incident better or more variously supported than the Resurrection of Christ. Nothing but the antecedent assumption that it must be false could have suggested any idea of a deficiency in the proof of it... In any ordinary matter of life, the evidence would be amply sufficient to determine our action and belief."²

As an example of the influence of such an antecedent assumption, we have the verdict of Rudolf Bultmann:

"A historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable."³

Another is that provided by Hastings Rashdall (d. 1924), famous for his history of the medieval universities. He was no less categorical:

“The reanimation or the sudden transformation into something not quite material and yet not quite spiritual, of a really dead body would involve the violation of the best ascertained laws of physics, chemistry, and physiology. Were the evidence fifty times stronger than it is, any hypothesis would be more possible than this.”⁴

3. Unwarranted acceptance of the thought of Darwin.

The antecedent assumption that has led Bishop Spong to reject the bodily Resurrection of Christ is the assumption that Darwin’s philosophy is true, and that the Gospel texts must be interpreted in the light of this philosophy.

If Darwin is right, Spong argues, then the universe is not dependent on an intelligent Creator distinct from it, and God is, in the words of the editorial in *The Evening Post*, (quoting Spong) only “a divine presence found in the midst of life.”

In this philosophy, a miracle such as the Resurrection is obviously impossible, for a miracle supposes that a personal Creator has intervened to override the laws that govern the normal running of the Universe, for example the raising to life of a dead body.

Bishop Spong has assumed that Darwin’s main books *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* are primarily scientific works, and are substantially correct. He is mistaken on both counts.

Darwin’s account of the development of living forms is demonstrably false, for it is plain from the fossil record that the vast array of intermediate forms which his theory demands, never in fact existed (e.g. those found in the Cambrian strata, living forms appear suddenly, fully formed, and sometimes in considerable variety). Darwin attempted to deal with this difficulty in chapters X and XI of the *Origin*, but even then, the special pleading was evident.

In his book *Darwin on Trial*, Phillip E. Johnson, who lectures on law in the University of California in Berkeley, pointed out that the logic in the *Origin* is gravely flawed.

Michael Denton, in his book *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, indicated several grave deficiencies in the *Origin* on the scientific side and said it is time Darwinism is abandoned. Denton is a molecular biologist who is currently working as a researcher at Otago University.

In 1937, Paul Lemoine, editor-in-chief of the Volume in the French Encyclopedia that deals with biology, and formerly Director of the Paris Museum of Natural History and President of the Geological Society of France, wrote that, in the light of the scientific evidence now available, the evolutionary theory should be abandoned and a different orientation given to scientific research. Citing the findings of the leading

specialists of the day, such as Cuenot, Caullery, Guyenot and Carpenter, he wrote:

“In my opinion, this volume of the Encyclopedia, which I thought would assure the triumph of the evolutionary theories, today on the contrary seems to me to sound their death-knell.”⁵

Secondly, although Darwin’s books contain a wealth of scientific information, they are primarily works of philosophy. That is why they were welcomed with open arms by Marx and Engels, whose philosophy was Dialectical Materialism.

Darwin’s philosophy is a restatement of an evolutionary philosophy put forward in ancient times by Empedocles (d. 435), Democritus (d. 370) and Epicurus (d. 270). They held that the various forms of living bodies with their structures were the product of chance. Empedocles proposed a theory of natural selection to account for the very suitable arrangement of teeth in the human jaw. He was refuted by Aristotle in his book *The Physics*. Aristotle pointed out that Empedocles had not accounted for the fact that this arrangement is the same in every generation.

Darwin lays great stress on the power of Natural Selection, making it almost omniscient. But its influence is merely negative: it causes the disappearance of forms that are not adapted to the environment. The only positive factor in the theory is chance variation.. This was pointed out by Samuel Butler, the author of *Erewhon*, in his anti-Darwinian book, *Luck or Cunning?* published in 1887. The same point was made by L.S. Berg, a Russian ichthyologist, in 1922, in his book *Nomogenesis, or Evolution Determined by Law*.⁶

In the *Origin*, Darwin, like Julian Huxley in his book *Evolution; the Modern Synthesis*, was at pains to eliminate real purposiveness, or final causes, from his account of the living world. If there is real purposiveness in nature, this adaptation of means to end that do not yet exist in physical reality, proves, beyond the possibility of doubt, that the living world is the work of an intelligent Cause. This purposiveness is necessarily implied in heredity and the struggle for existence, two factors without which the Darwinian theory is not intelligible.

4. The explanation of the favourable reception by his audiences and the media.

How did it happen that Bishop Spong’s new version of the Christian religion, a kind of “theological snake oil” got such a warm reception from so many New Zealanders, not only those who attended his lectures, but also others who wield great influence through the media?

The causes are twofold: ignorance and an unspoken desire to be rid of the moral constraints which Christianity imposes, especially in the sphere of sex, and of the fear of the punishment that will be meted out, Christianity assures us, on those who violate the moral law and die unrepentant.

Ignorance: New Zealand is a cultural backwater in the Western world. There is widespread ignorance of the Bible and the moral law that is summed up in the Ten Commandments. There are some genuine scholars in the fields of secular knowledge, but few if any, in those of biblical scholarship and theology (T.F. Torrance, a genuine scholar, was in New Zealand for a few years, but returned to Scotland). Spong is certainly not a scholar-indeed, he may not claim to be one - but there are few who are able and willing to engage him in debate. The result is that, as the saying goes, he has been able "to get away with murder".

Unacknowledged Longings: If so many people want "God to be redefined" (*Evening Post*, October 15) or God to be "divested of the ogreish quality we have fastened on him" (*The Dominion*, November 1), it is because the God revealed by Christ makes them feel uncomfortable. Just read Matthew 10:28, where Christ tells us whom we must fear and why; Matthew 25:41, in which he tells us what the King will say to the goats on the left; or Matthew 25:30, about the fate of the fellow who failed to make use of his one talent.

People are apt to resent the idea that their conduct and their inmost thoughts are an open book to Christ, who will be their Judge, as St. Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 5:10: "We must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for things done in the body, whether good or bad."

Spong's God is a nice tame Deity, whose love for men is unconditional, however proud and unrepentant they may be. Christ has told us that his love for us is not unconditional. He said: "If you obey my commands you will remain in my love" (John 15:10).

5. An appendix on fundamentalism

Bishop Spong apparently thought that it was enough to dispose of a critic to describe him as a "fundamentalist", or assert that he had undergone a "mental lobotomy".

He seems not to have realised that there are two forms of Fundamentalism, one Moderate, the other Extreme.

Moderate Fundamentalism is the position of those who hold that in the Christian creed there are a number of tenets that are so fundamental that if a person rejects any one of them he has "made shipwreck of his faith," as it has been professed by Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox for centuries. Such are for example, the existence of God the Creator, the Blessed Trinity, the Divinity of Christ, the Atoning death and the bodily Resurrection of Christ.

G.K. Chesterton took as a summary of these fundamental doctrines the Apostles' Creed, which he defended in his books *Orthodoxy*, published in 1908, and *The Everlasting Man*, published in 1925.

Similarly, it was these fundamental elements of the Christian faith that C.S. Lewis defended in his book *Mere Christianity*, published in 1952.

Extreme Fundamentalism is the position of those who hold that many biblical texts that a significant number of biblical scholars treat as containing figurative or poetical language, can *only* be understood in a *literal* sense.

Endnotes

¹ Marie Christine Ceruti-Cendrier, *Les Evangiles sont des Reportages* (P. Tequi, Paris, 1995).

² B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel of the Resurrection* (MacMillan, London, 4th ed., 1889), p. 115.

³ Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth* (S.P.C.K, London, 1953) I, p. 39.

⁴ In an unpublished essay, quoted by Kirsopp Lake, *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (London, 1907), p. 269.

⁵ *L'Encyclopediie Francaise*, Vol. V, Les Etres Vivantes, Paris, 1937 5.06-4.

⁶ L.S. Berg, *Nomogenesis, or Evolution Determined by Law* (E.T. J.N. Rostovstow) Constable, London. 1926.

Redefining God In Man's Image (I)

A Critique of Bishop John Spong's Revised 'Christianity'*

by David H. Lane M.Sc. (Hons.), Dip.Tchg.**



This three part article was sent to over 2000 New Zealand Church leaders by the Executive Committee of the Wellington Christian Apologetics Society (Inc.) following Bishop Spong's controversial lecture tour of the country in October 1997. The main points of this paper were presented

in a public lecture by the author (Friday 7.30 pm, 28th November 1997, Turnbull House, Bowen St, Wellington) which was followed by a lively question-and-answer session. The article was first published in the *Evangelical Presbyterian* Vols. 47/4 & 48/1 (1997-98, pp. 30-55); Vol. 48/2 (1998, pp. 14-29); Vol. 48/3 (1998, 23-50).

Introduction: Bishop Spong - the moral spearhead of modern scholarship?

The Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong D.D., recently retired Episcopalian (Anglican) Bishop of the Diocese of Newark, New Jersey, completed a lecture tour of New Zealand in October 1997. His controversial views on Christianity received extensive media coverage. He was invited to the country by the St Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society to deliver the Inaugural Geering Fellowship Lectures which coincided with the 30th anniversary of Rev. Lloyd Geering's heresy trial before the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. These four weekly public lunch-time lectures during the month of October were given at St Andrews on the Terrace, the First Presbyterian parish in New Zealand.¹

In total he delivered around 40 lectures in the country with speaking engagements in Auckland,

Taradale, Christchurch and Palmerston North. In Wellington he was guest speaker at a number of services at St Andrews on the Terrace including a Sunday night "Galaxies Service" for "gay and lesbian Christians". He spoke at a Sunday morning service at St James Anglican Church, Lower Hutt, at the invitation of Rev. Ray Oppenheim, Vicar-in-charge, and gave a lecture to the combined Sea of Faith and Ephesus groups at the Johnsonville Union Church. In Taradale he spoke at the St Columbus Presbyterian Church with the support of the former minister Rev. Rachel Paulin. Bishop Murray Milne, Anglican Bishop of Hawkes Bay, arranged this venue by approaching Rev. Paulin directly. In Auckland about 450 attended his lecture entitled "A Faith for the 21st Century", co-sponsored by the Community of Saint Luke and St Matthew-in-the-City - Auckland Community Church. (The Minister of St Luke's Presbyterian Church Remuera-Newmarket, Rev. David J. Clark, is a declared practising homosexual and the Auckland Community Church is "a primarily gay and lesbian congregation" in St Matthew-in-the-City). Spong was also principal speaker at the Sea of Faith conference held over the weekend of 3-5 October at Kings College, Otahuhu, Auckland.

Bishop Spong has sought to present himself as a moral spearhead of modern scholarship confronting the Church with certain unpalatable yet assured 'facts' which demand it undergo a radical reorientation. Although on this visit the Anglican Church leadership in N.Z. said nothing to publicly endorse or challenge his well publicised views on the Christian faith, there remains a significant element among its leadership and lay-membership that champion his cause. The Anglican Bishop of Christchurch, The Rt. Rev. Dr David J. Coles, welcomed and introduced Spong at his Christchurch public meeting, concluding the meeting with a prayer of blessing. The Rt. Rev. Sir Paul Reeves, a former Primate and Archbishop of N.Z. wrote a supportive foreword to Spong's controversial book *Into the*

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Whirlwind: The future of the Church (1st publ. Seabury Press; Desbooks, 1983). He stated that he saw “precious little wrong with Spong” that would prevent him being considered a viable candidate and recipient of the office of “the next Archbishop of Canterbury”. Sir Paul Reeves, who was Governor-General of N.Z. from 1985-90, served as the Anglican Observer at the United Nations in New York and Assistant Bishop of the Diocese of New York (1991-94). He states in his foreword that Spong’s book will enable Anglicans to “get a firm grip on the spiritual resources that will sustain and carry us along.” He describes the Bishop as a sincere Christian “committed to a life of scholarship” and his book as “useful” in guiding them to answers to “questions about sexual preferences, lifestyle, marriage,” etc.

Spong’s position includes the following:

- The universe is part of who God is and as the universe evolves, God evolves. All revelations of the mystery of God are “images that bind and blind us all.”
- The General Theory of Evolution – molecules-to-man naturalistic evolution as taught by Charles Darwin - is fact. The biblical teaching (Gen. 1-3) of the special creation of man by God is a man-made myth which should be discarded as a true explanation of origins.
- A denial of the virginal conception of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was not born of the **Virgin** Mary, but was probably born to a rape victim.
- A rejection of the saving uniqueness of the Lord Jesus Christ. All religions provide equally valid ways to find God.
- Rejection of the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Christ’s death. Spong states: “The idea that somehow the very nature of the heavenly God required the death of Jesus as a ransom to be paid for our sin is ludicrous”.²
- Jesus Christ did not perform any of the miracles recorded in the Gospel narratives as these are mythological “accretions” which Spong calls “Christian midrash”.
- Jesus was quite probably married, most likely to Mary Magdalene. The account in Scripture of the Wedding at Cana of Galilee is a record of His own marriage as ‘proved’ by the fact that He attended it with His mother. His case is based on the fact that the only wedding Spong has ever attended with his mother was his own.
- A denial of the **bodily** resurrection and **bodily** ascension of Jesus Christ as taught by the Apostles and the Church. Such beliefs in Spong’s view are “myths”. He asserts dogmatically that the body of Jesus of Nazareth underwent decay following His death and today lies rotting somewhere in Palestine. He provides no empirical or historical evidence for such assertions.

- A rejection of all miracles recorded in both New and Old Testaments.
- The evidence in the New Testament points to the fact that the Apostle Paul was probably a “deeply repressed, self-loathing homosexual”.³
- Full support for the ordination of actively practising (non-celibate) homosexuals and lesbians (“gays”) to the Christian ministry, provided they are in a committed life-long monogamous love relationship. He maintains that the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles support such a practice and he has ordained a number of “gay” ministers in his own diocese.⁴
- He believes that the Church should give its blessing to the ‘marriage’ of homosexuals and considers such relationships as “holy”. Sexual relationships between non-married couples, “gay” or heterosexual, can be “holy” and should not be considered immoral.
- Favours as a matter of “conviction” both active and passive euthanasia and believes that “assisted suicide should be legalised, but only under circumstances that would effectively preclude both self-interest and malevolence”.⁵
- Favours safe and legalised abortion.

Spong is quick to respond in a hostile manner to Christians who dare to publicly challenge or question him on his unorthodox interpretations of the doctrines and teachings of mainstream Christian faith. He regularly uses pejorative terms such as “ignorant fundamentalists” and “literalisers” to describe his critics and resorts to ad hominem arguments in order to dismiss their views. For example, one questioner (the author) at one of his public lectures at Victoria University was told that his questions put to the Bishop were “silly”. He was sought out after the lecture by Spong and told by the Bishop that he was “full of evangelical rubbish”.⁶ He regularly informs audiences that the “evangelical wing” of his church is characterised by a “hostility that is appalling” and that “Christ is never served by hostility”.⁷

In response to a letter from Bishop Spong to the Primate of the Anglican Communion, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in which he sharply criticised the Archbishop and other Anglican Bishops for what he saw as their negative statements about homosexuality, the Archbishop began his reply as follows:

I am saddened by the hectoring and intemperate tone of your Statement which appears to leave little room for the dialogue you demand. You claim the high ground of science and reason; you argue that the view of those who disagree is ‘tired and threadbare’ and their leadership lacks integrity. Furthermore you attack personally those who disagree with your opinion and in doing so you distort the theologies and reasons why we are led to conclude that there is no justification for sexual expression outside marriage.⁸

Spong is a rising star among the pro-“gay” ordination lobby groups, liberal-minded church-goers and ex-church-goers. He is fêted by those clergy who have abandoned the traditional Christian faith and its teachings and who support the ordination of actively-practising “gays”. He regularly reminds his audiences that he has had 16 death threats made against him by Bible-quoting Christians and that he often receives letters from Christian “fundamentalists” stating that they are praying for his death. The *Dominion* reported: “Bishop Spong is used to death threats, and hate mail from New Zealanders began arriving even before he arrived in the country”.⁹ The Bishop and his defenders define all correspondence that would dare to question his views as “hate mail”. He links all his critics to the few odd extremists who he claims have made death threats against him. Such hype surrounds this cleric who presents himself as a persecuted hero standing for the “truth” in the midst of a “fundamentalist” ocean.

In an interview with Dr Brian Edwards on National Radio on Saturday morning (4 October 1997), the Bishop told him that he considered himself to be “a communicator of the scholarship of others”. In his book *Born of a Woman* he decries the ‘ignorance’ of his fellow Episcopal bishops who believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus and asks: “How will the church survive in this world if its leaders remain ignorant of biblical studies?”

Opportunities to challenge the Bishop publicly during his third visit to New Zealand in 1997 were virtually non-existent. For example, his four public lectures at St Andrews on the Terrace, Wellington, provided no opportunities for questions or discussion. The few limited question-and-answer sessions following his other public lectures were so tightly controlled and limited in scope as to make any form of real scholarly interaction very difficult, if not impossible. To hear the Bishop engage in “dialogue” one had to pay \$50 for the privilege.¹⁰ This public spectacle involving the Bishop and Lloyd Geering, Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies, Victoria University, only provided him with yet another forum in which to give vent to his evident pent-up hostility towards Christians who hold to the fundamentals of the faith.

Lloyd Geering and John Spong are ‘brothers-in-arms’ when it comes to the crusade to demolish the fundamentals of the Christian faith and any dialogue between the two on theological matters is predictably a mutual admiration exercise. The same is true of the two interviews with the Bishop by Rev. Dr James Veitch, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, Victoria University, Wellington, broadcast on National Radio.¹¹

No opportunity was given on radio or television for anyone representing mainstream Christianity to defend mainstream Christian beliefs or challenge the Bishop’s views during the one month period of his visit. The occasional provoked incredulity of largely atheist or agnostic interviewers, otherwise both ill-prepared and often almost fawning, to some of Spong’s more glaring

gaffes, made a quite inadequate substitute for professional journalistic scrutiny and media balance.

‘Dialogue’ at the University

In a public lecture at Victoria University¹² the Bishop began by announcing that he wished to “dialogue” with those present on the topic “Re-rooting Christianity in its Jewishness”. Among other things he attempted to “destabilise” the historicity of Judas Iscariot, the disciple of Jesus who betrayed Him to the Jewish religious leaders. Spong argued that Judas is only a “mythic figure” introduced into the Gospel accounts as part of a “Christian midrash” which reflected the alleged anti-Semitic attitude(s) of one or more of the Gospel writer(s). (Midrash¹³ is the name of a particular genre of rabbinic literature. See later discussion).

Spong maintained that the cause of the Jewish Holocaust of World War II carried out by the Nazis, could, in part, be attributed to the anti-Semitic attitudes that developed within Christendom, fuelled by deliberate anti-Semitic non-historical components in the Gospel accounts. He argued that the Gospel writers made it only appear as if the Jews were responsible for Christ’s death, when in reality, (Spong alleged) they were not (he effectively accused the Gospel writers of lying and provided no historical evidence in support of his accusations). Of course the opposite is true, for the Gospels state clearly that the Jewish chief priests and elders and the people they influenced, accepted full responsibility for the death of Jesus, while also indicting the Roman leadership (Mt. 27:20-25; cf. Lk. 24:20). The Apostle Peter declared on the Day of Pentecost that it was the “men of Israel” who had “nailed [Jesus] to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:23). He proclaimed the same message to the Jews in the temple (Acts 3:14-15) and elsewhere. And yet from the cross, Jesus is recorded in Luke’s Gospel as saying, “Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing”.¹⁴ Jesus forgave His persecutors and commands all His followers to do likewise.¹⁵

In orthodox theological terms the guilt of Jew and



Gentile alike is a symbol that Jesus Christ’s death is an indictment of the whole of sinful humanity. The only ‘political’ reference in the creeds of Christendom is to the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate, not the Jewish leadership as

might be expected from Spong’s argument - “He suffered under Pontius Pilate”.¹⁶ This segment of the creed is one of the few historical facts concerning Jesus that Spong accepts as literally true. The other is that He was crucified and died. And yet he is on record as stating that he interprets *nothing* in the Bible as literally true (see later discussion). While agreeing that all the writers of the Bible were Jewish, with the possible exception of Luke, a gentile convert to Judaism, Spong

failed in his lecture to explain why Jewish Gospel writers would concoct an historically erroneous account of the role of Jews in the death of Christ, with the sure knowledge that it would reflect badly on their own people.

Four days later in a radio interview with Rev. Dr Veitch, he suggested that these fabricated accounts were written “not because they [the writers] were trying to be deceitful”.¹⁷ Rather, the stories just grew out of the Jewish/Jewish-Christian tensions that developed in the early Christian community before the latter group made a clean break (c. 88 AD) from worshipping in the synagogues with the former group. Rev. Veitch, appeared to agree with him, yet neither provided any historical data in support.

Rev. Veitch, like Spong, does not believe that Judas Iscariot ever existed, a conclusion he says he reached after translating the New Testament into contemporary English and putting the writings into a claimed chronological order. Veitch’s understanding of Christianity and its origins, like Spong’s has more in common with the “New Age” version espoused in the book *Two Thousand Years Later: A Novel* (Hovenden Press, 1997) by Peter Longley, than with that taught by the Church for almost 2000 years. Veitch agrees with “almost all” of Longley’s “first century scenarios” outlined in his novel written to popularise the findings of the “Historical Jesus movement” among theologians; describing the book as “superb”.¹⁸ Longley presents Jesus (referred to as “Joshua of Nazareth” in the novel) as having been married for two years to a young girl Joanna, before her untimely death. Later Jesus had a son Ben Joshua, who he never saw due to Jesus’ untimely death at the hands of the Jewish authorities. The child’s mother was Maria of Magdala (Mary Magdalene), Jesus’ closest confidant and lover. Ben Joshua travelled to India to promote his father’s *real* message: a message centred on the “Christ consciousness” within all of us which is interpreted as our soul energy, the chi, or life-force of God. This message of universal divinity and the inter-connectedness of all life forms, was fused with Hinduism and Buddhist thought and the fuller version of Christianity was lost to the world after Ben Joshua’s death. The version taught by the Apostles Peter and Paul and handed down through the Church fathers is therefore not the real message and is based largely on non-historical accounts. Longley, like Veitch, Geering and Spong, concludes that Jesus’ disciples never really understood his message and they incorrectly interpreted his death as being of sacrificial necessity for mankind’s salvation from sin.

It is noteworthy that the Gospels record that the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus’ day did promote one false report of events to explain the disappearance of His body from the tomb. However, *they had good reason to do so*, as they believed that if the truth concerning the resurrection of Jesus became widely known and believed, it would reflect badly on themselves, as it would be a vindication of all His claims and a fulfilment of His prophecy concerning His own death and resurrection (Mt. 27:62-66). They even went as far as paying the Roman guards a bribe to spread the lie that the disciple’s had stolen Jesus’ body at night, even though the tomb had been sealed and

secured by the same guards. They were even prepared to act as false witnesses before the Governor in the defence of the guards whose lives were at risk because of the ‘loss’ of the body while they were allegedly sleeping (Lk. 28:11-15). Sleeping on duty was punishable by death in the Roman army.

At the close of John Spong’s lecture at the University, only eight minutes remained for “dialogue”. The first questioner (the author) indicated that he wished “to challenge the **historicity** of the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” as presented by the Bishop. This is the ‘Jesus’ whose body the Bishop believes remains to this day, rotting in a common criminal’s grave in Palestine. The following excerpt is based on a transcript of the interchange that ensued:

Questioner (the author): ‘... Before I raise my key question regarding the historicity of Jesus, may I ask



Charles Darwin
1809-1882

you a few short questions and would you please give me a “yes” or “no” answer. Do you accept the historicity of the man Charles Darwin who gave us the book *Origin of Species* outlining his theory of evolution?’

Spong: “Yes”.

Questioner: “Do you accept his death as an historical fact?”

Spong: “Yes”.

Questioner: “Do you accept that Darwin’s body lies buried in a grave in some form of decomposition on earth?”

Spong: “Ah ... maybe.”

Questioner: “That’s a strange answer isn’t it? Darwin’s funeral was a large public event witnessed by hundreds¹⁹ and his body lies today buried in a marked tomb in the graveyard of Westminster Abbey.” [It is common knowledge that Darwin’s body was not cremated].

Spong: “Well I wasn’t at his funeral, nor did I see inside the coffin, so I can’t be sure.”

Questioner: “OK then, let’s turn to the person Jesus of Nazareth you say you are a follower of. Two quick questions please. Is He an historical figure?”

Spong: “Yes, certainly”.

Questioner: “Did He die?”

Spong: “Yes”.

Questioner: “Now we come to my key question. Does the body of Jesus Christ of Nazareth lie in a grave somewhere on earth in some form of decomposition?”

Spong: “Yes, certainly”.

Questioner: "Well, isn't that a rather strange answer from one who is a Bishop in the Christian Church and who professes to believe in the Resurrection of Christ?"

Spong: "Not at all, anyway your line of questioning is just silly, ... silly!"

Questioner: "Well I won't accept that. Through the line of questions I have used, I have sought to open up and clarify an issue which has vexed the minds of many of the greatest theologians and thinkers of this century. You are non-committal when it comes to the whereabouts and state of decomposition of Charles Darwin's body, despite excellent historical verification of the facts,²⁰ but quite dogmatic when it comes to the 'facts' concerning Jesus Christ's body. That is inconsistent. You were never present at the time of Jesus' death and burial, nor have you had any contact with the witnesses to those events. You are almost 2000 years removed from the event and yet you can dogmatically assert that you **know** that Christ's body lies rotting in a grave in Palestine. How do you know that?"

"You are the one who recently stated dogmatically in a radio interview²¹ that 'there is no story of the risen Christ' in Mark's Gospel, that 'it is not until the ninth decade in Matthew's Gospel that we have one, but it is 'highly suspect'; and that the Apostle Paul's writings provide no support to the 'evangelical and fundamentalist' belief in the physical [bodily] resurrection of Christ. You stated: 'The Bible will not support a *physical* story of a resuscitated body ... There is nobody who thinks that Paul saw a *physically* resuscitated body walking out of a grave'... even the Book of Acts presents it [the appearance] as a sort of theophany.'²²



'In a TV 3 news interview, John Campbell sought to gain clarification of your views on the "physical [bodily] resurrection" of Jesus and all you did was to again present blatant factual errors and misrepresentations of the Church's position in order to fudge the central issue - the

bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul makes the **bodily** nature of the resurrection the cornerstone of Christianity in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 and gives an impressive list of the many eye-witnesses to the bodily appearances of the Risen Christ (vs. 5-8).'

"The Church has never taught that the resurrection of Christ was *merely* the resuscitation of a dead corpse (like that of Lazarus), as you have stated. [Lazarus' resurrected body was *mortal* - he latter died]. The Resurrection involved the supernatural activity of God the Father raising Jesus Christ the Son from the dead to

a new mode of **bodily** existence - the *immortal* resurrected body - a **new** creation."

"Mark's Gospel affirms this. Leaving aside the disputed last section of Mark 16:9 onwards, the account in the first eight verses affirms that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has risen from the dead (Mk. 16:6). The empty tomb is a powerful testimony to His **bodily** resurrection. Furthermore, Matthew's Gospel, chapter 28, states that His disciples **held onto His feet** when He met them after the resurrection and that they worshipped Him (Mt. 28:9). If that is not a confirmation of the **bodily** nature of the resurrection appearance, then I don't know what is."

Spong: "You mentioned the passage in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8. Here the Apostle Paul ranks the appearance of Jesus to him on the Damascus Road on the same level as those to Cephas (or Peter), the twelve, and then to all the apostles. Paul's encounter was clearly not that of a **bodily** manifestation, but rather a blinding light, so why insist that the others were **bodily** when the evidence indicates otherwise? The reference in Matthew to Jesus' feet being held did not involve his disciples as you claim, but was just a story the women made up" [and is "highly suspect"²³].

Questioner: "No, you're wrong. The accounts in Acts 9:3-9 and 22:6-11 clearly indicate that it was the **person** of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ [not a mere "blinding light"] who spoke to Saul (later called Paul) and to whom Saul spoke, not a mere figment of his imagination. It was not a purely "spiritual" or "psychological" appearance. The "concrete nature" of the encounter was such that he was physically incapacitated, blinded for three days by the brilliant light surrounding the Lord."

"In your discussion of 1 Cor. 15 it is significant that you left out Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to more than 500 people at one time, "most of whom" Paul states, remained alive at the time of his writing. Paul most definitely aligns his experience with these earlier **bodily** appearances. He stakes his own reputation on the validity of these reports, indicating that over 250 witnesses were available to be interviewed and checked out. He was clearly confident that they would confirm what he himself had seen - the Risen Lord Jesus Christ."

"You are wrong when you attempt to dismiss the incident in Matthew's Gospel as just a story the women told and by implication a myth originating from an unreliable source. These women were genuine disciples (followers of Jesus) like the twelve and Joseph of Arimathea. On encountering their risen Lord they took hold of His feet and worshipped Him" (Mt. 28:9).

Spong: "Oh well, if you say so."

Questioner: "Jesus gave the women instructions to tell His "brethren" to go to Galilee where they would see Him. The Gospel writer accepted their account as factual and it was on the basis of the women's reports that Simon Peter and John ran to the tomb to check whether Jesus had truly risen from the dead."²⁴

Bishop Spong 'honours' his rigid "fundamentalist" roots

In an article in the *Dominion*²⁵ written by senior journalist, Ian Harris, Spong is reported as deploring the "mental lobotomy" of Christian "fundamentalists who insist on a literal interpretation of scripture..." Such personal abuse and vitriolic denunciations are regularly levelled at this minority group by the Bishop. He delights in exploiting the negative modern connotations of the term "fundamentalist" but never defines the term accurately in its true historical context (see later discussion).

By telling us repeatedly that he was once a "pretty rigid ... fundamentalist"²⁶ which he defines as a narrow-minded Bible literalist who is "afraid of knowledge"²⁷, incapable of abstract thought²⁸, fearful and insecure in the modern world, and who does not even bother to read the Bible he or she pretends to defend²⁹; he implies that all dissenters from his particular interpretations of the Bible (the so-called "fundamentalists") are, as he once was, "racists", "male chauvinists",³⁰ "naive," "sexist" and "reflecting a patriarchal attitude of the world," "blatant homophobes," and those "who quote the Bible with abandon in order to uphold their perspective".³¹ While it is true that this form of "fundamentalism" to which he objects does indeed exist throughout the contemporary world, many fundamentalists (those holding to the *fundamentals* of faith) would be far removed from the attitudes outlined.

Spong was raised by a "committed Presbyterian Calvinistic mother" and in his youth attended with his parents an evangelical Episcopalian Church in North Carolina. "I was raised a fundamentalist. **I honour that tradition.** I was a southern evangelical..." he told an audience at Christ Church Cathedral in Vancouver on 7th July 1993.³² In 1995 he stated: "I was raised in the evangelical Protestant wing of the Episcopal Church in the South".³³ He made the same claims in interviews on National Radio (N.Z.) with Dr Brian Edwards, a well known atheist and media commentator,³⁴ and in an interview with Rev. Dr James Veitch.³⁵ Why then does he continue to lambaste his critics by suggesting that they are all tarred with the same brush that he once was, namely "fundamentalism" - a "tradition" he claims to "honour"? A strong case could be made that he is seeking to exorcise the last vestiges of the spirit of extreme "fundamentalism" from his own psyche. Sadly, in the process one could easily conclude that he appears to have been transformed into the very mirror image of what he claims to detest - an exemplar of the bigoted "fundamentalism" (albeit an extreme liberal version of it) he imagines lies lurking in the shadows behind everyone who dares to challenge him.

The vitriol he hurls at so-called "fundamentalists" and evangelicals would suggest that he is far from a convincing exemplar of the tolerance and universal love which he says lies at the heart of Christianity he lives out. He claims to be a "follower of Jesus Christ", who he stresses "loved wastefully" and calls us to follow His example. Why is it then that the Bishop lampoons his perceived enemies ("fundamentalists") as infantile cretins and has the gall to go on record as stating that

they have all undergone a "mental lobotomy"? If he ever directed such comments at the so-called "gay minority," or for that matter any other minority group based on ethnicity or shared belief(s), there would be howls of protest from within the very groups with which Spong is so closely allied. One must really wonder about his sincerity when he is on record as stating:

I must confess that those who literalize the scriptures and then use the Bible as a club to beat on non-literalists, feminists and homosexuals are the most difficult people I know to love. They are usually hostile and almost always judgmental. Their ability to tolerate any new truth that might threaten their security system is limited. Yet I pause to remember that they, too, are God's children, probably living in fear, and they must be given the respect due every child of God.³⁶

All evangelical and orthodox mainstream Christians who question Spong's assumptions or biblical interpretations are unfairly drawn into his net and labelled "hostile, judgmental literalizers," when in fact there are important distinctions between the type of "fundamentalists" he abhors and those who adhere to the "fundamentals of the faith" and yet lovingly and rationally defend their beliefs. We are never told about such distinctions and the fact that most mainstream modern evangelical and orthodox scholars vigorously repudiate the categorisation of their position as "fundamentalist" (in the pejorative sense in which Spong uses the term).

What of Spong's 'Supporters'?

Spong regularly provokes ridicule of elements of Holy Scripture and Christian creeds which are normally received with reverence by those in the evangelical and orthodox mainstream sections of the Church he supposedly honours, but now rails against. He lampoons the biblical texts they consider divinely inspired writ, and yet uses many of them, treated as historical documents, as launching pads to devise the most fanciful theories which he claims are taken seriously by "the Academy" - the leading New Testament scholars he claims support him and be part of.

It is very hard to take such claims seriously when he rarely names these individuals and, when he does, as in his book *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (1991), we find that he includes among his so-called supporters figures such as the late Fr Raymond Brown³⁷ (d. Aug. 1998) and Fr Fitzmyer, both of whom are on public record as standing for the very opposite positions to those endorsed by the Bishop.

Fr Brown, who has been and Fr Fitzmyer who is, a member of the papal biblical commission, are two unfortunates who allegedly have joined with Spong in "rejecting the literal narratives about the resurrection" as no more than "Christian legends". Nothing could be further from the truth! Both scholars have repeatedly gone on record as accepting the historicity of the burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea, Jesus' post-Resurrection appearances and the discovery of the empty tomb - all of which Spong rejects. As Professor

of Fundamental Theology Gerald O'Collins (of the Gregorian University, Rome) has argued, the remainder in the list of Spong's 'supporters' are either long dead and have no chance of dissociating themselves from Spong and his views, or they are those who cannot be classified as New Testament scholars in the proper sense of the word.³⁸

Who is Intellectually Dishonest?

Bishop Spong regularly accuses the evangelical wing of the Episcopalian church of exhibiting an "absence of personal integrity that is both surprising and disappointing"; surprising, to him, in that he was brought up in an evangelical environment where he claims personal integrity and piety were the hallmarks of evangelicals. He also accuses his evangelical critics of indulging in rhetoric and "heap[ing] hate upon homosexual people".³⁹

Author and television personality, Dr Maxine Hancock, who teaches in the English Department of the University of Alberta, notes in a detailed analysis of a public dialogue between Bishop Spong and Anglican evangelical scholar Rev. Dr John Stott on the question of "Christian sexual ethics,"⁴⁰ published in the journal *Crux* of Regent College (Vancouver), that Spong regularly used "rhetorical devices" to win over his audience. Early on in the dialogue he created as "a straw man, the stereotypical biblical literalist," or "fundamentalist" - the Bible-thumping enthusiast who disparagingly labels all of his or her critics as "secular humanists". Then the Bishop proceeded to knock down the "straw man", thinking that with its demise goes the whole of the tradition that regards the Bible as the divinely inspired and authoritative Word of God (e.g. see 2 Tim. 3:16). **"The use of pejorative words" and "sweeping generalization," Hancock reports, "was clearly designed to undermine a biblically-serious stance by means of generalization and pejorative terminology, without the necessity of offering either substantive evidence or logical argument".**

She also notes that he used faulty syllogisms, such as this one: "Some people use the Bible in ignorant and irresponsible ways. My opponent uses the Bible. Therefore, my opponent uses the Bible in ignorant and irresponsible ways". Of course Spong did not present his 'argument' in this form, but when his essential 'argument' is extracted from his rhetoric, it amounts to this. Unfortunately, the gullible are often taken in by such devices.

In a discussion forum I attended, chaired by Rev Dr James Veitch in the Religious Studies Department, at Victoria University (8 October 1997), Bishop Spong accused Rev. Dr John Stott, pastor of All Souls', Langham Place, London, of "the intellectual dishonesty typical of fundamentalists".⁴¹ This charge was first publicly levelled at Stott and Regent College staff (who produced the *Crux* debate transcript) in an article published by Spong in *The Voice* (March, 1995) called "Religious dishonesty, religious hostility" (the relevant section is reproduced in full in the endnotes⁴²). Spong has persisted in his denunciation of Rev. Stott even repeating the allegations in his recent Autobiography *Here I Stand* (HarperCollins, 2000, pp. 409-11)

In *The Voice* Spong claimed that in the published version of the "public debate", his opponent "had written a *new conclusion* to the debate". His basis for the accusation of "dishonesty" made at Victoria University was that the published transcript of the debate includes an appendix containing an additional response from Stott to Spong's summing-up speech; a response which did not form part of Stott's oral presentation and "was submitted *after* the debate." In *The Voice* he accused Regent College of "compromising honesty and integrity" because they "did not discuss this change in our agreement with [him]". "The rules of the debate were clear and mutually agreed to by the participants," wrote Spong. "Both of us [my opponent and I], "had agreed that the debate could be published verbatim by the Regent College magazine known as *Crux*."

Contrary to Spong's accusations, Regent College held to its agreement and published the entire debate verbatim. Far from there being dishonesty on the part of Rev. John Stott, or the "compromising [of] honesty and integrity" on the part of Regent College, it was the Bishop who was at fault for breaching the well-known rules (they had both agreed to follow) of public debate, prohibiting the introduction of new material in a summing-up: as noted by the editor.⁴³ Neither Rev. Stott nor the editor were under any obligation to notify Spong concerning the appendix addition. It was Spong who had breached the rules of debating, not Rev. Stott. Spong made no mention of this in the discussion forum at Victoria University. In the *Voice* article he suggests that there was no foundation to Regent College's claim that he had introduced new material into his summing-up speech. This assessment is demonstrably false.⁴⁴

The editor of *Crux* noted that during his final summing-up speech, Bishop Spong, in contrast to Stott's spontaneous closing remarks delivered *first*, read from a prepared statement, a statement which did introduce a number of **new points** to his argument. According to standard debating procedures, this would be **ruled out of order**. The editor noted that Rev. Dr Stott had written and requested that a statement he submitted addressing these additional points be considered for publication, as he had felt unfairly disadvantaged by the Spong's breach of standard debating rules. "Bishop Spong read a prepared speech," wrote Stott to the editor, "which (as far as I can remember) bore little or no relation to issues which had surfaced in the dialogue".⁴⁵ The editor agreed and published both his letter and his brief response in an appendix. The Rev. Stott, a gentlemanly debater of the old school, was understandably dismayed at the breach of the "no new material" rule, one designed to prevent a summary speech being misused in an unscrupulous manner to spring new points on an opponent without proper opportunity of reply.

When a questioner (the author) at Victoria University⁴⁶ publicly challenged Spong on his 'facts' concerning his public accusation of Stott's dishonesty, indicating that he had with him the full transcript, appendix and editor's comments on the debate, which were in support of Stott's addition; the Bishop retorted:

RELIGION

Scholar goes in to bat for historical Jesus

□ Counterclaim.

Jesus was neither married, nor a mere ethicist, says Dr Tom Wright, Dean of Lichfield Cathedral.

By ANGELA OTS

WHO WAS Jesus? A few years from the 2000th anniversary of his birth, the debate is heating up. Controversial Australian theologian Barbara Thiering visited New Zealand earlier this year, and now it is the turn of Dr Tom Wright, Anglican scholar and Dean of Lichfield Cathedral in England.

A New Testament specialist who taught at Oxford for 10 years, Wright has no time for Thiering, with whom he once did a television debate and found "strange". He says no scholar can take seriously her claims that Jesus survived crucifixion, let alone was married, divorced and had three children.

Thiering says her claims are based on her finding that the Dead Sea scrolls can be used to decode the Gospels. Wright says no serious scholar believes that the scrolls mention Christianity.

Wright also challenges liberal views that turn the story of Jesus into touchy-feely ideas on how to be good. Jewish religion already told people that, he says.

"If Jesus had said only what a lot of Western Christians seem to think he said, he would have been just a big yawn-maker."

Instead, the Gospels are much more dramatic, he says. Jesus himself had believed that what he did would be "something concrete through which God would radically change the world, not a general religious idea".

So the Gospels are an account of something God did only once for humanity - sending Jesus. And Wright says there is enough evidence to accept that Jesus existed. "It would be easier to explain the Roman Empire without Julius Caesar than to say Jesus didn't exist."

Other historical figures claiming to be the Messiah who would deliver Israel from Roman oppression came and went about 15 of them between 50BC and 150AD.

What sets Jesus apart? "The thing that makes him unique is his resurrection."

Wright says the Gospels contain enough historical evidence for historians to have to take the Resurrection of Jesus



Dr Tom Wright - "history is not about absolute proof..."

seriously. As a historian, Wright says he cannot put the first century together without accepting the Gospels.

He argues that the reaction of the early Christians to Jesus' Crucifixion also supports a belief in the Resurrection. "The only sense we can make of what the early Christians were saying about Jesus is that they thought ... he had passed through death into a new territory some where beyond."

If they had believed Jesus was dead they would not have gone on teaching his ideas, he says.

Because acceptance of the Resurrection challenges materialistic analysis, Wright argues that Jesus' conception can only "be approached with some hope, not necessarily of understanding it, but of sketching out the area within which true understanding may perhaps be found."

He says no one will ever prove the Resurrection, but "history is not about absolute proof, but about weighing the balance of likelihood and unlikelihood."

The Resurrection debate, although historical, is not removed from modern concerns.

"Jesus said God would focus on a moment of pain and truth through which humanity would be liberated."

"The crunch is that from that day to this people have said 'Excuse me, but the world still seems a pretty messy place'. The task for the Church is to become reconcilers who will accomplish the reconciliation of the world to God."

■ Dr Wright's lecture, St James's Anglican Church, Lower Hutt, September 28. Registrations essential. Ph 0800 854-466.

"Are you calling me a liar?" The questioner replied, "No", and asked that he be allowed to read the editor's comments in support of Stott. At this point the Chairman, Dr James Veitch, an ordained Presbyterian minister, intervened to silence the questioner, and sought another question from the audience. (Incidentally the questioner, had only just returned from a trip to the U.K. with his family, where he had sat under the ministry of the Rev. Stott at All Souls, Langham Place, London).

The Bishop was allowed by Dr Veitch to defame the character of a senior minister of the Anglican Church, without any chance of the published editor's viewpoint of the disputed matter being presented. The Rev. John Stott is one of the most highly respected evangelical Christian leaders in the world, a man of great humility and integrity, and one whose godly character is stamped upon everything he does, including participation in scholarly debates. In *The Voice* Spong called Stott's closing debate statement "a disjointed personal attack on [his] integrity and scholarship". A plain reading of the statement (reproduced in full in the endnotes⁴⁷) does not support Spong's ill-informed accusation, nor his claim that in Rev. Stott's final address, he had personally accused Spong of being "unscrupulous". Rev. Stott was wide-ranging in his appraisal of the problem of biblical hermeneutics and sought to link it with the issue of the Lordship of Christ. He even conceded in his summing up speech that there had perhaps been

weak points in his own "handling of the Bible" in the debate.

Spong: the mirror-image of a rigid "fundamentalist"?

Oxford New Testament scholar and Anglican theologian Rev. Dr N.T. Wright has exposed the pseudo-scholarly character of Spong's approach in his book *Who Was Jesus?*⁴⁸ Wright, who is Dean of Lichfield Cathedral in England, Canon Theologian of Coventry Cathedral, and a member of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission, states:

Spong's summons to follow where he leads cannot be dismissed merely as the blind leading the blind. He sees some things - but sees them through a tiny peephole and in a glaring bright light. Dazzled, he rushes on, constructing imaginary historical words and inviting us to base our faith and life upon them. If we refuse this invitation he will, no doubt, hurl his favourite abuse-word ["fundamentalist"] at us again. But if everyone who disagrees with Spong's book turns out to be a fundamentalist, then I suppose that all the fundamentalist churches in the world would not be able to contain the new members who would suddenly arrive on their doorsteps.⁴⁹

Dr Alister McGrath, a research lecturer in theology at Oxford University and himself the author of many books on theological and historical subjects, having concluded that the historical evidence is "nil", in support of Spong's view that Jesus Christ was probably a rape victim; states:

Yet [despite nil evidence] Spong apparently expects his readers to take his views on board as the assured findings of New Testament scholarship, and reconstruct their vision of the Christian faith and life as a result. One cannot help but feel that **the reasoned argumentation we have come to expect of the Anglican tradition has here been replaced by a special pleading and petulant assertion, more characteristic of the fundamentalist groups to which Bishop Spong takes such exception. Spong constructs a fantasy world, in which his own vision of a politically correct culture leads him to impose political and social stereotypes upon the New Testament with a fierce and uncritical dogmatism and a lack of scholarly insight and responsibility...**⁵⁰

The "fundamentalism" Spong eschews is far removed from the positions and attitudes adopted by his numerous critics, including: Canon Peter Jensen

(Principal of the Anglican Moore Theological College, Sydney), Fr John McDade S.J., Editor of *The Month* and Lecturer in Systematic Theology at Heythrop College, Bishop Holloway of Edinburgh, Alister McGrath, N.T. Wright, Gordon Fee (Prof. of N.T. Regent College), Loren Wilkinson (Prof. of Interdisciplinary Studies, Regent College) and Rev. Dr John Stott. Fee, for example notes:

Spong's opposition to fundamentalism is thoroughgoing, but not always fair, mostly because he seems determined to throw the net too widely, so that the term includes people like Stott, whose own work and attitudes are as far removed from the fundamentalism that Spong eschews as is Spong himself. But "fundamentalism," it should be noted, may refer either to a set of conclusions about Scripture that are often unduly "literalistic" and, from my point of view, obscurantist, or to the *mindset* of those who hold such views. One of the primary characteristics of this mindset is the tendency to divide the whole world into two camps: "us" and "them". *Unfortunately, this is the very mindset that Spong himself adopts...*⁵¹

Spong appears to be the very mirror image of the "fundamentalist" mode of thinking he claims to deplore. His argumentative style is waged applying a "divide-and-rule" mentality. Every Christian who opposes him is consigned to the theological trash-can, labelled "pre-modern bigot," "homophobe", "sexist", and "literalizer" etc. According to his own public statements, there is absolutely no room in his world-view for the Bible to be taken literally **at any point**. On 7th July 1993 the following public question was put to him:

"How and when do you decide to take the Bible literally as opposed to applying your own interpretation as it relates to the world around you, since our world is constantly changing in terms of behaviour and values?"⁵²

Spong replied: "**I don't ever take it literally.** I take it as the story of the people of God walking through history with their God".⁵³ He holds that it is just a collection of "myths" - stories with little, if any, factual accuracy in terms of real history - carefully massaged to fit the religious sensitivities of largely Jewish writers seeking to make contact with a feeling of 'transcendence'. Such stories can neither embody or convey any moral absolutes since they are all figments of the creative imagination of the writers and reflect a culturally conditioned and "pre-modern" set of religious assumptions which are now largely redundant in our scientific and post-Darwinian 'enlightened' world.

Endnotes

- ¹ Inaugural Geering Fellowship Lectures (1997): "Christianity in the 21st Century", 12.10pm - 1.00pm, St Andrews on the Terrace, Wellington. October 7: "The Crisis of Faith - Why the Old Story No Longer Translates"; October 14: "Re-Rooting Christianity in its Jewishness"; October 21: "Opening the Christian symbols of the past to the possibilities of the future; October 28: "Speaking of Christ in the 21st Century: can we sing the Lord's Song in a strange land?"
- ² Lecture Room 306, 77 Fairlie Tce., Wellington. Public lecture hosted by Religious Studies Department, Victoria University, Wellington. Wednesday 12.10pm - 1.00pm, 8 October, 1997. This lecture was part of the Bishop's official lecture programme in Wellington. He was introduced by Professor Paul Morris, Chairman of Department, who attended the lecture together with Rev. Dr James Veitch. The author and a retired businessman Mr Bill Turkington, a senior Church elder in a Wellington church, witnessed the exchanges recorded. The transcript of part of this interchange is reproduced in this article
- ³ John S. Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 116-117
- ⁴ The first openly practising homosexual priest in the U.S. Episcopal Church to be ordained in a service which made a point of emphasising his sexual orientation, was Rev. J. Robert Williams. He died soon after of AIDS at the age of 37 years. He was ordained in All Saints Church in Hoboken, New Jersey, by Bishop John Spong, to head up a ministry called "Oasis", a ministry in Hoboken to "gay" men and women. He was forced to resign by Spong only a few weeks after his ordination because he lost his temper in a church conference in Detroit and stated publicly that Mother Theresa (d. 1997), the Noble prize-winning Catholic nun of Calcutta, should have sex, and called monogamy as unnatural as celibacy, stating that it was merely "an option". Spong could not tolerate such views as he is a strong advocate of monogamy for priests living in "same-sex love relationships". He was later rebuked at a meeting of his Church's bishops, for his ordination of Williams. Following his de-frocking Williams moved to Provincetown, Mass., joined the Western Orthodox Catholic Church and got involved in a healing ministry. He was author of the book *Just as I am: A practical guide to being out, proud and Christian* (based on a report from *United Press International*, 27/12/92). Bishop Spong also ordained an openly practising homosexual man, Barry Stopfel to the priesthood. Stopfel co-habited with his "partner" Will Leckie in a parish house belonging to St George's Episcopal Church, Maplewood, N.J. Episcopal Bishop Walter Right had earlier ordained Stopfel as a deacon in 1990 and Right was subsequently brought to trial by his church for heresy for this action. Spong was a vigorous supporter of Right during the court trial. The church court voted 7 to 1 to annul the heresy charge, formally exonerating Bishop Right. Only Bishop Andrew Fairfield dissented in the vote. The court concluded that no doctrine of the Episcopal Church, including the doctrine of marriage, was relevant to the ordination of Stopfel in 1990 by Right. Spong ordained the openly active homosexual Rev. David Norgard in September 1990 to head the Oasis Ministry to "gays". Prior to this appointment, Norgard, who is a supporter of "gay" marriages, served for six years as associate rector at the Holy Apostles Church in New York City. Frank Griswold III of Chicago, the newly elected presiding bishop of the 2.4 million member U.S. Episcopal Church, is a signatory to a statement supporting the ordination of sexually active "gays". He has urged his Church to "celebrate gay relationships". According to "Integrity", the homosexual support group within the Episcopal Church, there are about 40 Episcopal dioceses that have ordained sexually active homosexuals (based on a report from the *Associated Press*, July 19, 1997). For example, Bishop Frederick Borsch recently approved of the ordination of a non-celibate homosexual to the priesthood by his assistant minister Chester Talton. In 1979 the U.S. Episcopal Church passed a resolution against the ordination of "gay" priests, but this has been largely ignored in recent years. Spong argues that the ordination of "gays" to the priesthood is the "third revolution" after civil rights and the women's movement, that the Church should strongly support. His case for his support for the ordination of sexually active "gays" is presented in his book *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1984)
- ⁵ John S. Spong, "In defence of assisted suicide". *The Bishop's Voice: The Voice* (January/February 1996)
- ⁶ Lecture Room 306, 77 Fairlie Tce., Wellington. Public lecture hosted by Religious Studies Department, Victoria University, Wellington. Wednesday 12.10pm - 1.00pm, 8 October, 1997. This lecture was part of the Bishop's official lecture programme in Wellington. He was introduced by Professor Paul Morris, Chairman of Department, who attended the lecture together with Rev. Dr James Veitch. The author and a retired businessman Mr Bill Turkington, a senior Church elder in a Wellington church, witnessed the exchanges recorded. The transcript of part of this interchange is reproduced in this article.
- ⁷ John S. Spong, "Religious dishonesty, religious hostility" *The Voice* (March 1995).
- ⁸ "The Archbishop of Canterbury Replies to the Bishop of Newark", 24 November 1997. Sent by the Communications Department Nov 25, 1997. The Anglican Communication Office, London, UK. Sent to the automated mailing list for the worldwide Anglican Communion News Service, acns.
- ⁹ Ian Harris, "Saving the Church from itself," *Dominion* (7 October, 1997).
- ¹⁰ Centre for Continuing Education Seminar: "Jesus Christ in the New Millennium", 9.30am-4.30pm, Saturday 25 October. Law Lecture Theatre 2, Government Buildings, Lambton Quay. Fee \$50.00. Dialogue between Bishop Spong and Lloyd Geering. "... Is current secularism, coupled with the rigidity of fundamentalism spelling the death-knell of classical Christianity? Or will new forms of Christian faith emerge...?" (from CCE advertisement).
- ¹¹ "A Question of Religion", hosted by Dr Maureen Garing, National Radio, Sunday morning 12 & 26 October, 1997. Interview with Bishop Spong by Rev. Dr James Veitch, Senior Lecturer, Religious Studies Department, Victoria University.
- ¹² See endnote 6.
- ¹³ Midrash (exposition). Rabbinic commentary on the Bible, clarifying legal points or bringing out lessons by literary devices: story, parable, legends. The word Midrash is also applied to the vast literature to which this gave rise. It derives from a Hebrew root meaning: to inquire, study, investigate," and (by extension) "to preach." See *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*, ed. Geoffrey Wigoder (N.Y.: Macmillan; London: Collier Macmillan, 1989), 487. Midrash consists of an anthology and compilation of homilies, consisting of both biblical exegesis and sermons delivered in public as well as aggadot and halakhot and forming a running aggadic commentary on specific books of the Bible. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* Vol. 11 (Lek-Mil) (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing Hs. Ltd., 1971), 1507-1508. By the last century BCE the word Midrash stands for oral interpretation, that is, interpretation of the Torah, the Law of Moses. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* ed. Mircea Eliade, Vol. 9 (N.Y.: Macmillan/London: Collier Macmillan, 1978), 509.
- ¹⁴Lk. 23:34 NASB.
- ¹⁵Mt. 5:11; 5:44. Cf. Mat. 6:12; 1 Cor. 4:12.

- ¹⁶Apostle's creed. The 1600-year-old Nicene Creed states: "... And was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, And rose on the third day according to the Scriptures."
- ¹⁷ Tape transcript. October 12. See endnote 11.
- ¹⁸ See <http://www.spiritualchallenge.com/reactions.html>
- ¹⁹ Charles Darwin died at the age of seventy-three. His funeral took place on 26 April 1882, and among the group of ten distinguished pallbearers were his old friends Joseph Hooker, Thomas H. Huxley, Alfred R. Wallace and John Lubbock. Instead of being buried in the Anglican churchyard in the village of Downe, he was buried, by request of a parliamentary petition, in Westminster Abbey, where he lies today near the tomb of Sir Isaac Newton. See John Bowlbey, *Charles Darwin, A New Biography*, (1st publ. Hutchinson, 1990; London: Pimlico, 1991), 442; Ian T. Taylor, *In the Minds of Men: Darwin and the New World Order* (Toronto: TFE Publishing, 1992 3rd edition), 134-136.
- ²⁰ See endnote 19.
- ²¹ From tape transcript. Interview with Bishop Spong by Dr Brian Edwards. Saturday morning, 4 October, 1997. National radio.
- ²² The book of Acts does not present it as a theophany which is a manifestation or appearance of a deity or of the gods to man, which doesn't acknowledge any essential humanity in the manifested form. C.H. Dodd states in his book *The Authority of the Bible* (Great Britain: Collins, Fontana Books, rev. 1960), 220: "If Jesus Christ was a real Person - if, in theological terms, there was a true incarnation and not a mere theophany in human form, - then He was an individual living under historical conditions and limitations.
- ²³ Tape transcript. See endnote 21.
- ²⁴ See Mt. 28:8-10; Lk. 24:9-12; Jn. 20:1-3.
- ²⁵ See endnote 9.
- ²⁶ "A Dialogue on Christian Sexual Ethics" between Rev. Dr John R.W. Stott and Bishop John S. Spong. *Crux* Vol. XXIX, No. 3 (September 1993):18-31. See p. 28. *Crux* is the journal of Regent College, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. The dialogue was moderated by Dr Maxine Hancock of Edmonton.
- ²⁷ Spong, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism*, 27.
- ²⁸ Spong, *Rescuing the Bible*, 155.
- ²⁹ Spong, *Rescuing the Bible*, 3-5,79,133,217.
- ³⁰ See endnote 21.
- ³¹ "A Dialogue on Christian Sexual Ethics". See endnote 26.
- ³² "A Dialogue on Christian Sexual Ethics," 28.
- ³³ Spong, "Religious dishonesty, religious hostility," The evangelical arm of the Episcopal Church is called Episcopalians United.
- ³⁴ See endnote 21.
- ³⁵ Tape transcript, October 12. See endnote 11.
- ³⁶ John S. Spong, "On Tour with Liberating the Gospels", The Bishop's Voice, *The Voice* (December 1996).
- ³⁷ Raymond Brown is an American Roman Catholic scholar whose major book *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977) is the standard work on the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke.
- ³⁸ Gerald O'Collins, "What of the Spong Song?" Review of Resurrection: Myth or Reality by Bishop Spong. *Wel-com* No. 101 (September, 1994).
- ³⁹ Spong, "Religious dishonesty..." See endnote 7
- ⁴⁰ "Faculty Forum" in which three scholars offer their reflections on the dialogue on "Christian sexual ethics" between Rev. Dr John Stott and Bishop John S. Spong. *Crux* Vol. XXIX, No. 4. (December 1993), 28-39. See pp. 28-34.
- ⁴¹ Comment made in question-and-answer session following lunchtime lecture Wednesday 8 October, 1997. Session chaired by Rev. Dr James Veitch in Religious Studies Department. See endnote 6.
- ⁴² Spong, "Religious dishonesty...": "A bit later in the summer of 1993, I agreed to engage in a public debate, hosted by the Anglican Cathedral in Vancouver, with a leading English evangelical [Rev. Dr John Stott]. Again the rules of the debate were clear and mutually agreed to by the participants. Each of us was to give an opening statement. Each could respond briefly to the other's opening remarks. Then questions from the floor could be directed to each of us. Finally we were to give a closing statement. I considered an expected audience of 1500 to be an important forum in which to present my ideas, and so had prepared my opening and closing statements with great care. When my opponent came to his closing statement, he did not appear to be prepared and much of his statement ended up being a disjointed personal attack on my integrity and scholarship. Both of us had agreed that the debate could be published verbatim by the Regent College magazine known as *Crux*. Imagine my surprise when I received that publication and discovered that my opponent had written a new conclusion to the debate. He and Regent College sought to justify this abandonment of our agreement by suggesting that in my closing statement I had brought up new ideas to which my opponent had not had an opportunity to respond. They did not discuss this change in our agreement with me and, in this exercise of trying to win public relations points, both my opponent and Regent College compromised honesty and integrity."
- ⁴³ See endnote 26.
- ⁴⁴ Among other things, Spong introduced new arguments on "Christian sexual ethics" relating to the "lowered age of puberty" in modern society "over the last 500 years" and the raising of the age of marriage for educated women. These had acted together, he said, to separate puberty and marriage in Western civilization by ten to fifteen years putting "enormous pressure on the values of the middle ages." In other words its time to scrap traditional Christian morality, he argued. His new accusations against the Church such as its alleged control of its people by a message of "guilt" and its moral bankruptcy were all new. He raised for the first time the question of whether homosexuality is a sickness, sinful, or an abnormality [genetically inherited]. He accused heterosexual people for standing in judgement on homosexuals. "A Dialogue on Christian Sexual Ethics", 30. See endnote 26.
- ⁴⁵ "A Dialogue...", 30.
- ⁴⁶ Question-and-answer session, 8 October. See endnote 6.
- ⁴⁷ See endnote 26. Rev. John Stott's summary remarks in full: "I find it difficult to gather my thoughts after trying to concentrate on the questions that have been put to us. There are so many things that Bishop Spong has said with which I agree, but there are others with which I feel in very profound disagreement. And I am really, I suppose, worried more than anything else, apart from the Lordship of Christ, about this question of the handling of the Bible. It may be that the only way forward for us is in seeking to develop hermeneutical principles, principles of biblical interpretation, with which both of us can agree. We have accused one another of biblical selectivity, of choosing the verses that support our point of view, and neglecting those that don't. We, perhaps to some extent, have both done that. Many people over the years have come to me and have said, "Well, you can make the Bible teach anything you like," to which nowadays I always respond, "You're quite right, you can, you can make the Bible teach

anything you like if you are unscrupulous enough!" But if you are scrupulous in your use of proper principles of the biblical interpretation, far from manipulating and controlling Scripture, you'll find that Christ as Lord controls you, your thinking and your living, through the Scriptures. That's, I think, the area that we need to develop." Bishop Spong's reply began: "I do not plead 'guilty' to being unscrupulous, and I state very clearly that I acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ..." (p. 29).

⁴⁸ N.T. Wright, *Who was Jesus?* (1st publ. 1992; SPCK: 1995, 5th impression). See Chapter 4 "John Spong: The Bishop and the Birth", pp. 65-92.

⁴⁹ Wright, *Who was Jesus?*, 91-92.

⁵⁰ Alistair McGrath, "Bishop John Spong and the state of Anglican Theology," *Affirm*, (Winter 1994), 29. Extract reprinted from McGrath's work *The Renewal of Anglicanism*.

⁵¹ "Faculty Forum", 35. See endnote 40.

⁵² "A Dialogue on Christian Sexual Ethics," 28. See endnote 24. Question from Norman K. Flynn directed to Dr Spong.

⁵³ "A Dialogue..."

'No point' if Jesus not divine

By BOB SHAW

If Jesus was just a wise teacher then there is no point to Christianity, says Dr David Gooding, a world expert on the Greek Old Testament.

Modernist scholars who used reason as the sole judge of the Bible, and also challenged the divinity of Jesus Christ, based their deductions on a materialistic philosophy, he said.

"They want to be Christian but why? If Jesus is just a wise teacher and not the son of God there is no point in Christianity and no salvation."

Dr Gooding, who has been lecturing in Wellington on how the New Testament uses the Old Testament, was, until his retirement, Professor of Classics at Queen's University, Belfast. He has been Grinfield Lecturer in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) at the University of Oxford and had a personal chair created for him as Professor of Biblical Greek at Queen's University.

He said modernist thought had substituted reason for faith when reason should be used to understand God's revelation which was received through faith. As Einstein had said, science and religion both depended on faith.

To say that the blind forces of evolution, rather than God, created reason meant that one day those same blind forces would destroy reason, Dr Gooding said.



BIBLE EXPERT — Dr David Gooding.

Picture: JOHN NICHOLSON

The Evening Post, Saturday June 6, 1998, p. 25

Redefining God In Man's Image (II)

A Critique of Bishop John Spong's Revised 'Christianity'

by David H. Lane M.Sc. (Hons.), Dip.Tchg.

Bishop John Spong: Pioneer of a "new morality"?

The Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong DD, recently retired Episcopalian Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, and his adherents ("Spongites") see themselves as the arbiters of a new 'morality' ("Spongism") unshackled by the rigid constraints of traditional Christianity. He accuses "fundamentalist" and evangelical Christians of making "imperialistic and exclusive claims" for one "version of the truth" which he says is "idolatrous". Accepting the Bible as literally true in matters of moral instruction is not only morally repugnant to Spong, it is naive, dangerous, intellectually dishonest, insulting to the practising "gay" and lesbian priests he has ordained and whose cause he succours, detrimental to the feminism he champions, destructive to the stability of our pluralistic society, but more importantly the major threat to the survival of the Christian church. The latter 'concern' for the demise of the Church is his 'real motivation', so we are told, for vigorously championing causes that have left traditionalists in the churches reeling.

"Saving the church from itself" was the headline of an article in the Dominion on Bishop Spong by Ian Harris, which presented him as a saviour of the Church:

For the future Bishop Spong predicts that the churches will continue to decline till they realise they have to change. The biggest obstacle to change is people's insecurity about their religious convictions, so they literalise their beliefs and cling to them, afraid that if they let go they will find nothing there.

"That's not faith but lack of faith," he says. "Christianity gives the courage to embrace the reality that we will always be insecure." He wants the church to legitimise and explore the questions rather than claim to give black-and-white answers.¹

There are no absolutes, proclaims Spong, for all truth is relative. He would never dare to give black-and-white answers on matters of faith and morals, so he says - "read my lips". However, "Spongism" collapses since, if all truth is relative, this claim itself is relative, but is presented as an absolute truth. The full list of new moral absolutes embodied in Spong's creed are:

- there are absolutely no moral absolutes.
- "we will always be insecure" when it comes to finding answers about "ultimate questions" (e.g. whether or not there is life after death etc.).
- there is a "reality" to "embrace" by "faith" (Spong calls it "a divine presence in the heart of life").

- there is such a thing as true "faith" which enables us to "embrace" a "divine presence". (The sceptic would call it wishful thinking or "pie-in-the-sky").
- Spong's version of Christian "faith" is superior to the traditional one in providing people with "the courage to embrace the reality that we will always be insecure". Traditional faith is invalid, outmoded and utterly irrelevant to the needs of modern man.

Anyone and everyone who disagrees with any of these 'absolutes' is not only wrong according to Spong, they are bigoted, naïve, pre-modern in outlook etc. etc. Using Spong's own argument, each of these 'absolutes' may be held to be only bald assertions based on a particular set of presuppositions. One of his 'absolutes' has become a central dogma, namely rigid adherence to the bankrupt philosophy of moral relativism. Spong is quoted in the Dominion article as stating:

"I am totally opposed to predatory sex, prostitution, bath-house lovers, whether by homosexuals or heterosexuals. These things dehumanise sex, whereas I believe sex calls us into a higher humanity".²

Spong is correct. But, applying his own critique of morality, we may ask: who says these activities "dehumanise sex"? Isn't it from a position of perceived moral superiority that he launches such an attack on the promiscuous? He certainly suggests that they are not part of the "higher humanity" he sees himself part of, as a happily married monogamous Bishop. Surely he is only trying to impose his bigoted perception of what is "humanising" activity in terms of sexual behaviour, on others. Advocates of promiscuity, and there are many in our society who would call themselves 'Christian', might find such a statement from the Bishop as a proof that he still wears the scars of his "mental lobotomy". Surely he has failed to extricate himself from the "fundamentalist" straight-jacket he wore so well in his younger days.

The point is that Spong has no authoritative basis for insisting or even exhorting others to follow a moral code he sees as superior, more human, or even more satisfying than others, since he has jettisoned all moral absolutes based on a higher moral authority than a human one, and embraced moral relativism. Since nothing is ultimately secure in his worldview, it is pointless to appeal to values which are deemed acceptable at a given point of time by a given group of people, as the basis for a new 'morality' ("Spongism").

For many, the closest thing to paradise on earth would be a world where one's wildest promiscuous sexual fantasies could be physically fulfilled with no restrictions whatsoever. For many of these and others,

the restrictions of a monogamous sexual physical relationship would be the closest thing to hell on Earth. If the truths about the real nature and meaning of marriage, sex and human relationships are in fact open to revision in every generation and subject to the prevailing philosophies of the day, then what is the point of the Bishop trying to seize the moral high ground by talking of a "higher humanity". Such terms are only hollow and vacuous in a world devoid of a transcendent truth which is independent of the corrupting influences of those who would seek to massage revealed moral codes to suit their own liberal-minded predilections.

What is "Fundamentalism", the Bishop's favourite swear-word?

So what is the true meaning of the term "fundamentalism", a term which Spong uses so often to put down his opponents? Paul Enns in the *Moody Handbook of Theology* defines the term:

Historically, fundamentalism has been used to identify one holding to the five fundamentals of the faith adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the USA in 1910. The five fundamentals were the miracles of Christ, the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, and the inspiration of Scripture.³

The formulation of these "fundamentals" goes back to a conference held in North America in 1895. Later between 1910 and 1915 they were expounded in a series of 12 volumes called *The Fundamentals*. Most historians recognise that the term "fundamentalist" and "fundamentalism" have an important link with these publications. The "fundamentalist" movement arose in part as an attempt to stem the tide of theological liberalism that began to influence the churches at the end of the 19th century with the spread of an excessive and doctrinaire "Higher Criticism" of the Scriptures.

Each of the five "fundamentals" has been a rallying point for Spong's attack on Christianity. For example, in *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (1991) he attacks the divine inspiration of Scripture. In *Born of a Woman* (1992) he attacks the Virgin Birth (more correctly expressed - the Virginal conception) of Christ and in *Resurrection:*

Myth or Reality (1994) he attacks the doctrine of the bodily Resurrection and bodily Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ.

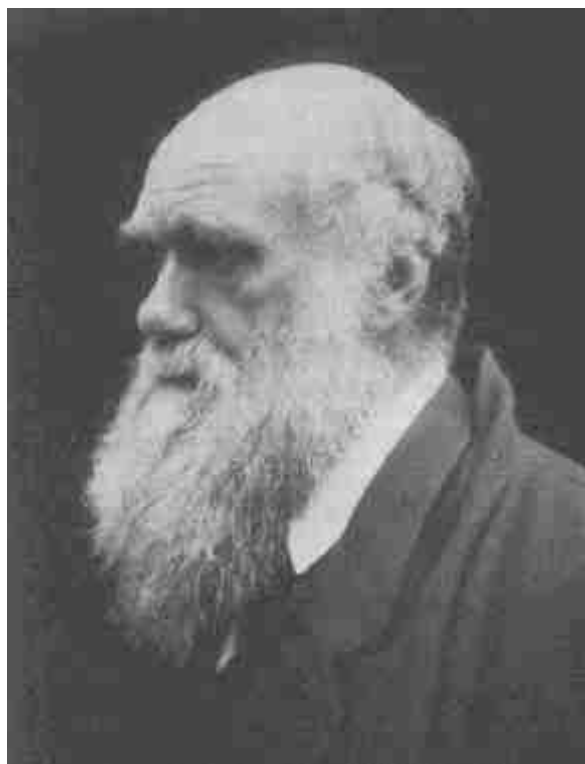
The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (1994) lists five doctrines as central to fundamentalism:

(1) verbal inspiration of Scripture, (2) the divinity of Jesus Christ, (3) the Virgin Birth, (4) the substitutionary theory of Christ's atonement, (5) the physical and bodily return of Christ. Again these are all targets for attack for Bishop Spong. He caricatures all fundamentalists as insisting on narrow literalistic interpretations of Scripture at all points and this is quite incorrect. While it is true that some extreme elements of the movement later took on an over-literalistic approach, the emphasis has always been towards upholding the integrity of the Word of God as an authoritative and truthful account of all events recorded.

Questionable scholarship and sophistry: Galileo 'condemned to death' and the 'plot' to kill Darwin

Let us see from Bishop Spong's recent statements how he distorts history and the term "fundamentalist" to advance his own case against traditional Christian belief. He was interviewed by Mike Hosking on TV One (2 October, 1997) and claimed that it is part of the "fundamentalist" mentality to seek the death of champions of free scientific enquiry whose discoveries are seen to challenge Church dogma:

"... it's the fundamentalist approach that wanted to put Galileo to death for suggesting the sun rotated around the earth. They wanted to put Darwin out of life for suggesting that evolution was true instead of the seven-day creation story."⁴



Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

Spong's Wellington agent Liz Robinson and the producer of the programme were informed of the host of errors of fact and distortions made by the Bishop in this and other public statements.⁵ Robinson, clearly embarrassed by the Bishop's ability to cram three grossly unscholarly 'howlers' into two sentences, at first tried to deny that Spong had said these things. Confronted with the evidence of videotape and transcript, she weakly pleaded 'slips of the tongue'. To her credit, she was at least aware, as the Bishop was not, that the Church authorities never sought the death sentence for Galileo, nor did "fundamentalists" seek to put Darwin to death. There is no historical evidence of any attempt, plan, or desire by "fundamentalist" - minded

Church authorities or adherents to kill Charles Darwin ("put Darwin out of life") before or after the publication of his major work *The Origin of Species* in 1859. Indeed, it has often been remarked by scholars that Darwin's work was in fact uncritically acclaimed by

leading clergy and critically contested by most scientific authorities of his day.

Spong's self-identification with these two luminaries – Darwin and Galileo – in his writings and lecture material, is so strong that he uses them (together with Freud and Copernicus) like trump cards to try and 'prove' his case that traditional Christian faith is opposed to reason, science and progress.

Whether the errors highlighted, which remained uncorrected, were 'slips of the tongue' or not, it remains a fact that errors of this nature and sophistry are hallmarks of this Bishop who prides himself in being an effective and gifted "communicator of scholarship".

The Galileo Affair: A Case Study

Any serious student of science knows that the Italian scientist and philosopher Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), widely regarded as the Father of Modern Science, championed the Copernican view⁶ that the Earth went around the sun (not the opposite, as claimed by John Spong). Galileo thereby challenged the Ptolemaic theoretical system - the dominant Earth-centred or geocentric system/theory of the day (first developed by Ptolemy of Alexandria [AD 85-165]). The latter theory corresponded to the worldview advanced in the 4th century by Aristotle, whose ideas became predominant in the 16th century. The Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus elaborated his alternative theoretical system in the first half of the 16th century. It is also referred to as the Pythagorean system after the ancient Greek pre-Socratic Pythagoras - one of the earliest thinkers (6th century BC) to advance the idea in a general way.

In a lecture to the "Sea of Faith"/Ephesus group (October 12)⁷ Spong made explicit and unambiguous his erroneous claim that "fundamentalists ... wanted to put Galileo to death", by stating: "Galileo was condemned to death by the Church for heresy." Like Emeritus Professor Lloyd Geering and Rev. Dr James Veitch⁸, he used the "Galileo affair" to condemn the Church outright for its bigotry and intransigence - a "flat Earth mentality" he said, which lay at the very heart of present day fundamentalism and evangelical Christianity. **He never bothered to inform his audience that the Bible does not teach a flat Earth, nor that the Church has never officially taught such a view.** His line of 'reasoned' attack was empty and pompous rhetoric posing as scholarship.

In his book *Inventing the Flat Earth*, Professor Jeffrey Burton Russell has shown that the sphericity of the globe was known to educated people throughout the Middle Ages, and that he can find only five obscure writers in the first 1500 years of the Christian era who seem to have denied that the

Earth was a globe. He documents a large number of writers, including Thomas Aquinas, who affirmed the Earth's sphericity.⁹ Professor Pawel Rybicki, in his book *True History of Polish Science*, points out that eminent scholars of the late Middle Ages (Buridanus, Oresmius) had also considered the idea of a moving spherical Earth. However, the idea had not been transformed into a theory, for it was discarded as being in disagreement with the data from common experience and the requirements of common sense. Thus Ptolemy's theory prevailed as the basic view which took the Earth to be the immovable centre of the universe.

The Galileo affair remains the cause célèbre par excellence for reflecting on the science-religion relationship. This is in part because the incident was the first to illustrate the problem as it exists today, in the sense that the facts of the case really do show all the outward indications of a clash between a symbol of science and a symbol of religion. Its classic relevance to the same problem is also in part due to the impression which the trial of Galileo made on subsequent history. In fact, the most common interpretation of the event continues to be presented in terms of what it shows about the relationship between science and religion.¹⁰ The event is also seen by many scholars as a microcosm of the Scientific Revolution itself and scientific investigation in general, and therefore is studied primarily for what it tells us about the nature of scientific knowledge per se and how it develops.¹¹ It



Galileo Galilei (1564-1642)

raised questions about the truth of nature and the nature of truth. One key epistemological issue it raised was the question of whether or not physical truth has to be directly observable, or whether any significant phenomenon (e.g. earth's motion) can be true even though our senses cannot detect it, but can detect only its effects (even today earth's motion cannot be directly seen by an observer on earth).

One of the most common myths widely held about the Galileo affair is that he was condemned by the Catholic Church for having discovered the truth that the earth moves around the sun. Now since to condemn a person for such a reason can only be the result of ignorance and narrow-mindedness, this is

also the myth which is used to 'justify' the incompatibility between science and religion. Such a thesis concerning the Galileo affair is erroneous, misleading, and simplistic, and yet it continues to circulate.¹² A formulation of the myth can be found in Albert Einstein's foreword to the standard English translation of Galileo's *Dialogue*.¹³

Galileo was officially condemned by the Roman Church at the conclusion of a trial which began in 1633 and included a series of Inquisition proceedings (1615-1616). According to the trial document¹⁴ he was condemned because he was "vehemently suspected of heresy: namely, of having believed and held the

[Copernican] doctrine - which [was] false and contrary to sacred and divine Scripture.”¹⁵ He was never condemned to death or charged with formal heresy.¹⁶ The charge “vehemently suspected of heresy” meant that his intentions in publishing views supporting Copernicanism were condemned as wrong. Galileo was never “excommunicated” by the Church as Spong claims in his book *Into the Whirlwind* (p. 13) and *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (p. 9). Such massive blunders, and there are many others, are clear evidence that Spong has little real understanding of one of the most important controversies in the history of science. He is no serious scholar but rather a propagandist who often distorts the facts of history for his own ends.

Spong even has the gall to claim that Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) was “excommunicated”

(*Whirlwind*, p. 13) by the Church for his scientific theory, a claim which is so wide of the mark that it is laughable. In his famous book *De Revolutionibus Orbium Caelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*) first published in Nuremberg in 1543, in which he most comprehensively sets out his heliocentric theory, Copernicus included a preface in the form of an epistolary dedication to Pope Paul III (1534-1549), a known scholar and lover of astronomy. By this act Copernicus hoped to free himself and his work of any possible suspicions of heresy.

Two cardinals subsidised the work¹⁷ and neither Pope Paul III nor any of the nine popes that followed (from 1549-1591), took exception to the Copernican doctrine.¹⁸ News of the Copernican theories had reached the Papal Court as early as 1533 when Pope Clement VII (1523-34) was informed about “the Copernican theory of the motion of the earth”. **One wonders how Copernicus could have been excommunicated by the Church for his theory presented in *De Revolutionibus*, as Spong claims, when he received his first copy of the published work on May 24, 1543, and then in Frombork, on the same day, died aged seventy years.** The Roman Church must have moved extremely fast in matters of Church discipline in those days!

The famous mathematician-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead notes: “... the worst that happened to men of science was that Galileo suffered an honourable detention and a mild reproof before dying peacefully in his bed”.¹⁹ In his book *The Sleepwalkers* (1959) Arthur Koestler concludes:

The gist of the matter is that Galileo could not be legally convicted without completely destroying him - which was not the intention of the Pope or the Holy Office. Instead, they resorted to a legally shaky concoction. The intention was, clearly, to treat the famous scholar with

consideration and leniency, but at the same time to hurt his pride, to prove that not even a Galileo was allowed to mock Jesuits, Dominicans, Pope, and the Holy Office; and lastly, to prove that, in spite of his pose as a fearless crusader, he was not of the stuff of which martyrs are made.

The only real penalty inflicted on Galileo was that he had to abjure his conviction [of the truth of Copernican system].²⁰

In view of his repeated formal denials before the ecclesiastical authorities in 1616 and 1633 (the latter in

reference to his 1632 work *The Dialogue*²¹) that he did not support Copernican doctrine, and the alleged imposition of an absolute injunction upon him in 1616 by the Commissary of the Holy Office to abandon the doctrine and refrain from teaching it; Galileo was judged in 1633 as having violated his solemn commitments not “to hold, to teach, or defend it in any way whatsoever”.

The Commissary was Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, the most influential and highly respected theologian and churchman of the time, with whom Galileo was on very good terms, despite their philosophical and scientific differences. The exact content, form, and circumstances of the injunction are not completely known, but they are extremely complex and subject to great controversy. Furthermore, the



Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543)
Refuted Ptolemy's geocentric system and proposed the heliocentric system we accept today.

occurrence and propriety of the later Inquisition proceedings of 1633 hinge on the exact nature of this warning. A key fact is that Bellarmine reported back to the Inquisition that he had warned Galileo to refrain from propagating the geokinetic thesis and abandon it, and that Galileo had promised to obey.²²

On February 24, 1616 a committee of eleven consultants to the Inquisition had reported unanimously that Copernicanism was philosophically and scientifically untenable and theologically heretical. Much of the tragedy of the Galileo affair stems from this opinion, which even Catholic apologists seldom if ever defend.²³ The investigation had been prompted by (1) a written complaint against Galileo filed with the Roman Inquisition in February 1615 by a Dominican named Niccolo Lorini, and (2) a charge of “suspicion of heresy” against Galileo, made in person to the Inquisition in March 1615 by a Dominican friar named Tommaso Caccini. Lorini’s complaint was accompanied by a letter written by Galileo to Benedetto Castelli, in which he sets out to show that attempts to prove a conclusion (the geostatic thesis) based on a premise of biblical objections, is a non sequitur, since the Bible is only authoritative in questions of faith and morals, not scientific questions.²⁴ This personal letter written to his friend and follower who had succeeded him in the chair of mathematics at the University of Pisa, was used by Lorini as incriminating evidence.²⁵

The Inquisition appears to have had some misgivings about the opinion of the committee of eleven consultants, for it issued no formal condemnation of Galileo. Instead there was a private warning given to him by Cardinal Bellarmine as noted. In March 1616 a public decree was issued by the Congregation of the Index,²⁶ the department of the Church in charge of book censorship. First, it stated that the doctrine of the earth's motion is false, contrary to the Bible, and a threat to Catholicism. Second it condemned and prohibited a book written by a Neapolitan friar, Paolo Antonio Foscarini, which argued that the earth's motion was compatible with the Bible. Third, it suspended circulation of Copernicus's book, pending correction and revision. Fourth, the decree ordered analogous censures for analogous books. It is noteworthy that Galileo was not mentioned at all.²⁷

Although Catholics, including Galileo, were obliged to obey the decree, it did not carry the weight and generality of pronouncements which define the Catholic faith, just as even an Inquisition decree did not carry the authority of an official papal decree or a decree issued by a sacred council, such as the Council of Trent (1545-1563). However, the rather confusing nature of the decree, taken together with Bellarmine's private warning to him, led Galileo to seek an audience with Pope Paul V (1605-21) to try and gain some reassurance from him of

where he stood with the Church. It appears from Galileo's correspondence that he was warmly received and reassured. However, about this time he received letters from friends indicating that rumours were abroad that he had been personally put on trial, condemned, forced to recant, and given appropriate penalties by the Inquisition. Having shown these letters to Cardinal Bellarmine, Galileo sought from him a certificate documenting what had happened and how Galileo was affected. The document written by the most authoritative churchman of his time declared the following: Galileo had been neither tried nor otherwise condemned; rather, he had personally been notified of the decree of the Index and told that in view of this decree he could no longer hold or defend the geokinetic thesis. It did not state that Galileo was unable to discuss the geokinetic thesis as a hypothesis.

At this time The Congregation of the Index only called the Copernican doctrine "false and totally opposed to Scripture" but not formally heretical. As Sols and Camacho conclude: "On the theological level the error of the ecclesiastics did not consist in formally declaring Copernicanism heretical, since ... this was emended in the official document. The error here consisted rather in calling false a doctrine that had simply not been proved, and in calling 'totally opposed to Scripture' an opinion which was opposed only to

certain passages of the Bible given a strictly literal interpretation. The opinion is not really opposed to Scripture and turns on something purely scientific."²⁸

In 1623 Pope Paul V died and was replaced by Cardinal Maffeo Barberini who was elected Pope Urban VIII. Urban was a well-educated Florentine, and in 1616 he had been instrumental in preventing the direct condemnation of Galileo and the formal condemnation of Copernicanism as a heresy. He was a great admirer of Galileo and appears to have interpreted the decree of the Index to mean that the earth's motion was a dangerous doctrine whose study and discussion required special care and vigilance. Furthermore, he thought that the theory could never be proved to be necessarily true.²⁹

Two events in particular were to turn the Pope against Galileo. The first was Galileo's book *Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems, Ptolemaic and Copernican*, published in Florence in February 1632. The second was the discovery of a document in the file of the Inquisition proceedings (1615-1616) which read as a report of what took place when Cardinal Bellarmine (d. 1621), in the name of the Inquisition, gave Galileo the private warning to abandon his geokinetic views. The document stated that in February 1616 Galileo had not only been ordered to stop holding the geokinetic thesis but that he had been prohibited from discussing it in any way whatsoever, either orally or in

writing. In other words, this document states that Galileo had been given a special injunction, above and beyond what bound Catholics in general. Under different circumstances the fact that the document did not bear Galileo's signature, would have ruled it out as having no legal validity. However, so many difficulties were posed by the contents of his *Dialogue*, which presented the geokinetic thesis in a favourable light, that Galileo was swept up in maelstrom of serious accusations, malicious slanders, and accumulating complaints directed at him.

In the summer of 1632 sales of the *Dialogue* were stopped, unsold copies were confiscated, and a special commission was appointed by the Pope to investigate the matter. In an unusual step the Pope chose not to send the case to the Inquisition in the first instance. A three-member panel issued a report in September 1632 and on the strength of this the pope felt he had no option but to refer the case to the Inquisition. So Galileo was summoned to Rome to stand trial.

In 1633 he faced three formal hearings before the Inquisition and answered various questions about the *Dialogue* of 1632 and the events of 1616. He admitted having been given a warning by Cardinal Bellarmine in February 1616 and referred to this as an oral warning that the geocentric theory could be neither held nor



defended but only discussed hypothetically. He denied having been issued with a special injunction not to discuss the earth's motion in any way whatsoever, and produced Bellarmine's certificate as supporting evidence. He also denied ignoring Bellarmine's warning when he omitted to inform the publisher of the restrictions imposed on him regarding discussion of the Copernican theory. He justified the omission by responding that he was not obligated to warn the publisher, because the book did not hold or defend the earth's motion; rather it demonstrated that the arguments in its favour were not conclusive, and thus it did not violate Bellarmine's warning as he had given it to him.

Prior to the second interrogation the Inquisition asked three consultants to determine whether or not Galileo's *Dialogue* held or defended the geokinetic theory. In separate reports all three concluded that the book clearly defended it and came close to holding it. What we would call today an out-of-court settlement was arranged at this point. Galileo agreed to plead guilty to the lesser charge of having inadvertently transgressed the order not to defend Copernicanism, in exchange for the prosecutors agreeing not to press the most serious charge of having violated the special injunction. At the second hearing he conceded that after having carefully re-read his book, he was surprised to find that the reader may well have gained the impression that he had sought to defend the geokinetic theory, even though this had not been his intention. To explain this aberration he blamed his own vanity, literary flamboyance, and excessive desire to appear clever by making the weaker side (the geokinetic thesis, in the view of his accusers) look stronger. He expressed his deep sorrow for this transgression and said he was willing to make amends. At the third and final hearing he presented his entire case, repeated his admission of wrongdoing together with his denial of malicious intent, and added a plea for clemency. A report on Galileo was then compiled by the Inquisition, summarising events from 1615 to Galileo's third deposition in 1633.

Pope Urban VIII (1623-44) read the report but his doubts remained as to Galileo's intentions. On June 16 1633 he directed Galileo to be interrogated under verbal threat of torture (a standard Inquisition practice at the time) in order to determine his intention. The pope insisted that even if Galileo's intention was found to be pure, he had to make a public abjuration and had to be held under formal arrest at the pleasure of the Inquisition, and his book banned. Under formal threat Galileo denied any malicious intention and showed his readiness to die rather than admit that. He recited his formal abjuration at a public ceremony in the convent of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome on 22 June 1633. Two distinct heretical views were mentioned by the Inquisition in the formal sentence, (1) the cosmological thesis that the earth rotates daily on its axis and circles the sun once a year, and (2) the methodological principle that one may believe and defend as probable a thesis contrary to the Bible. Interestingly, only seven of the ten cardinal-inquisitors signed the sentence.

All the actions of the Inquisition were disciplinary, not dogmatic. It was not a matter of Church doctrine that the Earth did not move. As Pietro Redondi states: "This heresy was inquisitorial - that is, disciplinary, not theological or doctrinal - both according to the words of the manuals of criminal heresiology of the period and as

reported by the most serious juridical scholars of the affair." In modern terms we would refer to it as condemnation for "high treason".³⁰ Galileo was accused of lying and perjuring himself before the judges by pretending that he had written his *Dialogue* in refutation of Copernicus, that he had 'neither maintained nor defended the opinion that the Earth moves' and so forth. The pope was furious that Galileo had requested a licence to publish his *Dialogue* without, however, intimating to those who granted him this licence that he had been commanded not "to hold, to teach, or defend" the Copernican doctrine "in any way whatever". His accusers concluded that the "licence to print" had been "artfully and cunningly extorted ... by not notifying the censor of the command imposed upon him." They attributed his motive, not to "malice", but rather "vainglorious ambition".³¹ The *Dialogue* was the only one of his works incriminated for the infraction of an injunction.³²

One anti-Galilean myth maintains that Galileo deserved condemnation because his 1632 book violated not only various ecclesiastical norms but also various rules of scientific methodology and logical reasoning. He is portrayed by some scholars as a master of cunning and knavery, and responsible for a host of misdeeds. For example, as noted, he has been accused of using cunning to circumvent the injunction in order to obtain a licence to publish the *Dialogue*. On the contrary, he obtained written permission to print the book - first from the proper Church officials in Rome (when the plan was to publish the book there) and then from the proper officials in Florence (when a number of circumstances dictated that the book be printed in the Tuscan capital).

It is true that a theological case against Galileo was mounted, but this drama was orchestrated largely by Aristotelian academics in the universities, well before the judgement made by the Holy Office in 1633. As Koestler points out:

... the sun-centred universe had never been officially declared a heresy, since neither the opinion of the Qualifiers, nor the decree of the Congregation of 1616, had been confirmed by infallible pronouncement ex cathedra or by Ecumenic Council. Had not Urban himself said that the Copernican opinion 'was not heretical but merely reckless'?³³

The Biblical account of the miracle of the sun standing still so Israel under Joshua could extend the battle and defeat their enemies the Amorites, was used by some opponents of the Copernican system to attack Galileo's case for a moving Earth.³⁴ However, the account, like the passage in Ecclesiastes. 1:5 (also used to argue against earth's motion) which refers to the sun "rising and setting and hastening to the place from which it arose"; merely uses convenient phenomenological language (language of appearances) in reference to the 'movement' of the sun across the sky. Modern people, including those in "the Academy," regularly use such language when they speak of a "sunset" and "sunrise".

While it is true that the Church fathers of the Middle Ages thought that these passage and verses such as Psalms 19:6, 93:1 and 104:5 supported Ptolemy's views, their error only highlights the problem of biblical hermeneutics.³⁵ Phrases and terms such the "four

corners of the Earth"³⁶ and Earth's "cornerstone"³⁷ are clearly figurative and don't demand or even suggest a strictly literal interpretation. Others which refer to the "circle of the Earth" (Is. 40:22) and the Earth as "hanging on nothing" (Job 26:7) have been interpreted by some scholars more literally as supporting a modern understanding of our Earth as a globe.

In contrast to his depiction of the Roman Catholic Church as a bastion of unrelenting bigotry, John Spong presented "the Academy" - the university scholars of Galileo's day - as open-minded, objective seekers after truth and totally committed to the freedom of scientific enquiry. Nothing could be further from the truth. He suggested that the same gulf exists today between "the Academy" (of which he sees himself as a respected senior member) and the mainstream Christian Church. The traditional Christian mind, he suggested, is trammelled and unfree, incapable of entertaining any possibilities that collide with antecedent religious belief.

Such references to Galileo are frequently made by those wishing to make the point that there is a radical opposition between science and Christianity – or at least Roman Catholicism. Galileo is invoked as a fearless thinker who ran afoul of ecclesiastical obscurantism and paid the penalty. Auguste Comte, one of the founding fathers of the modern social sciences, argued that Galileo represented the modern spirit's freeing itself from the stultifying grasp of theology and metaphysics. Similarly, for Spong, Galileo represents science's fighting to free itself from the clutches of blind faith, biblical literalism, and superstition. However, this 'historical case' does not stand up to scholarly scrutiny. The facts do not reveal a church intent on suppressing truth in order to protect discredited beliefs.³⁸ Galileo would have been appalled by those, like Spong, who have used him in their campaign against Christianity.

Galileo sought to prove the Copernican system (or heliocentric system) to be fact and the Roman Church did not accept that he had adequately proved his case. He did not prove that the Earth moves. He did not think that his astronomical discoveries provided sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the Earth moves around the Sun, but he did think that he had good reason to question the truth of the geocentric astronomy's of Ptolemy and Aristotle. Some scholars maintain that he was committed to the view that science discovers what is truly so, and knows what is so in terms of causes.³⁹ The Church authorities were upset that he had failed to indicate the tentative nature of his conclusions in his *Dialogue*, and thereby, had broken, in letter and in spirit, his earlier solemn commitment to treat the Copernican system strictly as a hypothesis. Instead, they maintained, he presented it as dogma, demanding at the same time that the Church reinterpret Scripture in the light of his findings.

He appeared to tactlessly lampoon Pope Urban VIII (1623-44), one of his staunchest supporters, in order to score points in his arguments against the university-based Aristotelians and was so bombastic in his manner that he deeply offended those who had a genuine interest in his scientific work. He ridiculed his opponents with a variety of literary devices, including destructive irony and sparkling wit, had a penchant for

controversy, and wrote with unsurpassing eloquence. His sarcastic lampoon of Fth Grassi, one of his opponents, in his work *Il saggiaiore* ("The Assayer"), alienated the Jesuit astronomers, once his strongest supporters. There is little doubt, as Koestler notes, that they used their influence to have his *Dialogue* banned and to turn the Pope against its author. It "did not require much Jesuit cunning to turn Urban's perilous adulation [for Galileo] into the fury of the betrayed lover."⁴⁰ Galileo's vanity, quarrels over priority of discovery, contemptuous attitude and effective sarcasm, cost him dearly in the long run.⁴¹

Galileo's troubles developed and climaxed in 1632-1633 during the so-called Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants (1618-1648). At that particular juncture Pope Urban VIII, who had earlier been an admirer and supporter of Galileo, was in an especially vulnerable position; thus not only could he not continue to protect Galileo, but he had to use him as a scapegoat to reassert, demonstrate, and test his own authority and power. The legal background to the "Galileo affair" involved essentially matters of ecclesiastical or "canon" law.⁴²

It needs emphasising that although Galileo was sentenced to a mild form of "house arrest", his book *Dialogue* placed on the prohibited Index, was humiliated by having to publicly retract his 'error', required to do penance,⁴³ and prohibited from replying to his Aristotelian opponents; **he was never "condemned to death" and never spent a day of his life in the dungeons of the Inquisition. When he arrived in Rome to face trial before the Inquisition, he was not placed under arrest or imprisoned but was allowed to lodge at the Tuscan embassy, the Villa Medici, one of the most impressive palaces in the city.** His visit had the status of an imprisonment, a privileged imprisonment to be sure, but a forced residence nonetheless. For some of the time he was even allowed to reside at the chief prosecutor's apartment.

The sentence of indefinite 'formal imprisonment' was commuted by Pope Urban VIII, at the request of the Duke of Tuscany, to permission to reside at the palace of Archbishop Piccolomini in Siena, to his farm at Arcetri where he continued his researches, even after hearing and sight were much impaired, and later to his house in Florence, where he spent the remaining years of his life. He received guests regularly and lived in relative luxury. Colin A. Russell, Professor of History of Science and Technology at the Open University, notes:

To describe the events as a 'martyrdom' is of course incorrect, as is the allegation of physical torture. Certainly the threat was there, but at Galileo's age it would have been illegal and it was not carried out. Furthermore the Pope did not speak ex cathedra so questions of 'infallible pronouncements' did not arise. And it must be conceded that Galileo's tactless lampooning of the Pope was a bad error of judgement. However, the Church manifestly displayed monumental insensitivity to the human tragedy involved, though by comparison with some of the Inquisition's activities we can readily recognize that they were wrong as well as misguided.⁴⁴

It is noteworthy that Galileo never wavered in his loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church and only blamed some “wrong-headed individuals” for his condemnation. The Church eventually came to terms with the Copernican system, lifting the prohibition of Galileo’s *Dialogue* on 8 October 1741, and on 16 April 1757 the prohibition of related works. Pope Benedict XIV (1740-58) had the Holy Office grant an imprimatur to the first edition of the *Complete Works of Galileo* in 1741 following the presentation of optical proof of the fact that the Earth revolves around the sun. In 1744 the Inquisition allowed the *Dialogue* to be published as part of an edition of Galileo’s collected works. The implicit reform of the 1633 sentence became explicit in a decree of the Sacred Congregation of the Index that removed from the 1757 edition of the Catalogue of Forbidden Books, works favouring the heliocentric theory.

However, in 1820, while Canon Settele, professor at the University of Rome La Sapienza, was preparing to publish his *Elements of Optics and Astronomy*, he came up against the refusal of Father Anfossi, master of the Sacred Palace, to grant the imprimatur. This incident gave the impression that the 1633 sentence had indeed remained unreformed because it was unreformable. The unjustly censured author lodged an appeal

with Pope Pius VII, from whom in 1822 he received a favourable decision. A decisive fact was this: Father Olivieri, former master general of the Order of Preachers and commissary of the Holy Office, drew up a report favouring the granting of the imprimatur to works presenting Copernican astronomy as a thesis and no longer as a mere hypothesis. This papal decision was to receive its practical application in 1846, with the publication of a new and updated Index which did not include the name of Copernicus.⁴⁵ The 1835 edition of the Index omitted the *Dialogue* for the first time.

Koestler shows how much of the opposition to Galileo’s scientific position came from the academics within the universities who were committed Aristotelians and put pressure on the Roman Church to charge him with theological heresy.⁴⁶ In contrast, astronomers from the Jesuit Order - the intellectual spearhead of the Catholic Church - having confirmed Galileo’s findings, including the ‘earthly’ nature of the moon, the existence of sunspots, and the fact that comets moved in outer space beyond the moon; supported him in the early stages of the Galileo affair. They freely discussed the Copernican system and “advocated [it] as a working hypothesis, but it was unfavourably viewed to present it as established truth, because it seemed contrary to current interpretation of scripture - unless and until definite proof could be adduced in its favour.”⁴⁷ In contrast the Dominicans attacked Galileo during the early stages of the controversy.⁴⁸ During the later phases (1632-33) the two sides exchanged roles. Koestler states:

Thus the intellectually most influential order within the Catholic Church was at that time in full retreat from Aristotle and Ptolemy, and had taken up an intermediary position regarding Copernicus. They praised and feted Galileo, whom they knew to be a Copernican, and they kept Kepler, the foremost exponent of Copernicanism, under their protection throughout his life.



Galileo Galilei (1564-1642)

But there existed a powerful body of men whose hostility to Galileo never abated: the Aristotelians at the universities. The inertia of the human mind and its resistance to innovation are most clearly demonstrated not, as one might expect, by the ignorant mass - which is easily swayed once its imagination is caught - but by professionals with a vested interest in tradition and in the monopoly of learning. Innovation is a twofold threat to academic mediocrities: it endangers their oracular authority, and it evokes the deeper fear that their whole, laboriously constructed edifice might collapse. The academic backwoodsmen have been a curse of genius ... they stretch, a solid and hostile

phalanx of pedantic mediocrities, across the centuries.⁴⁹

Ten years after the publication of *De Revolutionibus* the University of Wittenberg condemned the Copernican teachings, and other universities followed in its wake: in 1573, Rostock; in 1576, the Sorbonne in Paris; and in 1582, Tübingen. For 35 years following its publication, no university department anywhere taught the Copernican system as they were firmly committed to Aristotelianism. Finally in 1578-1580, for the first time in the history of science, Copernicus’ theory was introduced into a university department of Cracow University (Copernicus’ Alma Mater) by Professor Walenty Fontanus.

At first, the Roman Church had not taken any definite stand with regard to Copernicus’ theory, which had met with a favourable reception on the part of liberal Church dignitaries. This attitude underwent a change, however, when at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) the Church launched its struggle against the Reformation. The Church then saw in the theory of Copernicus a threat to the religious view of the world. The pronouncements by Galileo increased the uneasiness of the Church. In his book *The Galileo Connection* (1986) Charles Hummel shows how the academics drew the clergy into the scientific controversies:

Galileo’s trial of 1633 was not the simple conflict between science and religion so commonly pictured. It was a complex power struggle of personal and professional pride,

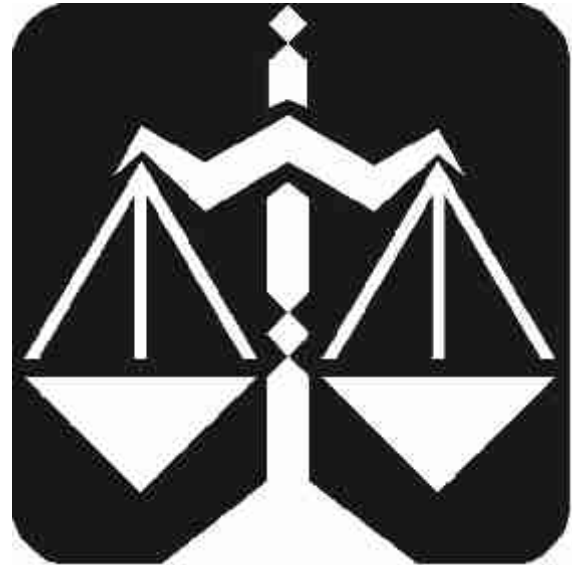
envy and ambition, affected by pressures of bureaucratic politics.... For almost thirty years before the conflict took a theological turn, Galileo waged a running battle against the Aristotelianism of the scientific establishment.... It is curious that, despite the evidence, historians of science have seldom blamed the university professors for their part in the decision against Copernicus and Galileo, their opposition to freedom of scientific inquiry. Yet it was they, the leading scientists, who urged the theologians to intervene, confident that the church would be on their side.... The real authoritarianism that engineered Galileo's downfall was that of the Aristotelian scientific outlook in the universities. Only after Galileo had attacked that establishment for decades did his enemies turn their controversy into a theological issue. Even then it was the natural philosophers who worked behind the scenes with pliable church authorities to foment Galileo's trial, and rob him of the reasonable solution worked out by the Inquisition.⁵⁰

Writing to a friend in 1635, Galileo made it clear who he thought was responsible for the fateful decision against the Copernican system in 1616 in which he was censured and had to promise the ecclesiastical authorities he would abstain from all future advocacy of the condemned doctrines. He did not blame any of the church authorities but rather the university academics - "the Academy" as Spong would refer to them - who manipulated the Roman church. Galileo indicted the men whose "slanders, frauds, stratagems, and trickeries were used eighteen years ago in Rome to deceive the [Church] authorities."⁵¹

He produced no new 'facts' which incontrovertibly established the heliocentric system. He had not succeeded in proving irrefutably the double motion of the Earth - its annual orbit round the sun and its daily rotation on the polar axis. Such evidence had to wait for over two centuries.⁵² The Church had happily taught Copernicanism as hypothesis (not fact) for many years prior to the discoveries of Tycho de Brahe, Johannes Kepler and others, including Galileo.⁵³

The "Galileo affair" is as much, if not more, a serious indictment of the "Academy" than of the Church. Unfortunately, some scholars continue to capitalise on the myth that Galileo was persecuted by the Church in an attempt to knowingly suppress the truth. For example, in *Galileo: A Life* (HarperCollins, 1994), James Reston Jr. states: "The Copernican theory was true, and the Church had used extreme and rigorous methods to crush that truth and protect its falsehood" (p. 285). The promotion of the Galileo legend is a key weapon in the arsenal of hucksters of modernity like Spong, Geering and Veitch, who delight to use this illusory stick to beat the so-called "fundamentalists". As Carrell notes: **"Celebrations of the values of modernity are characteristic of much of the secular media, and the legend of Galileo is surely one of the constitutive myths of the modern world"**.⁵⁴

The Verdict on John Spong the 'scholar'



By daring to highlight typical errors which are rife in Spong's books and lecture material as examples of "shoddy scholarship",⁵⁵ one is immediately accused by Spong of "trying to shoot the messenger" because one can't handle the "message". This was the line of defence he used in an interview with Dr Brian Edwards, when Edwards informed Spong that many correspondents (including the author) had contacted him highlighting the Bishop's "shoddy scholarship" before the interview even went to air.⁵⁶ However, a number of scholars, including those from leading universities, have taken the time to carefully examine his "message" and work and conclude that it is "shoddy" 'scholarship'. The noted New Testament teacher Luke T. Johnson, for example, asks:

Given the shoddy level of analysis and argument evidenced by [Spong's] books, perhaps the most pertinent questions to ask are: Why were they written? and Why were they published by houses of at least residual reputation?⁵⁷

Alister McGrath has this to say about Spong's book *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (1991):

This work would probably be dismissed as utterly inconsequential were its writer not a bishop. It is as aggressive in its modernity as it is selective and superficial in its argumentation and intolerant and dismissive of the views of others....⁵⁸

Of his work *The Myth of God Incarnate* he writes:

But this pugnacious, dismissive and intolerant work has done nothing to further our understanding of the gospels ... [in it] 'pure fantasy' replaces meticulous and responsible historical inquiry.⁵⁹

In reference to Spong's book *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*, Gerald O'Collins, Professor of Fundamental Theology, Gregorian University (Rome) writes:

[Spong's] work simply does not belong to the world of international scholarship. No genuine scholars will be taken in by this book.⁶⁰

Endnotes

- ¹ Ian Harris, "Saving the Church from itself," *Dominion* (7 October, 1997).
- ² Harris, "Saving the Church..."
- ³ Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Moody Press:1989), 613.
- ⁴ Videotape transcript. Interview with Bishop Spong by Mike Hosking, Television One. "Top of the Morning" programme (Thursday morning, 2 October, 1995).
- ⁵ Personal communication by telephone 2 October, 1997.
- ⁶ Nicolaus Copernicus was a Polish Doctor of Canon law, humanist, physician, philologist, economist, astronomer and mathematician. He studied at Cracow University (1491-1495), now called the Jagiellonian University, the University of Bologna (1497-1501) and the University of Padua (1501-1503). In 1507 he wrote his *Commentary on the Hypothesis of the Movements of Celestial Orbs*. This was the first outline of the heliocentric (or sun-centred) theory in theoretical terms without all the mathematics. To avoid controversy, he put off publishing the full mathematical description of the heliocentric system contained in his famous manuscript *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres) until late in his life. In the opinion of the French philosopher and astronomer, Abbe Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), Copernicus handed over his complete manuscript of *De Revolutionibus*, written between 1515 and about 1530, to his friend, Tideman Giese, then Bishop of Chelmno, who in turn sent it to Copernicus' friend George Joachim Rheticus, a young professor of astronomy from Wittenberg University. Rheticus, who in 1540 had published a treatise entitled *A First Narration (Narratio prima)* in which he set forth Copernicus' theory, transferred the printing of the entire work (*De Revolutionibus*) from Wittenberg to Nuremberg, which at the time was a large publishing centre specialising in astronomical publications. Copernicus sent his preface to his volumes *De Revolutionibus* to Nuremberg in June 1542. He elucidated three kinds of astronomical phenomena which required recognition that the Earth executed three motions: a rotational one – to explain the diurnal phenomena, an annual orbit around the Sun, and a slow movement of the Earth's axis to account for the phenomenon of precession. The publication of this work and one in the same year by the Flemish scholar Vesalius – *On the Structure of the Human Body (De humani corporis fabrica)* are considered by some scholars to mark the birth of modern science. See Jan Adamczewski, Nicolaus Copernicus and his Epoch (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1972), 50-154, 156, 161.
- ⁷ Lecture at Johnsonville Union Church, Sunday 5pm - 6.30 pm (8 October). About 90 people attended including former minister of St Andrews On the Terrace, Rev. John Murray, and the current minister Rev. Dr James Stuart.
- ⁸ I refer here to material from their public lectures attended over recent years. Lloyd Geering presents a fairer assessment of the Church's role in his book *God in the New World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1968), 38-39. "While the church's treatment of [Copernicus and Galileo] is inexcusable, it is equally unfair of us from our vantage point in the twentieth century to declare how things should have been done.... [Their theories] seemed to be flatly contradicted by common-sense. On the other hand, the church authorities were right in being anxious to preserve the truth from being undermined by new-fangled error" (p. 38).
- ⁹ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth* (Praeger, 1991).
- ¹⁰ See for example, G.V. Coyne, M. Heller, and J. Zycinski, editors. *The Galileo Affair: A Meeting of Faith and Science*. (Proceedings of the Cracow Conference, 24-27 May 1984; Vatican City: Specola Vaticana, 1985); Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe* (New York: Macmillan, 1959); Jerome J. Langford, *Galileo, Science and the Church* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966); Paul Poupard, editor. *Galileo Galilei: Toward a Resolution of 350 Years of Debate - 1633-1983*, transl. by I. Campbell (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, University Press, 1987); and William R. Shea, "Galileo and the Church," in David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, editors, *God and Nature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 114-35. Galileo's classic discussion of the relationship between science and the Bible is in the form of a letter to Lady Christina of Lorraine, the Grand Duchess dowager of Tuscany.
- ¹¹ See for example Stillman Drake, *Galileo* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), and Paul K. Feyerabend, *Against Method* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978).
- ¹² Maurice A. Finocchiaro (editor and translator), *The Galileo Affair: A Documentary History* (University of California Press, 1989), 3-4.
- ¹³ Albert Einstein, 1967 "Foreword." In *Galileo Galilei, Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. Transl. by Stillman Drake (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), vi-xx
- ¹⁴ All the original trial documents with one exception are found in the 20 volumes of the *National Edition of Galileo's Works* edited by Antonio Favaro (1st publ. 1890-1909). The remaining one was first published by Pietro Redondi in 1983 and in a critical edition of the *Inquisition Proceedings* edited by Sergio M. Pagano (Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 1984).
- ¹⁵ Trial document quoted in Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe* (1st publ. Hutchinson, 1959; Pelican Books, Reprint 1979), 609.
- ¹⁶ The Cardinal of Capua, Nicolaus Schonberg, who resided in Rome, went to great lengths as early as 1536 to obtain more detailed information on Copernicus' theories. He personally wrote a letter to Copernicus urging that the world of science be given access to his findings and requesting all the particulars of his theory. Cardinal Schonberg promised to pay for all copyists who would be needed to copy Copernicus' work, as well as for the costs of forwarding the work to Rome. He indicated that as his plenipotentiary in arranging this matter he wished to appoint Theodor Radzyn, one of Copernicus' closest friends. Expressing the hope that Copernicus would satisfy his request, the Cardinal assured the author of *De Revolutionibus* that he had in his person an admirer of his great talent, and someone who desired to give him his due. Tideman Giese, then Bishop of Chelmno, another old and devoted friend of Copernicus was an ardent advocate of the publication of *De Revolutionibus*. Cardinal Schonberg and Bishop Giese were also among the persons who were mainly responsible for overcoming Copernicus' reluctance to publish his work. In his dedication in his book to Pope Paul III, Copernicus mentions these two individuals and states: "Thus, letting myself be persuaded by such persons and guided by such hope, I have finally allowed my friends to arrange for the publication of this work as they have so long begged of me". See Adamczewski, *Nicolaus Copernicus and his Epoch*, 145, 147.
- ¹⁷ The nine popes in order following Pope Paul III (1534-49) were: Julius III (1549-55), Marcellus II (1555-59), Pius IV (1559), Pius IV (1559-65), St Pius V (1565-72), Gregory XIII (1572-85), Sixtus V (1585-90), Gregory XV (1590-91), Innocent IX (1591). In 1616, while Paul V (1605-21) was Pope, the Holy Congregation of the Index issued a decree declaring that Copernicus' work *De Revolutionibus* be suspended until certain passages considered detrimental to Catholic truth were corrected. The decree was signed by the Secretary of the Congregation, Bishop of Albano and the Cardinal of St. Cecilia –

Father Magdalenus Capiferri of the Order of St. Dominic. In 1620 the Congregation of the Index issued a second decree in which it specified which passages were to be deleted and which others were to be amended. And so it was that the work of Copernicus was put on the Index of Prohibited Books and for two whole centuries his works were not allowed to be read by orthodox Catholics. Upon the issuance of the decrees the rule was adopted "that the system known as the Copernican System could henceforth be taught only as a hypothesis, but could not be defended as a thesis". De Revolutionibus appeared with a preface by the Protestant theologian Andreas Osiander in which it was affirmed that the movement of the Earth set forth in the text is not taken to be real, but only a mere hypothesis for purposes of calculation in order to save the appearances. Because Osiander did not sign his preface, it was thought for centuries that these introductory words were by Copernicus himself. Osiander, who helped supervise the printing of De Revolutionibus, has gone down in history as a falsifier of Copernicus' work. Osiander stated in his preface that the theory outlined should be regarded merely as a hypothesis and a "fictitious scheme for calculation". It is important to stress that the trial which ensued in 1633 was against Galileo personally, due to his crime of disobedience, and not aimed at Copernicanism

- ¹⁸ The Inquisition was primarily interested in two main categories of crimes: formal heresy and suspicion of heresy. Here, the term suspicion did not have the modern legal connotation pertaining to allegation and contrasting it to proof. One difference between formal heresy and suspicion of heresy was the seriousness of the offence. For example, a standard Inquisition manual of the time stated that "heretics are those who say, teach, preach, or write things against Holy Scripture; against the articles of the Holy Faith; ... against the decrees of the Sacred Councils and the determinations made by the Supreme Pontiffs; ... those who reject the Holy Faith and become Moslems, Jews, or members of other sects, and who praise their practices and live in accordance with them..." (Masini, 1621, 16-17, cited in Finocchiaro, *The Galileo Affair*, 14). The same manual stated that "suspects of heresy are those who occasionally utter propositions that offend the listeners ... those who keep, write, read, or give others to read books forbidden in the Index and in other particular Decrees ... those who listen, even once, to sermons by heretics..." (Massini, 17-18). Another difference between formal heresy and suspicion of heresy was whether or not the culprit, having confessed the incriminating facts, admitted an evil intention. Furthermore, within the major category of suspicion of heresy, two main subcategories were distinguished: vehement suspicion of heresy and slight suspicion of heresy; their difference depended on the seriousness of the crime. Thus, in effect there were three main types of religious crimes, in descending order of seriousness: formal heresy, vehement suspicion of heresy, and slight suspicion of heresy (Finocchiaro, *The Galileo Affair*, 14-15).

- ¹⁹ Alfred N. Whitehead, cited in Arnold Lunn, *The Good Gorilla* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1944), 231

- ²⁰ Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, 501.

- ²¹ Galileo Galilei, *Dialogo dei due massimi sistemi del mondo (Dialogue concerning the two Principal Systems of the World)* (1632). This book was a 'trialogue' consisting of a four-day debate between two Italian intellectuals (Sagredo and Salviati) and a third man (Simplicio) who was the foil of the piece. His function was to defend the old Aristotelian/Ptolemaic system. He was depicted as the champion of orthodoxy, slow to follow an argument and something of a buffoon. Regrettably (in the light of later events) he was also incorrectly thought by Pope Urban VIII to be a thinly-veiled caricature of the Pope himself, representing the papal arguments almost in their original words.

- ²² Finocchiaro, *The Galileo Affair*, 30

- ²³ Finocchiaro, *The Galileo Affair*, 29.

- ²⁴ While it is true that the Bible does not provide scientific descriptions of events using the language of modern science, nevertheless, where it touches on matters of history and facts relating to the natural world, it is trustworthy and divinely authoritative.

- ²⁵ Finocchiaro, *The Galileo Affair*, 30

- ²⁶ The Congregation of the Index was instituted by Pope Pius V in 1571 with the purpose of book censorship; one of its main responsibilities was the compilation of a list of forbidden books (called Index librorum prohibitorum); this congregation was abolished by Pope Benedict XV in 1917, and book censorship was then handled once again by the Congregation of the Holy Office, which had been in charge of the matter before 1571. The Congregation of the Holy Office, in turn, had been instituted in 1542 by Pope Paul III with the purpose of defending and upholding Catholic faith and morals; one of its specific duties was to take over the suppression of heresies and heretics which had been handled by the Medieval Inquisition; hence, from that time onward, the Holy Office and the Inquisition became practically synonymous. In 1965 at the Second Vatican Council, its name was officially changed to Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Holy Office or Inquisition was, therefore, more important and authoritative than the Index. Finocchiaro, *The Galileo Affair*, 14

- ²⁷ Finocchiaro, *The Galileo Affair*, 30.

- ²⁸ Ignacio Sols and Juan Jose Perez Camacho, "Galileo and Copernicanism on Trial," (transl. From Spanish by Ralph McInerny) in *Catholic Dossier: Issues in the Round*, 1/2 (July-August, 1995), 24

- ²⁹ Finocchiaro, *The Galileo Affair*, 32.

- ³⁰ Pietro Redondi, *Galileo Heretic* transl. by Raymond Rosenthal (1st publ. in Italy as Giulio eretico, 1983; London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1988), 326. Redondi suggests the reader "See on this subject, the juridical point of view on the difference between doctrinal heresy and disciplinary heresy as explained by L. Garzend in *L'Inquisition et l'hérésie* (Paris, 1913)."

- ³¹ Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, 608-609. Also see J.J. Fahie, Galileo: His Life and Work (London: John Murray, 1903), 314-315.

- ³² Redondi, *Galileo Heretic*, 258.

- ³³ Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, 501

- ³⁴ Josh. 10:12-14. In one of his "conversations at the table", in 1539 Martin Luther thus described Copernicus: "Mention has been made of some new astrologer, who wanted to prove that the Earth moves and goes around, and not the firmament or heavens, the Sun and the Moon... This fool wants to turn the entire art of astronomy upside down! But as the Holy Scriptures show, Joshua ordered the Sun, and not the Earth, to halt!" Quoted in Adamczewski, *Nicolaus Copernicus and his Epoch*, 147. John Calvin and Philipp Melancthon, one of the most outstanding German humanists, were also highly critical of the Copernicus system, Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, 148.

- ³⁵ Ps. 19:6 [The sun's] "rising is from one end of the heavens and its circuit to the other end of them..."; Ps. 93:1 "the world is firmly established, it will not be moved"; Ps. 104:5 "He established the earth upon its foundations so that it will not totter forever and ever".

- ³⁶ Rev. 7:1; 20:8; Is. 11:12. These three verses are part of prophecy where the use of figurative language is commonplace. In each case the writer employs appropriate phenomenological language. See also Ezek. 7:2 "four corners of the land".

- ³⁷ Job. 38:6. The language in this chapter is rich with personifications (e.g. "the morning stars sang together" v. 7), metaphors (e.g. "bolt and doors" of the sea" vs. 8,10), and similes (e.g. "like clay under the seal" and "like a garment" v. 14). Given the context

- with the wide use of figurative language, the phrase “cornerstone” cannot be taken literally to mean a stone engraved with the builder’s name etc.
- 38 Two books which reflect this new consensus view are: Annibale Fantoli, *Galileo: For Copernicanism and for the Church* (Vatican Observatory – Notre Dame, 1994); and Michael Sharrat, *Galileo: Decisive Innovator* (Blackwell, 1994). The Galileo Commission was set up by Pope John Paul II to dispel the notion that the Church is hostile to science and in times past has tried to suppress its truths.
- 39 William E. Carroll, “The Legend of Galileo: The Warfare between Science and Religion,” in *Catholic Dossier: Issues in the Round*, 1/2 (July-August, 1995): 15. William E. Carroll is Professor of History at Cornell College (Iowa).
- 40 ...Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, 490.
- 41 ...Giorgio de Santillana, *The Crime of Galileo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 6.
- 42 Finocchiaro, *The Galileo Affair*, 12
- 43 Involving the recital, once a week, of the seven penitential Psalms. The recital was delegated, with ecclesiastical consent, to his daughter, Sister Marie Celeste, a Camelite nun. See Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, 500.
- 44 Colin A. Russell, *Cross-currents: Interactions Between Science and Faith* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 45-46. The claim that Galileo was tortured is quite false.
- 45 Cardinal Poupard, “Galileo: Report on Papal Commission findings,” in *Catholic Dossier: Issues in the Round*, 1/2 (July-August, 1995), 42-44.
- 46 In his book *Galileo* (N.Y; Hill and Wang, Pastmaster’s Series, 1980), Stillman Drake notes that Aristotelian “philosophers alone urged the intervention of theologians” (p. 4) in the Galileo affair. In chapter 3 “Conflicts with Philosophers” (pp. 38-57) he provides the background to this conclusion.
- 47 Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, 433.
- 48 In February 1615 a Dominican filed a written complaint against Galileo with the Inquisition in Rome. In December 1614 at a church in Florence, a Dominican Friar named Tommaso Caccini preached a Sunday sermon against mathematicians in general, and Galileo in particular, on the grounds that their beliefs and practices contradicted the Bible and were thus heretical. In February 1615 another Dominican, named Niccolo Lorini, filed a written complaint against Galileo with the Inquisition in Rome, enclosing Galileo’s letter to Benedetto Castelli as incriminating evidence. Then in March of the same year, Caccini, who had attacked Galileo from the pulpit, made a personal appearance before the Roman Inquisition; in his deposition he charged Galileo with suspicion of heresy, based not only on the content of the letter to Castelli but also on the book of Sunspot Letters and on hearsay evidence of a general sort and a more specific type involving two other individuals. (Finocchiaro, *The Galileo Affair*, 28).
- 49 Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, 433-44.
- 50 Charles E. Hummel, *The Galileo Connection: Resolving Conflicts between Science and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 116, 119-120.
- 51 Quoted in Giorgio de Santillana, *The Crime of Galileo*, 213 n. 3. Cited in Hummel, *The Galileo Connection*, 120.
- 52 In 1838 Friedrich Bessel’s astronomical measurements of the annual parallax of stars over many years were accepted as final proof of the revolution of the Earth around the Sun. This stellar parallax is the apparent movement of stars produced by the Earth’s revolution. These measurements were not possible in Galileo’s time. Similarly, in 1851 the rotation of a very long pendulum (Leon Foucault’s experiment) showed the rotation of the Earth on its axis.
- 53 Koestler notes that it is a well known fact that the Jesuit missionaries in China in the 16th and 17th centuries owed their influence at the court in Peking in the first place to their services as astronomers. The surprising thing for him was to discover that the type of astronomy they taught, from the end of the 17th century onward, was the Copernican system of the world; and that the rapid spreading through China and Japan, of the doctrine of the Earth’s motion was thus primarily due to the Society of Jesus, working under the supervision of the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda in Rome. See B. Szczesniak, “The Penetration of the Copernican Theory into Feudal Japan”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1944, parts I and II; and C.R. Boxer, Jan Compagnie in Japan, *The Hague* (1936), 52 seq. Cited in Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, 503.
- 54 Carroll, “The Legend of Galileo,” 15. As an example of the perpetuation of the legend of Galileo consider the headline and a statement from *The New York Times* (October, 1992) reporting on Pope Paul II’s formal acceptance of the findings of a special commission he had appointed to re-examine the Galileo Affair. Headline: “After 350 Years Vatican Says Galileo was Right: It Moves”. The story referred to “one of the Church’s most infamous wrongs – the persecution of the Italian astronomer and physicist for proving the Earth moves about the Sun”. Here we have the legend of Galileo in its most blatant and unsophisticated form.
- 55 For such a critique see Michael R. Bott and Jonathan Sarfati Ph.D., “What’s Wrong with Bishop Spong,” *Apologia* (The Journal of the Wellington Christian Apologetics Society [Inc.]) 4/1 (1995): 3-27.
- 56 From tape transcript. Interview with Bishop Spong by Dr Brian Edwards. Saturday morning 4 October, 1997. National radio.
- 57 *Christian Century* (April 28 1993), 457.
- 58 Alister McGrath, “Bishop John Spong and the state of Anglican theology”, *Affirm* (Winter, 1994), 29.
- 59 McGrath, “Bishop John Spong...”, 30.
- 60 Gerald O’Collins, “What of the Spong Song?” Review of Resurrection: Myth or Reality (1994) by Bishop Spong. *Wel-com* 101 (September, 1994).

Redefining God In Man's Image (III)

A Critique of Bishop John Spong's Revised 'Christianity'

by David H. Lane M.Sc. (Hons.), Dip.Tchg.

Bishop Spong and the doting media

The Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong DD, recently retired Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Newark, New Jersey, sees himself as a heroic Christian apologist defending the "true" message of Christianity, having rejected what he calls the "traditional Christian thought" which he says is locked into "pre-modern categories" and is becoming increasingly "irrelevant in [a] post-modern world". He has stated:

I will not allow the Christ I worship or the Bible I treasure, to be defined exclusively in the pre-modern categories of traditional Christian thought so that each becomes irrelevant in my post-modern world. My call is to find a way to rescue the essence of Christianity from the distortions of its history and to call those who are alienated from the faith of their childhood to look once more through different lenses at the message of Christ. All of this is involved, I believe in the apologetic task that confronts the Christian faith at the dawn of the third millennium. My life as an author, in combination with the life of this Diocese, has presented me with the rare opportunity and the obvious privilege of being a Christian apologist through the media to the secularised world.¹

Spong's views on Christianity received major coverage in the *Dominion* and *Evening Post* newspapers, National Radio, Television One and Television 3, during his lecture engagements in Wellington during the month of October, 1997. It was a well orchestrated media campaign providing free regular 'advertisements' and promotions for his weekly lectures and books. Presented as "saviour of the church" by Ian Harris, senior journalist with the *Dominion* (7 October), the media blitz rose to a crescendo on November 1, when the same journalist presented him as a "saviour of Jesus" - "We must free Jesus from the rescuer role"² [as the Saviour of sinners] the Bishop is quoted as saying (*Dominion* 1 November). In an article applauding Spong's views published recently in *Stimulus*, Harris states:

Many things appealed about what Bishop John Spong had to say while in New Zealand in October. Foremost among them were his insistence on faith experience over doctrinal formulations, and his uncompromising acceptance that the revolution in understanding in so many fields over the past 400 years leaves us no option but to rethink our whole approach to Christianity. The emphasis on experience is the clue to Bishop Spong's approach to the key texts of Christianity in the New Testament....

Bishop Spong was clinical in demolishing some concepts central to the creeds - again, not because he dismisses the spiritual experience which led to their formulation, but because of the view of the cosmos, human life, God, Jesus and sin through which they are expressed. More than sometimes realised, belief in a divine rescuer [Saviour of sinners] grew out of "a view of human life which is no longer operative, a theistic understanding of God articulated in a form that is all but repulsive, a magical view of Jesus that violates our minds, and the practical necessity for the church to elicit guilt as a prerequisite to conversion."³

Spong's views have been sought out by journalists like Harris as if they were the last word on the Christian faith. This is not surprising as Harris is a sympathetic advocate of Spong's theological position. In a short biographical note attached to the *Stimulus* article it is noted that he is co-ordinator of Ephesus in Wellington, a group that jointly sponsored one of Spong's Wellington lectures, together with the 'Sea of Faith network'. Harris was the first chairperson of this network in New Zealand, a network whose members include many supporters of Lloyd Geering's theological views. He also formerly edited *The New Zealand Methodist* and served as Director of Communication for the Presbyterian Church. Journalists like Harris have every right to think what they want about Spong's views, but they have a responsibility to represent a balanced analysis.

Photographs, large and small of the steely, grey-eyed cleric, John Spong, graced the pages of at least five Wellington papers in October 1997. How could one but not know who Bishop Spong is? The *Evening Post* editorial (October 15) declared:

Spong ... can't be dismissed as a spokesman for some obscure sect; he's a senior Episcopal bishop, in the American arm of the Anglican Church.

While this statement is in part correct, we need to look a little more deeply at the question of why the media failed to provide a real balance in its coverage of his views which many mainstream Christian leaders believe are right outside the orbit of the Christian faith (he certainly cannot be considered a "spokesman" for mainstream Anglicanism). It is hard to imagine that the media would demonstrate such bias in any other academic sphere.

Imagine for example, a Ph.D. in science coming to New Zealand and attempting to publicly promote creationism. The media, always so-vigilant in upholding "good science" for the 'moral' well-being of

society, would be very quick to ensure that experts from the N.Z. Skeptics Society have every opportunity to redress any criticisms of the 'sacred' theory of Darwin that might be made in the media. This has been precisely their approach in dealing with all prominent creationists who have ventured to New Zealand on public speaking engagements.⁴ The principle of natural justice requires that highly controversial issues should be presented with balance and the same level of good journalistic scrutiny be applied in the reporting of religious issues as in any other sphere of daily life.

On Television 3, as noted earlier (see Part I), the Bishop was interviewed by John Campbell, who asked him to clarify his beliefs on the Resurrection of Jesus. Spong began, as he often does, by erecting a straw man, charging the Church with presenting a naive "pre-modern" understanding of the resurrection which "literalised" the account of the bodily resurrection. He made the outrageous and erroneous claim that no New Testament scholar at any leading university today believes in the bodily resurrection of Christ, or the historicity of the Gospel narratives dealing with this event. N.T. Wright and Alister McGrath and hundreds of other conservative scholars would be appalled at such a blatant falsehood.

To suggest that the Church has taught that the resurrection of Jesus was *merely* the resuscitation of a corpse and *nothing more* speaks volumes of the quality of Spong's 'scholarship'. For one who constantly tells us that he studies the Bible for two hours a day, it would appear that he has failed to understand its basic teachings on the resurrection. While it is true that the Church has always defended and proclaimed the **bodily** nature of Christ's post-resurrection appearances and rejected all explanations that define such encounters with his followers as purely spiritual/psychological 'events'; the resurrection has always been understood and presented as a miraculous event involving the intervention of God as Sovereign Lord, into human history.

The Church has always taught that the resurrected body of Jesus was *immortal* and clearly of a *different nature* to a strictly **mortal** body, enabling Him to appear in the midst of His disciples in the upper room when all the doors were locked (Jn. 20:19,26), to disappear from view following an evening meal with the two disciples He met and talked with on the Emmaus road (Lk. 24:31), and to 'ascend' to Heaven.

The Apostle Paul emphasised the *different nature* of the resurrection body when he wrote to the Corinthians stating: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 15:50). Here he was not denying the *bodily* nature of the eternal state of believers, as Spong suggests, nor was he providing a description in strictly **physical** terms of the nature of the resurrected body - in terms of physiology etc. It becomes clear from the wider context of the passage that he is contrasting the mortal body (of 'flesh and blood'), subject to decay and death through sin; with the immortal body, not subject to death and decay, for he immediately adds: "Nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (v.50).

Spong argued that 1 Corinthians was the *first* book written in the New Testament and that belief in the

bodily resurrection of Christ was a *later* "midrashic interpretation" by the Gospel writers without any historical foundation. (*Midrash* is a method of hermeneutics [biblical interpretation] used by ancient rabbis in the time of Jesus and Paul. See later discussion). If it was a *later* interpretation, then why does Paul make such a point of the *bodily* nature of the resurrection state of believers, and link it to the Christ's victory over death? Furthermore, why does he make this issue the cornerstone of Christian faith *so early on*, if it was only a *later* fabricated "myth", as alleged by Spong?

The doting media don't seem to have any grasp of, or show any interest in such details fundamental to understanding the Christian message. Perhaps they might consider taking the time to familiarise themselves with the relevant Scriptures. Consider the key passage where Paul writing to the Christian believers at Corinth states:

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory, O death where is your victory? O death where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 15:51-57, NASB)

This passage, which forms part of Handel's *Messiah*, addresses the question that vexed the Corinthians "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?" (1 Cor. 15:35). Paul devotes considerable effort to contrasting the earthly/natural body (of 'flesh and blood') with the heavenly/spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:40,44-49).

As Dr Brian Edwards correctly pointed out in his interview with Bishop Spong on National Radio, "the core issue is whether Jesus survived beyond the grave". When asked the question: "Did Jesus rise from the dead"? Spong replied by fudging the issue. "Most people ask the wrong theological question," he told Edwards. Rather, they should ask: "Was there a powerful experience?". There is much "supporting data" to suggest there was. "The disciples fled and yet find themselves drawn - driven to recognise Jesus" after his crucifixion and death. Edwards was clearly frustrated at the response and suggested that the Bishop was merely extrapolating from the experiences of others, namely the disciples, without telling his audience what **he** believed. Spong conceded that Edwards was correct. Edwards asked the question again: "Did Jesus in some way survive death?". There was a long awkward pause and Spong replied:

Yes there was an experience of Jesus after the crucifixion. He was available as a living power and part of who God was. There is ample data

that a powerful experience happened. The issue is what was it. The Bible will not support a physical story of a resuscitated body.

At this point Edwards could have delivered his knockout punch but failed to mount any significant challenge. For of course the Bishop to appeal to “ample data” and “supporting data” for a “powerful experience” of Jesus by His disciples, when for him, nothing in the Gospel Resurrection accounts can be taken as literal history, is, to say the least, inconsistent. Furthermore, tens of millions of Christians throughout the Church age have given testimony to a “powerful experience” of the Risen Christ in their own lives, have come to believe that He is available to them through His Spirit to provide the “power from on high” needed to live the Christian life of obedience and faith, **and believe that He rose bodily from the grave based on the authoritative testimony of Scripture.** Spong would only sneer at such “naive” “pre-modern” testimonies and label them “invalid data”. He rules out as illegitimate *a priori*, the possibility that a “powerful experience” could be had (by the disciples) of One resurrected to an imperishable bodily state, because he rejects anything (of a miraculous nature) that runs counter to his materialistic, naturalistic presuppositions.

The founder of no other religion in human history besides the Lord Jesus Christ, has predicted His own death and bodily resurrection, fulfilled that prophecy, and convinced generations of His followers, including a band of disgruntled and heart-broken disciples, that He overcame death and lives for evermore. The ignominious death on a Cross would hardly seem to be a successful opening marketing strategy to ensure the survival of a belief in the founder's ‘resurrection’, if his body remains to this day (as Spong claims) decaying in a common criminals’ grave. If the earliest accounts of Jesus’ death indicted the authorities of His day, in part, as they do, for a travesty of justice surrounding Jesus’ death; and yet his body remains to this day in the grave, it would seem a miracle that such a ‘faith’ in the ‘resurrected’ Jesus ever ‘got off the ground’.

The only reasonable solution to the dilemma is to accept that the historical data points to the bodily resurrection account of Jesus as being true. It was this single event that explains the dramatic turnaround in the thinking of the disciples, the rapid inroads made by Christianity in a Jewish setting dominated by competing pagan beliefs, and the testimonies of faith in the Risen Lord by countless Christians throughout the ages.

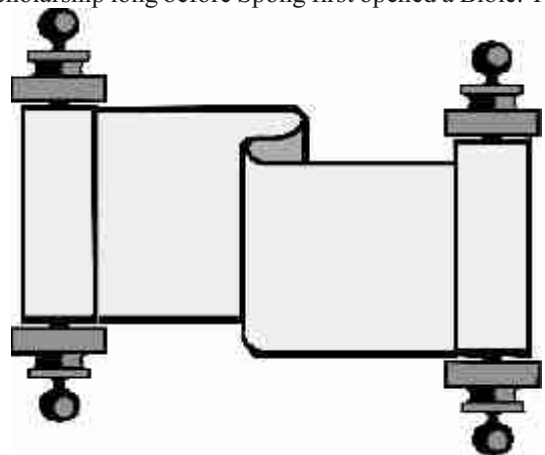
Like Geering and Veitch, Spong ridiculed the Ascension accounts (Mark 16:19; Lk. 1:51; Acts 1:2,9; 1 Tim. 3:16) as though they confirm that the Church believed it had to present Jesus as some sort of astronaut because its thinking was locked into a three-tiered universe.⁵ Nothing could be further from the truth. The Judaeo-Christian concept of Heaven has never suggested that it is a place located in the *physical* universe. It is referred to as “above” in the sense that it transcends earth-bound temporal life and exists in a different dimension. Spong has stated: “The ascension of Jesus was not about space-travel or moon shots. It was not to be literalized in terms of a first-century cosmology”. But the Church has never taught that the

immortal body of Christ rose from the earth to be relocated somewhere in the physical “heavens”.

The Scriptures teach that the Lord Jesus Christ “was lifted up while they were looking on, a cloud received Him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9). The event had a ‘physical’ dimension in that the immortal body of Christ rose in full view of the disciples and was taken from their sight. However, the obvious supernatural aspect of the account makes it ridiculous to suggest that it was ever conceived of strictly in terms of a literalised “space launch” in which the laws of physics govern the trajectory, the upward acceleration and final destination of Jesus in the physical universe. The great Reformed theologian Karl Barth poked fun at those who lacked the ability to grasp the truth of the Ascension.⁶ The ‘physical’ “rising” of Jesus was a reality and yet the *greater* reality was what the disciples grasped by faith - the glorious fact that Jesus had gone to be with His Father in Heaven. Spong is clearly a master at creating crude stereotypes of the beliefs affirmed in mainstream orthodox Christianity, stereotypes that are rarely, if ever challenged by journalists.

Spong's case for 'Christian Midrash' demolished

Bishop Spong is quite right to argue that Christians need to gain a Jewish perspective on the Scriptures. But this has been emphasised in conservative biblical scholarship long before Spong first opened a Bible. The



problem is that his understanding of the Jewish perspective and methodology is fundamentally wrong. While he offers insights into the connections between Old and New Testaments, his interpretative scheme is flawed and his ‘analyses’ contain a litany of distortions, faulty logic, bald assertions and sloppy scholarship. There is nothing original in his exegesis. He takes well understood Old Testament typologies - the foreshadowing of New Testament truths in the Old Testament - and prophetic passages linking the two; and turns them on their head, in an attempt to bolster his case that the Gospels are non-historical narratives and commentaries *because* they are “Christian *midrash*”.

The Gospels came about, he argues, through the retelling of the Jesus story in “midrashic terms” within the synagogues, relating the events of His life and ministry to the liturgical life of the synagogue, and attempts to incorporate Jesus and the Gentiles into Jewish tradition. In his book *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes* (HarperCollins,

1996) he contends that Gospel authors did not intend their stories to be perceived as historic accounts of actual events, but rather as interpretative narratives about the meaning of Jesus. Spong argues that only as we come to understand Jewish culture of the New Testament period and learn how to reinterpret these Jewish Gospels, will we be able to liberate them so that their message can make sense to a post-modern world. We must unpack Jesus from the Old Testament stories in which the writers have packaged him, he argues, and only then can we discover the One in whom God can be encountered by post-modern man. However, this argument begs the question, for if the Gospels are of minimal or no historical value in the understanding of the man Jesus, as Spong argues, then how can post-modern man know that Jesus is a man in whom God was present and can be encountered today.⁷

In his book *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (1994) Spong defines rabbinical *midrash* as the “Jewish way of saying that everything to be venerated in the present must somehow be connected with a sacred moment in the past.”⁸ *Midrash*⁹ is of course the developed tradition of biblical interpretation of pharisaic and later rabbinical Judaism. This method recognises the patterning within the Scriptures and looks for truth precisely within the “patternedness” of God’s revelation. As Jewish-Christian scholar Jacob Prasch notes:

In the handling of various Biblical literary genre – such as narrative, wisdom literature, Hebrew poetry and apocalyptic – it seeks cognate relationships between different scriptural texts in order to interpret them in the light of each other. The approach is more topical than linear... Midrash makes heavy use of allegory and typology to illustrate and illuminate doctrine, but never as a basis for doctrine. It sees multiple meanings in Bible texts found in strata, but this is very different in fundamental respects from the gnostic and Alexandrian uses of figurative interpretation associated with Philo and Origen, reflecting a more Hebraic, rather than Hellenistic world-view and view of theology. Midrash interprets prophecy as a cyclical pattern of historical recapitulation (prophecies have multiple fulfilment), with an ultimate fulfilment associated with the eschaton, which is the final focal point of the redemptive process.¹⁰

Spong is quite mistaken to think that the Gospel tradition contains “nothing objective” and contains almost nothing that is literal history *because it is midrash*. First, leading midrash scholars do not accept that the Gospel narratives are midrash, yet Spong defines them as the “haggadic midrash” of the event of Jesus¹¹ (p. 15). Second, midrashic interpretation incorporates a grammatical-historical exegesis as a *first* step and thereby full recognition is given to the historical accuracy and reality of events recorded. Figurative midrashic exposition in the New Testament can be found in Jude’s epistle or Galatians 4:24-34. It is midrash which accounts for the manner in which the New Testament writers handle the Old Testament. Jesus was a Rabbi, Paul was a Rabbi. They both interpreted

the Bible in a way other rabbis did – according to a method called *Midrash*. Spong explains his use of the term ‘midrash’ in his book *Born of a Woman* (pp. 18-20):

The Gospels, far more than we have thought before, are examples of Christian midrash. In the Gospels, the ancient Jewish story would be reshaped, retold, interpreted, and even changed so as to throw proper light on the person of Jesus. There was nothing objective about the Gospel tradition. These were not biographies. They were designed to inspire faith.

To force these narratives into the straightjacket of literal historicity is to violate their intention, their method, and their truth. To see them as expressions of the genre called midrash with a Christian twist is to enter Scripture in a new and perhaps life-giving way.

All conservative New Testament scholars would agree that the Gospels and the birth narratives do not



have *only* a flat, literal meaning. That would be absurd. They are written with great artistry at the level of narrative and theology. There are depths to them, which as New Testament scholar N.T. Wright points out, “the crude literalist is bound to miss, to his or her great loss. **But they are not midrash**” [emphasis added]. “This has become clear”, he goes on to note, “from the work of the great contemporary writers in the field. Names like Geza Vermes and Jacob Neusner come to mind: Spong doesn’t mention them in his discussion of *midrash*, perhaps not surprisingly, since although they are the acknowledged experts on the subject, **their work leaves no room for his strange distorted view**”¹² [emphasis added]. The recently translated work of Strack and Stemberger, a classic treatment of the subject, finds no place in Spong either; nor do the very important studies of Philip Alexander, the Director of the Hebrew Studies Centre at Yarnton, Oxford.¹³ Alexander’s articles form, in fact, a direct and devastating rebuttal of the use of ‘midrash’ by Dr Michael Goulder of the University of Birmingham, and others, upon whom Spong places great emphasis.”¹⁴

Goulder's views were published in 1974 and have found little support among scholars. It is incredible that Spong admits that he had not even heard of him until 1991. Goulder argues that the Jews of the New Testament times read their Scriptures according to a set lectionary – a view for which there is no evidence. "Indeed, it is even a matter of debate", as Bishop Paul Barnett points out, "whether such a lectionary was in place by the time of the Talmudic writings which were assembled in the 500s!"¹⁵ Goulder also asserted that the Gospel writers composed their Gospel text for lectionary readings in the Churches – again a viewpoint for which there is no evidence. In Goulder's view, the Gospel passages about Jesus and his ministry are non-historical and are merely ciphers for retelling Old Testament stories for the purpose of giving meaning and expression to the "God consciousness" the writers experienced in Jesus. Goulder's critics, who Spong chooses to ignore, point out, there is no evidence whatsoever that Jews of New Testament times used a lectionary to control their readings. On the contrary, Justin Martyr, writing in the mid- Second Century, tells us that the Christians in Church read "the memoirs of the apostles...as long as time permits (Justin, *Apology* 1:xvii).¹⁶ Spong erects the whole structure of his latest book *Liberating the Gospels* on these two erroneous assertions of Goulder.

Genuine 'midrash' differs drastically from anything that we find in the gospels.¹⁷ As Prof. R.T. France concludes, *midrash* is scarcely to be found where Spong alleges it is commonplace. France and D. Wenham are editors of a volume of essays published by Sheffield University Press in 1983 which substantially demolished Goulder's hypothesis. Spong makes no mention of this crucial work entitled "*Studies in Midrash and Historiography (Gospel Perspectives II)*" (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983). In fact he cites no scholar in his book *Liberating the Gospels* who does not support his own views. The same is largely true of all his other books. His 'scholarship' is built on conjecture upon conjecture 'supported' by largely discredited 'scholarship'. Here is a brief excerpt from Wright's case against Spong:

First, midrash proper consists of a commentary on an actual biblical text. It is not simply a fanciful retelling, but a careful discussion in which the original text itself remains clearly in focus. It is obvious that the gospels do not read in any way like this.

Second, real midrash is 'tightly controlled and argued'.¹⁸ This is in direct opposition to Spong's idea of it, according to which (p. 184) 'once you enter the midrash tradition, the imagination is freed to roam and to speculate'. This statement tells us a good deal about Spong's own method of doing history, and nothing about midrash. The use made of the Old Testament in the early chapters of Luke, to take an example, is certainly not midrash; neither is it roaming or speculative imagination.

Third, real midrash is a commentary precisely on Scripture....

Fourth, midrash never included the invention of stories which were clearly seen as non-literal in intent, and merely designed to evoke awe and wonder. It was no part of Jewish midrash, or any other Jewish writing-genre in the first century, to invent all kinds of new episodes about recent history in order to advance the claim that the Scriptures had been fulfilled....

Where does this leave Spong's continued emphasise on 'midrash' as the correct literary genre for the gospels? In tatters.... The gospels are not midrash¹⁹ (emphasis added).

Spong has stated that he can "no longer accept the proposition that anyone can understand the Bible, and most especially the New Testament, without understanding the method of midrash".²⁰ We must conclude that Spong neither understands the method of *midrash* nor the meaning of the New Testament. His promotion of his so-called 'midrashic' interpretation for the Gospel accounts is among other things, an attempt to dismiss the miraculous element from Scripture. In an interview on National Radio with Rev. Dr James Veitch, who largely accepts Goulder's theory on midrash, Spong stated:

... The walking on the water story. Jesus never walked on the water. There's no purpose for walking on the water. You know you don't walk out to catch a fish. You don't walk out to rescue someone.

Such 'reasoning' is puerile and matches that which he uses in his book *Born of a Woman* to 'prove' that Jesus' attendance *with his mother* at the wedding of Cana means that he was the one getting married.²¹ Even Dr Veitch, who like Spong, rejects all the miracles of Jesus, appeared flustered by Spong's *non sequitur*, for it does not follow that a miracle didn't happen because no purpose can be given for it occurring. A failure to find a purpose could be due to the intellectual deficiency and spiritual blindness of the one analysing the 'event'.

The Bishop's 'logic' is faulty on another score, since if one *could* walk on water and calm a storm in order to save one's friends from drowning, *surely one would do so!* This is what Jesus did. However, to analyse miracles on a purely pragmatic level is to miss the whole point, for they are manifestations of Divine power and were performed by Jesus to reveal His true identity to the Jews, as the Messiah and the Christ.²² Indeed, the disciples worshipped Him after He entered their boat and the wind stopped, declaring: "You are certainly God's Son" (Matt. 14:24-34; Jn. 6:18-21). Veitch tried in vain to cut into the Bishop's monologue and point out that the disciples were in peril of their lives on a storm tossed sea when Jesus came to them walking on the water and calmed the sea. Spong rudely ignored the interviewer and continued :

... If you read the book of Psalms you will find that after the Red Sea the Jewish people - Israel - celebrated God's power over water in their Psalms. That was their hymns. And they would say in the psalms God can make a path for Godself [sic] in the deep. God's footprints can be seen upon the waters. If you believe that Jesus

is an experience of the living God you interpret that by wrapping this God language from the host of Psalms around Him and so it was said of Him that he has power over water. His foot prints can be seen upon the sea. That's a midrashic story and it goes through the whole Gospel tradition... [in particular] Matthew, Mark and Luke. There are certainly elements of it in John.

Spong reduces two sober accounts in two Gospels, of events that were witnessed by the disciples, to mere fantasy-history in the interests of his ideological/philosophical bias which rules out miracles. The 'midrash' method of "wrapping God language" around the person of Jesus, which he says was employed in this case, is a "myth" of Spong's own making. The Gospels, as Wright and all leading authorities on *midrash* conclude, are not *midrash*.

Hypocrite or harmless modern-day Don Quixote?



Figures such as Bishop Spong become almost Pickwickian: naughty Anglican bishops who go about writing books which "question the faith" saying "shocking things". C.S. Lewis, places one such character, the "Episcopalian Ghost," in his work *The Great Divorce*.²³ In this brilliant

satirical character sketch of the 'enlightened' liberal Episcopalian bishop, one of the residents of Hell who takes a day trip to heaven, he exposes the pretentious, irreverent, flaky, and self-deluded nature of the liberal mind-set. The apostate minister, who appears as a "fat ghost with the cultured voice...wearing gaiters" declares that his rejection of traditional Christian doctrine was the expression of "honest opinions fearlessly followed [which] are not sins". They are "not only honest but heroic" and "I asserted them fearlessly," he declares. "When the doctrine of the Resurrection ceased to commend itself to the critical faculties which God had given me, I openly rejected it. I preached my famous sermon. I defied the whole chapter. I took every risk".

His claim to "risk"-taking is quickly challenged by fellow-traveller, Dick, who asserts that self-aggrandizement was his real motive. "What risk?" asks Dick, adding: "What was at all likely to come of it except what actually came - popularity, sales for your books, invitations, and finally bishopric?" – the same 'fruits' of apostasy enjoyed by 'renowned scholar' Bishop Spong. Dick explains to the Ghost how they had both fallen prey to the errors of liberal theology:

You know that you and I were playing with loaded dice. We didn't want the other [the fact of the "Supernatural" character of traditional Christian faith] to be true. We were afraid of crude salvationism, afraid of a breach with the spirit of the age, afraid of ridicule, afraid (above all) of real spiritual fears and hopes.... Having allowed oneself to drift, unresisting, unpraying, accepting every half-conscious solicitation from our desires, we reached a point where we no

longer believed in Faith. Just in the same way, a jealous man, drifting and unresisting, reaches a point at which he believes lies about his best friend: a drunkard reaches a point at which (for the moment) he actually believes that another glass will do him no harm. The beliefs are sincere in the sense that they do occur as psychological events in the man's mind. If that's what you mean by sincerity they are sincere, and so were ours. But errors which are sincere in that sense are not innocent.²⁴

Bishop Spong, who plays the role of an 'erudite' provocateur, is like the cultured apostate of Lewis's story who proclaims his heroic and fearless stand against "hide-bound prejudice, and intellectual dishonesty, and timidity, and stagnation" (*Divorce*, p. 37). "God, for me", says the Episcopalian Ghost, "is something spiritual. The spirit of sweetness and life and tolerance – and, er, service" (p. 42). "For me there is no such thing as a final answer. The free wind of inquiry must always continue to blow through the mind, must it not?" (p. 40). Such sentiments harmonise so well with the Spong song.

Spong clutches at straws to advance his preposterous and fanciful theories, devoting enormous energies to constructing straw-men left, right, and centre, so that traditional Christian beliefs appear as nonsense. As one perceptive critic wrote to the *Evening Post*:

People may mock the idea of a God who makes Man out of dust but if they read Spong all they will get is a bishop who loves making one from straw.... most Christians... would never deny Spong the right to critique the Christian faith, [but they] wish he would get his facts right first.²⁵

Spong's attacks on mainstream Christian beliefs, based largely on rhetoric, special pleading and sophistry, are reminiscent of the campaigns of the memorable hero Don Quixote, of Cervantes' classic



novel. He travels the world in a misguided devotion to chivalry, combating supposed enemies to his romantic ideal. His efforts include tilting at windmills in the mistaken belief that they are giants that threaten.

Spong's quixotic journey brings him 'down under', far from his own diocese in New Jersey, in the misguided belief that he has numerous theological dragons to slay here. His lance is tilted at numerous straw men, parodies and caricatures of Christian doctrine of his own making. He seems to imagine that the Church is bedevilled by extremes of a selective and uncritical literal reading of the Scriptures, or a blind and unquestioning

acquiescence before an authoritarian Church.²⁶ Such excesses may be part of the rigid "fundamentalism" of his past, but to accuse mainstream Christianity in New Zealand in such terms, shows he is ill-informed. If he actually engaged real targets which do pose a real threat to Christianity, he might have more credibility.

It would be easy to dismiss Spong as a harmless, misguided or self-deluded knight-errant, a champion of modernity stalking imaginary giants in an exercise of self-aggrandisement, unaware that he is doing battle

assumptions rooted in the sociology of knowledge, postmodernism argues for a world in which "objective" reality and the concept of absolutes are replaced by culturally determined visions of truth. As Rev. J.

Stephen Freeman has pointed out, "competent theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas or Leslie Newbigin have used the postmodernist critique to great advantage, turning classical liberalism on its ear and presenting

interesting and new defences of Christian tradition".²⁹

Spong gives *midrash* a postmodernist twist. "Midrash means that when one enters the Scriptures, one must abandon linear time", he says. "One must abandon literal certainty in favor of a living, open-ended faith tradition, where God is seen as past, present and future, all at once as if the three were inseparable".³⁰ Traditional Christian theology has always emphasised the sublime unity of the triune God, the three-fold time component of His actions in history, and the trans-historical nature of His creative, redemptive and Sovereign activity in the world. However, this is not a denial of the *literal* nature of Divine action in human history - the intersection of the transcendent One, in Whom the past, present and future components of time are subsumed within the eternal scope of His Being; with the *linear* development and progression of mankind's history. For Spong the abandonment of *literal* time in relation to God's actions, is an abandonment of the historicity of the Biblical accounts of God's supernatural actions in human history. Freeman concludes that "in Spong's hands "midrash" means nothing more than a private licence to reinvent the gospel in a manner which is indistinguishable from the liberalism he himself has now denounced".³¹

Spong claims that he wants to affirm that there is a 'transcendent' force or 'divine' reality "at the heart of life", but seeks to express this "truth" in "non-theistic terms". As atheist Dr Brian Edwards perceptively commented on National Radio (4 October, 1997), the Bishop, like Lloyd Geering, speaks pious "gobbledegook", for at every turn he resorts to religious concepts like "divinity" and "God" to try and express that which he (Spong) admits is unintelligible. Spong has been widely quoted as referring to "the true God, the divine mystery, the essence of holiness", being "within and beyond" all forms of worship traditions; theological terms and phrases which are clearly defined within a theistic framework. However, he is not using them in this sense at all. For him words in religious matters can be loaded with any 'reality' the user chooses. The term "holiness" bears no relationship to "moral good" or "moral evil" as traditionally defined, but means anything which enhances "fuller being". Furthermore, the phrase "God within and beyond" bears no relationship to the concept of God's immanence and



- Don Quixote and Rocinante; Sancho Panza and Dapple -

with giants of another place and era. But this is an inadequate analysis. Yes, it is true that his line of attack appears at first glance to be a rehash of the modernism that assaulted the churches in an earlier era. And yes, the world has moved on from modernism to embrace 'post-modernism',²⁷ which questions change and progress and, in fact, even the possibility of intelligibility. But our knight-errant vigorously denies being a champion of modernism or liberalism.

He claims that his book *Resurrection: Myth or Reality* (1994)²⁸ is a "postmodernist" approach to the Christian story. The rise of postmodernism, one of the trendy world-views currently popular on many university campuses, is one of the many symptoms of the bankruptcy of western liberalism. Working from

transcendence since there is no essential distinction between the Creator and the creature in terms of essential "being". The universe is part of who God is and as the universe evolves, God evolves.

Spong's challenge is not that of a harmless crusader, but that of a heretic who chooses to destroy the foundations of the Church while being financially suckled by her. His role is best compared to the Biblical picture of false prophets who come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves (Mt. 7:15). His attack is on two levels. On the surface he attacks straw-men, and he knows that they are only straw-men. But through the tangle of caricatures he is constantly thrusting at, his lance eventually pierces its intended victims, the **real** beliefs at the heart of Christianity - those that he concedes have provided solace and assurance to many sincere Christians throughout the centuries. The straw-men serve as the smokescreen for the real battle going on behind the scene.

If Spong truly believes that the Bible contains no *literal* truth, then why does he expend enormous energies rewriting the meaning of Scripture, when surely, in the end, one version is as good as any other. His cut-and-paste approach to Bible interpretation means that his interpretations will be irrelevant as new world-views emerge, long after he has departed this world. His assault on Christian faith is calculated and relentless, for he hates the reality which is embodied in traditional belief - the concept of a Holy self-revealing Sovereign Creator God to whom men and women are ultimately morally accountable. He finds traditional Christian doctrines "repulsive" because they embody the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ. The *Evening Post* editorial (October 15, 1997) reports on Spong: "He says the Church must come up with a new model of God which makes sense in a post-Darwinian world; he seeks a new language of faith". Clearly, he would prefer to remake God in his own image, for on National Radio in an interview with Rev. Dr Jim Veitch, he stated:

"The God we worship is made in our image. If horses had Gods they would look like horses. If bears had Gods they would look like bears."

Here we have the reversal of Christian truth so characteristic of apostates. A 'God' made in mankind's image, or for that matter Spong's image, would be a pagan god, and a graven image shaped by the liberal predilections of the human 'artist' and the potential embodiment of both the very best and worst features of human nature. Is it any wonder that Spong describes the practice of "kneeling in prayer and worship" as "infantile" since the concept of God as Father is no longer useful, as "it implies we are somehow dependent on Him".³²

Spong has outgrown such 'child-like concepts' which only serve to reinforce, he says, false faith and false security systems. He is soaring to lofty heights on the wings of 'insecurity', a Jonathan Livingstone Seagull, free from the morass of traditional Christian doctrine and mainstream committed Christians, who would count it a privilege to bow the knee to a Deity who they acknowledge to be worthy of worship.³³ (Spong's unblushing enthusiasm for New Age sentimentalism of the *Seagull* speaks volumes). Drawn

forever upwards on the thermal air-vents emanating from the 'time-less' works of "higher biblical criticism" and post-Darwinian 'enlightenment', Spong revels in the exquisite beauty and 'Sun-like' appearance of a 'divine'-graven image made in the likeness of his own. However, like the legendary Icarus, whose wax-held wings detached at a higher orbit, Spong has over-reached himself, and his fanciful theology is revealed as slop and mush when exposed to the penetrating light of the true Gospel. In one of his well-quoted passages, he states:

The time has come for the church to surrender its neurotic pattern of trafficking in one feeble religious security system after another and to allow its people to feel the bracing wind of insecurity, so that Christians might understand what it means to walk by faith.³⁴

The hypocrisy of such a position becomes clear when we examine his public statements. For example, in July 1993 the Bishop stated in a public debate with Rev. John Stott:

I state very clearly that I acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ.³⁵

If words mean anything, his affirmation of "Lordship" means that Jesus Christ is "the Lord". This is an affirmation that Jesus Christ is the All-powerful Ruler, above Whom there is no other. This was the title Caesar claimed for himself alone and the first century Christians were martyred for refusing to acknowledge Caesar as Lord. The term embodies the concept that we are subject to and dependent upon Him who outranks us as Creator, Sustainer and Judge of all people. When we are subject to His Lordship we acknowledge His right to rule us. The Christian believer affirms by faith the Lordship of Christ and finds in Him alone the basis for sins forgiven and eternal security.

But for Spong all such concepts are fit for the theological trash-can. He is quite comfortable affirming "the Lordship of Christ" because by the phrase he means something quite different from what it would suggest to orthodox believers. In an address to the 123rd convention of the Diocese of Newark on January 24, 1997, he began by stating:

Grace and Peace be with you in the name of the Lord Christ.

For Spong, Jesus is not the unique Christ in Whom the Godhead came to dwell fully in human form. Rather, Jesus is just another human embodiment, albeit the most advanced form in the opinion of some, of the "christ consciousness" preached by New Age adherents.

"No human words can capture any absolute truth," stated Spong in his address. "All human words are culturally conditioned and thus can never articulate ultimate truth. They can only point to it." And yet Jesus claimed to articulate and embody the ultimate truth for He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (Jn. 14:6). Spong of course claims Jesus never said this and that the exclusivity, while being anathema to him, can be taken

to mean something quite different. He adopts the same perverse approach when reciting and interpreting the creeds every Sunday, part of his duty in gaining a stipend from the Church. One wonders why he does not recite nursery rhymes backwards instead. At least this practice would not involve such blatant hypocrisy.

“Double-speak” and a Call for Resignation

As noted, the media has presented Spong as a saviour of the Church - Spong the hero “Saving the church from itself”.³⁶ As the media van lurched from one Spong promotion to another, it gained momentum, reaching a crescendo with the announcement that Spong sees himself as the saviour of Jesus Himself. Under the headline “Transforming God from an ogre of **our** making,”³⁷ he is reported as saying “We must free Jesus from the rescuer role” - His role as a Saviour from sin. Leading up to this comment, in an attempt to sound non-judgemental and present himself as the paragon of enlightened open-mindedness, he stated:

“It’s not that the churches’ concepts are wrong, it’s just that they were fashioned in a different age and are irrelevant to the world we’re now living in.”³⁸

This statement oozes “double-speak”, for in typical self-contradiction he goes on to attack the traditional Christian image of Jesus as Saviour from sin or “divine rescuer” *as taught in churches today*. He is reported as saying that the concept had grown out of “a view of human life which is no longer operative, a theistic understanding of God articulated in a form that’s all but **repulsive**, a **magical view** of Jesus that **violates our minds**..” Later he states that the concept is **nonsense**:

“A saviour to restore us to our pre-fallen status is pre-Darwinian superstition and post-Darwinian nonsense. We must free Jesus from the rescuer role.”

But how can “nonsense” not be “wrong”? To be specific, how can Spong say that the Church’s **concepts** of the Redemption, the Fall, and Salvation, are **not wrong** and then call them “nonsense” and “superstition”? Ian Harris, the article’s author, has suggested that what he meant to say was that the

concepts are true, but wrongly packaged for today’s world, since the packaging was put together in a pre-Darwinian world.³⁹ However, these theological concepts, while revealed against the backdrop of a specific Judaeo-Christian history, **are not tied to a particular scientific worldview. They were well-articulated before the advent of modern science, which as A.N. Whitehead, Loren Eiseley, S. Jaki, C.F. von Weizsacker and other leading scholars have shown, owes its very birth to the Christian faith.**⁴⁰ Perhaps the answer to Spong’s inconsistency is found in his statement in *The Evening Post* (October 27) on the Nicene Creed:

The creed is using mythological language to talk about what it means to be part of God’s creation. It’s a vision more than anything else. If you literalise the creed it becomes nonsense.⁴¹

Again his comments ooze “double-speak”. For Spong is happy to accept as literal truth those parts of the creed that fit his presuppositions - that Jesus **literally** “was crucified ... under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried...” (and that is all); while rejecting all others that offend his presuppositions. He reduces all those he rejects to nonsense by literalising them in an exaggerated fashion, reducing them to mere caricatures of the real doctrines. For example, as noted earlier, he portrays the Ascension as an attempt to launch an astronaut through interplanetary space to a *physical* heaven set in a three-tiered universe. The “rocket-man Jesus” Spong portrays, bears no resemblance to the Lord Jesus Christ portrayed in the Gospel account of the Ascension.

A recent correspondent, to *The Evening Post* and *The Dominion*, a senior Church elder in Wellington and a member of the Wellington Christian Apologetics Society (Inc.), put it well in his letters to the editor, by suggesting that it was blatant hypocrisy for a Bishop of the Church to draw a salary from the Church and share in the support funds of Christian trusts such as the St Andrews Trust, while devoting his energies to attacking the very foundations of beliefs that have given birth to the Christian Church.⁴²

Endnotes

- ¹ John S. Spong, “On Tour with Liberating the Gospels.” *The Bishop’s Voice, The Voice* (Newspaper of the Episcopalian Diocese of Newark, N.J.) (October 1996).
- ² Ian Harris, “Transforming God from an ogre of our making,” *Dominion* (Saturday, November 1, 1997), 26.
- ³ “Ian Harris reports on John Spong”, *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice*, 5/4 (November 1997), 27.
- ⁴ These include Dr Henry Morris, Dr Donald Chittick, Dr Duane Gish, the late Professor Arthur Wilder-Smith, Dr Carl Wieland, Dr Don Batten, and others.
- ⁵ Lecture, St Andrews on the Terrace, Wellington. October 7, 1997. Geering Fellowship Lectures.
- ⁶ Karl Barth, *The Faith of the Church* ed. by Jean-Louis Leuba, transl. by Gabriel Vahanian (1st British ed. London: Collins, Fontana Books, 1960), 97-98.
- ⁷ This point is also made by Bishop Paul Barnett in his article ‘Would the “real Jesus” please stand up?’ *Southern Cross* (Newspaper of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney) (October 1997). Rev. Barnett is Anglican Bishop of North Sydney and Emeritus Vice-President of the Anglican Church League.

- 8 John S. Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 8.
- 9 The clearest guidelines in Midrash are the Seven Midroth attributed to Rabbi Hillel, founder of the Pharisaic School of Hillel where Rabbi Shaul (St Paul) was educated as a rabbi by Rabbi Gamaliel, the grandson of Hillel. A classical work of Midrash in Judaism is the Midrash Rabba on Genesis (Berashith). Another is Lamentations Rabba.
- 10 Jacob Prashch, Midrash. <http://www.cw.co.za/moriel>
- 11 Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*, 15.
- 12 cf. G. Vermes, *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975); J. Neusner, *Midrash in Context: Essays in Formative Judaism* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholar's Press, 1988).
- 13 cf. H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991); P.S. Alexander, 'Midrash and the Gospels', in C.M. Tuckett (ed.), *Synoptic Studies* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 1-18, and 'Midrash', in R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden (eds.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London and Philadelphia: SCM and TPI, 1990), 452-59. Cf. too G.G. Porton, 'Midrash', in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. IV, 818-22, with extensive bibliography.
- 14 N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (1st publ. 1992; SPCK: 1995, 5th impression), 72.
- 15 Barnett, 'Would the "real Jesus" please stand up?'.
- 16 Barnett, 'Would the "real Jesus"...'.
- 17 All Midrashic teaching undertakes two things: (1) to explain opaque or ambiguous texts and their difficult vocabulary and syntax thus supplying us with what we would call literal or close-to-literal explanation or, for lack of that, purely homiletic guess; (2) to contemporize, that is, so to describe or treat biblical personalities and events as to make recognisable the immediate relevance of what might otherwise be regarded as only archaic. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* ed. Mircea Eliade, Vol. 9 (N.Y.: Macmillan/London: Collier Macmillan, 1978), 512.
- 18 Alexander 1984, 'Midrash and the Gospels,' 10, in direct reference to the question of Luke 1-2. See endnote 12.
- 19 Wright, *Who was Jesus?*, 72-73. See endnote 13.
- 20 Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*, 3.
- 21 Wright, *Who was Jesus?* 90-91. Here Wright shows that Spong exhibits a "total lack of historical perspective" and his "entire argument" hangs on "slender and anachronistic threads".
- 22 Miracles formed an important element in the work of Jesus Christ, being not only Divine acts, but forming also a part of the Divine teaching. Christianity is founded on the greatest of all miracles, the Resurrection of our Lord. If that be admitted, other miracles cease to be improbable. Miracles were and are a response to faith, and its best encouragement. They are also referred to as "signs", "wonders", "marvels", and "mighty works". See C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (1st publ. 1947: Great Britain: Collins, Fount Paperbacks, 12th impress., 1988).
- 23 C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: A Dream* (1st publ. 1946: London: Geoffrey Bles, reprint, 1962).
- 24 Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 38.
- 25 Michael Bott, "Bishop accused of making a man from straw," *The Evening Post* (Monday, October 27, 1997), 5. Bott is a former Vice-President of the Wellington Christian Apologetics Society (Inc.).
- 26 The Don Quixote comparison used here is based on ideas contained in a letter from Bishop Brian Carrell, published in the *Wellington Cathedral News* (November 1997). The Bishop, who has given his permission for these ideas to be used in the present article, suggests three "obstacles to faith today" should be addressed by the Anglican Church rather than the "windmills" Spong attacks. These are (a) "a lack of credibility in how we often live as individual believers or companies of believers, with the effect that our Christian lives do not always reinforce our gospel words", (b) "a lack of clarity in our grasp and expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ in terms that come across as good news to our generation", and (c) "a lack of reality in how our faith finds fresh roots in the soil of this land. We still look too often like a Northern Hemisphere import, a Church that draws more on its 11th than 1st century roots."
- 27 See E. Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 28 See endnote 8.
- 29 Rev. J. Stephen Freeman, "A Platonist discovers Midrash: John Shelby Spong's *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*" A Review. Episcopalians United - *United Voice*. <http://www.episcopalian.org/EU/UV/1994/november/resurrection.htm> Rev. Freeman is rector of St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Oak Ridge, Tennessee.
- 30 Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*, 20.
- 31 Freeman, "A Platonist discovers Midrash..."
- 32 Lecture. Sunday, 5 pm - 6.30pm October 8. Johnsonville Union Church. About 90 people attended including former minister of St Andrews on the Terrace, Rev. John Murray, and the current minister Rev. James Stuart.
- 33 See Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:10.
- 34 Spong, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop rethinks the birth of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 13.
- 35 "A Dialogue on Christian Sexual Ethics" between Rev. Dr John R.W. Stott and Bishop John S. Spong. *Crux* Vol. XXIX, No. 3 (September 1993), 29. *Crux* is the journal of Regent College, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. The dialogue was moderated by Dr Maxine Hancock of Edmonton.
- 36 Ian Harris, "Saving the Church from Itself," *Dominion* (7 October, 1997).
- 37 Harris, "Transforming God..." See endnote 2.
- 38 Harris. "Transforming God..."
- 39 Personal communication by telephone Tuesday 4 November 1997.
- 40 See Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 1926) 17; Loren Eiseley, *Darwin's Century: Evolution and the men who discovered it* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Anchor, 1961) 62; Stanley L. Jaki, *Science and Creation: From eternal cycles to an oscillating universe* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1974) viii; Carl von Weizsacker, *The Relevance of Physics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 163.
- 41 "If it isn't real, what does it mean?", Interview with Bishop John Spong by Phil Pennington. *Insight: Christianity, Evening Post* (Monday, October 27, 1997), 5.
- 42 William Turkington. Letters to the Editor; *Dominion* (18 October, 1997) "Clerics too Skeptical"; *Evening Post* (23 October) "Blatant Clerical Hypocrisy". One wonders why he hasn't got the backbone to leave the Church, queried the writer, and join the Skeptics Society where he would be welcomed with open arms.

Here I Stand: A Critique

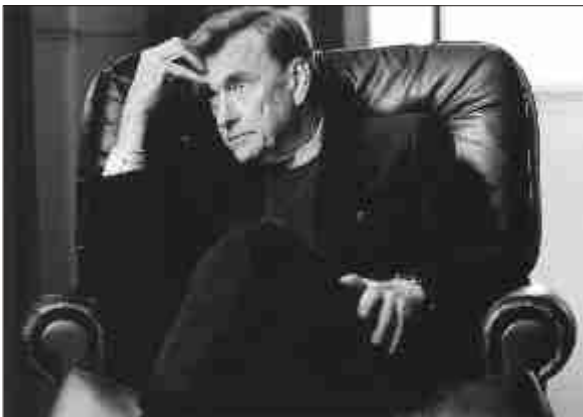
by David H. Lane

Here I Stand: My Struggle For a Christianity of Integrity, Love, and Equality

by John Shelby Spong

(HarperCollinsPublishers, 2000)

461 Pages: ISBN 0 7322 6693 9



Introduction

An autobiography may be subjective. *Here I stand* chronicles Bishop John Shelby Spong's experiences over the course of his professional life of almost 25 years as an Episcopalian (Anglican) priest and bishop of the Diocese of Newark in northern New Jersey. This diocese has become well-known in the 70-million strong world-wide Anglican communion as "the graveyard for liberalism" due to its rapid decline in numbers, and is no longer at the cutting edge of change.¹ The book traces the author's life from poverty in America's rural and segregated south to a successful author and lecturer who claims to herald a "new reformation" in the Christian Church. He began writing it while in New Zealand on a lecture tour in 1997 and it was published shortly after he retired in January 2000. I met and spoke with the author at two of these lectures and attended other lectures on his two earlier tours of the country.

While an autobiography may be egocentric, this 461-page one by the most controversial bishop in today's world-wide Anglican communion, goes beyond that to become markedly egotistical. Such is the ecclesiastical hubris that the average genuine Christian reader would probably feel squeamish and embarrassed reading parts of this book. Even the liberal Presbyterian minister Rev. Christopher J. Nichol,² a true blue Spong 'acolyte', wrote in a recent review: "*Here I Stand* crosses the border [from "egocentric"] and becomes egotistical" (*Evening Post*, 21 July, 2000). In another review, Ian Harris,³ a strong supporter of Bishop Spong

and a theological liberal, describes him as "com[ing] across as tetchy and arrogant". His "impatience with his church", writes Harris, the first chairman of the Sea of Faith (NZ), "grows over time" (*Dominion*, 5 Aug, 2000).

Throughout the book Bishop Spong denounces Anglican leaders, both liberals and conservatives, fundamentalists and all who would dare to disagree with him on such issues as the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals and lesbians to the Episcopalian priesthood. He calls all "ex-gay" organisations "fraudulent" (p. 393). He accuses the Archbishop George Carey of engaging in "strident rhetoric", "dishonesty" and lying, displaying "weak and ineffective leadership" and promoting "rampant homophobia" (pp. 440-41) and maligns the character of evangelical Anglican scholar Rev. Dr John Stott (pp. 409-11). The highly respected conservative biblical scholar and teacher N.T. (Tom) Wright is dismissed as "a propagandist rather than an educator" who "speak[s] to a world that no longer exists" (p. 400). Spong scoffs at his "outdated thought" and describes his attempt to defend "the literalness of the legend of the virgin birth" [Spong's words] of Christ as "simultaneously amusing and depressing" (p. 400).

Spong is damning of the presiding Episcopalian bishop Frank Griswold, attacking his integrity, expressing how "disgusted" he was with Bishop Griswold's behaviour, and describing him as a "pathetic" and "inept" person lacking any leadership character (pp. 449-51). Bishop Gordon Charleton is described as "probably the most irrationally homophobic man [he] had ever met" (p. 391). He describes the 1998 Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops as "a place of overt dishonesty and rampant hostility" (p. 451) where he met "evangelicals ...in public debate" who were "frequently dishonest, manipulative, and unworried by any commitment to truth, fairness, or justice." (p. 455). The refusal of the Conference to support the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals to the priesthood, is called "a sign of the death of Christianity". His public insults directed at evangelical African Bishops at the Conference were well publicised. Although he was forced to apologise for his comments at the time, he states unrepentantly in his book that he never considered them then, or now, to

be insults, let alone requiring any form of apology from him.

Spong reserves his most glowing praise for Rt. Rev. John Eldbridge Hines who served as Presiding Episcopalian Bishop from 1964-1973, calling him his “closest friend”, his “ultimate role model” and a “warm, open, and brilliant” man “possess[ing]...awesome personal integrity” (p. 232). He adds: “I believe John Hines saw me as one who might continue his legacy” (p. 232). Spong never made it to this spiritual zenith in terms of office and his rancour directed at Hine’s successor is recorded by providing the reader with Hine’s “opinion” of the man:

“John’s ... successor [The Rt. Rev. John (Jack) Maury Allin] was, in his [John Hine’s] opinion, a man who replaced creative vision with an unthinking reaction wrapped in the language of a dishonest and threadbare piety” (p. 232).

Using this means to attack a conservative church leader makes it hard to match with Spong’s stated “goal ... to hold up a mirror to friend and foe alike and, when the reflection was visible, to say *this is how you looked to me*” (p. ix, emphasis added). Of one of Jack Allin’s “cronies” (p. 307) as Spong calls him, Harold Robinson of Western New York (Buffalo), he writes: “Harold was a decent man, relatively conservative, who loved the trappings of the bishop’s office and delusions of power that these trappings produced” (p. 308). Later he accuses him of being “hostile” and “incompetent” and “never [having] said a kind word” (p. 389). One suspects these charges of hostility and delusion might be a case of ‘the pot calling the kettle black’.

Early in his book he states that his “primary agenda as a priest” was “always ... to move the theological debate out of the sacred structures of sacred space and into the professional lives of our people”. His “measure of successful preaching” was always based on whether the sermon was discussed during the week “in offices and hospitals, on golf courses, at bridge tables, and at cocktail parties” (p. 4). Most of his critics have seen something positive in his efforts to relate the Christian faith to the modern world and provoke discussion. However, they are all in agreement that he has placed himself well outside the Christian tradition and has used his privileged position as bishop to attack it.

Spong thrives on controversy and will no doubt be delighted, if not profoundly flattered, that the present writer has entered the debate over his learned views. Provocateurs regard any publicity as good publicity. They are flattered by the attention even bad publicity brings. Bonhoeffer’s warning in his *Ethics* that foolishness may be, in our epoch, a greater evil than ‘evil’ itself is relevant here. Such foolishness needs to be confronted head on.

Hectoring and intemperate tone

Spong’s “hectoring and intemperate tone”, as the Archbishop George Carey described it, and his filibustering in far-flung fields of the Anglican communion, have created major dissention and unprecedented rancour. He admits that his “temper was spoken about openly” and that he lurched from one

personal “faith crisis” to another while creating “enormous hostility” in the wider Christian community through the nature of his published works. The Episcopalian House of Bishops formally dissociated itself from him and his diocese for his part in the ordination of a practising homosexual, Robert Williams (see later discussion).

Spong’s near obsession with promoting the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals and lesbians, church blessings for “gay” ‘marriages’, and his blanket dismissal of the views of all who would disagree with him, as “prejudiced” and “ignorant”, are all hallmarks of his numerous propaganda ‘missions’ into the public arena. Between 1990 and 2000 he made almost three thousand public addresses (p. 438).

He takes great umbrage at comments made by his critics that he is not a real scholar of any standing and only an “amateur theologian”. He dismisses such “demeaning comments”, as he terms them, as not even worthy of reply (p. 311) but then proceeds to try and disprove his critics by quoting the number of his published books, his book sales figures, book citations, and such like (see later discussion). He highlights the fact that he has been awarded two *honorary* Doctor of Divinity degrees [in 1976 and 1977] and one *honorary* Doctor of Humane Letters by recognised institutions of higher learning, and then accuses his critics of not



Lloyd Geering

having “ever thought about achieving ... [such] academic honors”. Such an arrogant claim can be easily dismissed. Many of his critics such as Dr N.T. Wright have “earned doctorates” in theology from world-class universities. Furthermore, of the 308 living bishops in the Episcopalian Church (USA) in 1998, 64 had “earned doctorates”, including 48 in theology and 16 in “secular”

fields.⁴ Many of them have been highly critical of Spong’s position and have voted against him on issues involving “gay” marriage and ordination. John Spong, like his admirer Lloyd Geering, who he describes as New Zealand’s “great liberal Christian voice” (p. 405) lacks an earned doctorate degree.

Spong’s own “delusions of grandeur and hints of immortality”, at first only momentary and largely innocent, which he refers to feeling on seeing the publication of his first “booklet”, seem to find permanent residence in his psyche during his meteoritic rise to success in the publishing field.

His book’s title *Here I stand*, is intended to be a reference to the famous declaration made by Martin Luther at the genesis of the 16th century Reformation at the Diet of Worms: “Here I stand ... I can do no other”.⁵ Luther helped ignite the Reformation of the 16th century by nailing to the door of the church in Wittenberg in 1517 the 95 Theses that he wished to debate with the Roman Catholic Church. Spong sees himself as a visionary following in the spirit of Luther, by his proposals of a radical overhaul of every one of

the main Christian doctrines undergirding the Christian creeds. Spong's "Twelve Theses" in which he seeks "to sketch out a view of God beyond theism" are listed in his appendix (pp. 468-69). They are expanded upon in his earlier book *Why Christianity Must Change: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*.

The Rt. Rev. Rowan Williams, who he describes as one of the Anglican Communion's "ablest scholars and one generally open and liberal on the gay issue" (p. 446), described the theses as "juvenile and unworthy of serious consideration" in the Lambeth issue of the *Church Times*, the closest thing to an official Anglican church newspaper in England. True to form Spong hit back describing the article in his autobiography as a "hostile ... and unprincipled attack" on himself, "irresponsible, unprofessional, and lacking in integrity". He adds "I told him [Williams] so". Spong then has the gall to go on to accuse Williams of merely writing the review to "win the approval of the evangelical elements of the church who were blocking his advancement in the life of the church". In a pouting and pitiful display of spite he writes: "Like so many bishops in the United Kingdom, he [Williams] yearned to wind up at Canterbury, York, or at least London. All were light-years away from Monmouth.... [William's] article was, on the favorite targets of the evangelicals [and] would serve him well" (p. 446).

Spong's assertions contained in his twelve theses amount to a renunciation of all that he affirmed when he made his ordination vows on joining the Episcopalian priesthood. They risk the suggestion of hypocrisy. But the word hypocrisy has no place in his vocabulary unless levelled by himself as a charge against those with whom he disagrees. He even levelled the charge of hypocrisy, in effect, against Rev. Robert Williams, the first practising gay man he ordained to the priesthood (see later discussion), when he rightly sought and obtained his resignation for expressing views in public contrary to his ordination vows.

"Unless Robert reaffirms the basis on which he was ordained", thundered Spong to the board of Oasis (a ministry to "gays" which Williams was appointed to the head of by Spong), "I cannot in conscience continue to support his work at the Oasis or to ask the diocese to underwrite it" (p. 386).

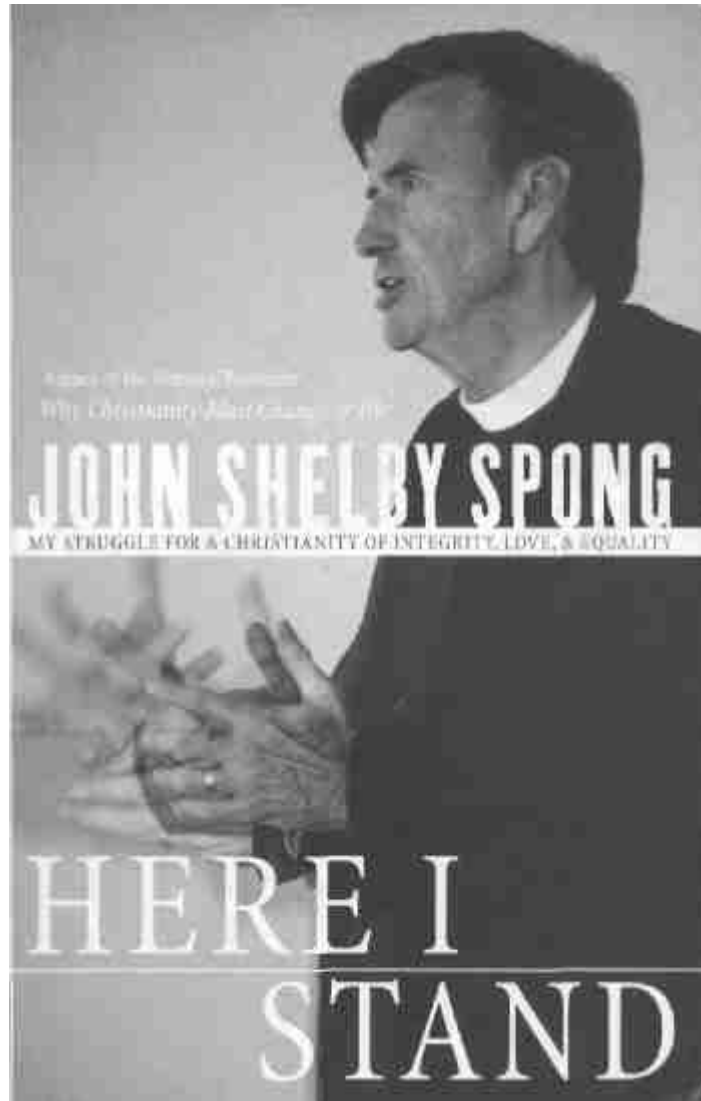
One wonders whether Spong's conscience has ever been activated or even pricked by the fact of his own whole-scale abandonment of the Christian doctrines he

vowed to uphold at his own ordination. He has only sneered and laughed at those who have dared to challenge him on such matters (e.g. see p. 380), and yet he has remained content to be suckled financially through to his retirement and beyond by a church whose teachings he has long abandoned and still seeks to destroy. (Similarly, liberal ministers in New Zealand churches, such as Presbyterians Lloyd Geeing and Rev. Dr James Veitch, who both hold and propagate similar beliefs to Spong, have been content to be suckled in like fashion).

In the case of Rev. Robert Williams, he had agreed to remain sexually faithful and monogamous in his "gay" relationship, as a condition of his ordination to the priesthood and his employment with "Oasis" in Hoboken - a ministry to

homosexuals and lesbians. Spong felt that he had effectively double-crossed him when Williams publicly stated, shortly after his ordination, that sexual faithfulness and monogamy were part of a scheme to impose heterosexual standards on the gay community (p. 386). Indeed Spong, a married monogamous heterosexual bishop, had imposed this 'irksome restriction' (as some might view it) on Williams as a prerequisite to his continued employment in the diocese. He sought to straight-jacket this marginalised "gay" man and make him conform to his own 'narrow' view on the superiority of sexual fidelity and monogamy, without taking account of the rampant promiscuity that is often integral to the "gay" lifestyle.

It is important to note that Spong is in fact a conservative compared to some of the aggressive



advocates of sexual revolution within the Church. (For example, Professor Carter Heyward's advocacy of "sexual friendships" and the recent Beyond Inclusion Conference at All Saint's Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California at which monogamy for homosexual people was said to be unnecessary).

Robert Williams, who had been asked by a reporter shortly after his ordination by Spong on June 3, 1989 - "Are you saying that sex is good for everyone?" - had made world headlines when he had responded with unbridled anger: "Mother Teresa would be better off if she got laid" (p. 386). Spong recalls the fallout: "The grand experiment, based on the hope of developing a new consciousness in the church, was going up in flames" (p. 386).

To his credit Spong displayed belated pastoral competence and discernment in recognising the offensive character of Williams' widely reported comments, made while Mother Teresa (d. 1997) was still alive. He suggested that Williams apologise to the Roman Catholic Church for attacking one of their icons, but he refused to, saying that to ask a "gay" man to apologise to the Roman Catholics was like asking a Jew to apologise to Nazi Germany. Spong interpreted this recalcitrance as due to Williams' lack of knowledge of "how to deal with public relations", an area in which he is a self-confessed expert. Williams "was now an empowered victim", writes Spong, "who needed to give as good as he got". In 1991, just two years after being ordained, Williams⁶ was diagnosed with AIDS and died at the age of 37.⁷⁷ Spong chooses not to mention these important facts but does record that Williams had "wanted to be the first openly gay, male theologian of the church who would specifically help the church look at theology through the eyes of an authentic gay male experience" (p. 349).

Reflecting on the "incident" Spong writes: "[It] only proved how incompetent I was in allowing this ordination to take place in the first place" (p. 387). The largely homosexual board of Oasis were deeply embarrassed by William's damaging comments and voted to inform Spong that they no longer had confidence in his leadership. Spong had been assisted in the ordination by the retired bishop of Maine, Fred Wolf, who was the preacher, and the retired bishop of Iowa, Walter C. Righter. Soon afterwards, not surprisingly, enormous pressure mounted within the House of Bishops for Spong to resign for violating the church teaching and the collegiality of the House by ordaining Williams. He ignored such criticisms and resolved to beef up his campaign to emancipate "gay" clergy and succour the cause of marginalised non-celibate "gays" seeking ordination. He sought to downplay the fiasco by reporting that the problem had been with William's maverick style and his refusal to work with him.

Spong's schemes to force through homosexual ordination into the Episcopalian/Anglican communion were regularly plotted while on paid study leave. For example, he confesses to having spent much of his time while on sabbatical study at Harvard Divinity School in 1990 "plotting a national campaign to deliver the church from the peril of seeing its prejudice against homosexual persons become a perceived virtue" (p.

388). He focused on this "campaign" after he had deliberately verbally "kicked" the presiding bishop, Edmond Browning, "in the stomach" (figuratively) by accusing the church of serving its own agenda of "homophobia" (p. 388). Spong indulged himself in the Harvard sabbatical respite soon after the Robert Williams scandal erupted, while numerous calls for his resignation were still being voiced in the House of Bishops.

He recalls delving into one real 'theological gem' while at Yale Divinity School, a book published in the 1930s by Arthur Nock. In it Nock raised the possibility that the Apostle Paul might have been a deeply repressed gay man. Delighted that his search to uncover Paul's "emotional and hidden agendas" (p. 375) had supposedly hit 'pay-dirt', and armed with this gem of 'modern scholarship', he soon began his crusade to inform the "ill-informed" masses in the Church that even though Paul "had been a self-hating homosexual man", the 'good news' is that "God loves us just as we are". Never one to dare suggest that homosexual acts are sinful and to be repented of, Spong calls "in-the closet" "self-loathing" repressed "gays" into committed monogamous same-sex relationships and then into the priesthood.

On the opening page to the preface Spong writes: "My goal has been to hold up a mirror to friend and foe alike and, when the reflection was visible, to say this is how you looked to me.... I have tried in these descriptions to be scrupulously honest" (p. ix). The sheer numbers of bishops in his own communion he identifies as "foes" is staggering. It is hard to reconcile this with his search for "a Christianity of integrity, love and equality". The litany of abuse he levels at his many foes is tiresome: evangelicals and conservatives are almost always labelled "ill-informed", "lacking integrity", "prejudiced", "close-minded", "doctrinaire in a fundamentalist direction", "hostile", "male-chauvinists" and "engaged in character assassination", etc. All liberals who fail to endorse his views are accused of "mediocrity", "shallowness" and "compromise".

"To affirm diversity", writes Spong in his preface, "is to respect differences, and to create an environment in which each person can be called and empowered to be the deepest, fullest self possible, for that is what I believe the church, known as the Body of Christ, is designed to do" (p. xi). Such words are empty rhetoric when one considers the schismatic and vitriolic nature of his efforts to discredit those who sincerely seek to uphold the traditional teachings of the Church.

Childhood background

John Shelby Spong was born on June 16, 1931 in Charlotte, North Carolina. His father died when he was twelve years old leaving him "with lots of unhealed wounds" from their "incomplete relationship". Healing occurred when he found a surrogate father in the person of his rector, Robert Crandall, who helped him discover his "own call to the priesthood" (p. x).

"The religious right of my adult life", he writes, "is the direct descendant" of an "evangelical moralistic mentality" (p. 10) endemic to the "Protestant

fundamentalist southland” of his birth. The religion of his mother he calls “a brand of rigorous fundamentalist Calvinism” (p. 14) and he describes her as “represent[ing] the moderate or liberal wing of her family’s rigorous fundamentalist background”. His home was “overtly pious” where “racism was an operative assumption” (p. 18). With breathtaking candour he recalls a wondrous moment of pre-pubescent “self- actualization” involving his “first step” towards rejecting racism:

“The first dawning on my consciousness that there might be something out of sync about the [overtly pious and racist] way of life I accepted as normal occurred when I was *no more than three or four*. Yet it settled into my memory bank and over the years acted like a pebble in my shoe. For me it marked the first moment of self-actualization, the first step out of my Southern upbringing” (p. 19. Emphasis added).

He goes on to recall how his father had lectured him while he was still three or four never to say “Sir” or “no Sir” to a Negro. Following an innocent exchange between himself and an old black workman in which he addressed him as “Sir”, he was mentally crushed to discover that this ‘transgression’ of the “Southern code” was a cause for discipline (mild rebuke) from his father, a response he could not comprehend. “I remember feeling deeply conflicted over this episode for days or even weeks”, he writes.

“I tried to process my father’s hostility internally, but it made no sense to me. I felt wronged... for me, *as a three- or four-year-old boy*, to decide in a *deep and significant way* that my father was wrong, *morally wrong*, in what he had done opened doors in me to a radical new self-consciousness that would never go away” (pp. 19-20. Emphasis added).

His father was an alcoholic and he records:

“... strange as it may seem, I never saw him retire for the night without kneeling at his bed to pray. He never talked with me about that prayer time or its meaning to him, and though I did not experience him as a religious man, that symbol of kneeling made a powerful impression on me. In my world a religious man would not do the things my father did. He drank whiskey, mostly bourbon, he used profanity with enthusiasm, he played poker for money ... and gamble[d] at slot machines and cards” (p. 14).

God was introduced to young John as “very much like a punishing parent, male to be sure”. He was taught to fear Him and that He “had heaven as a place of reward and hell as a place of punishment”. (p. 15). Spong hated Sundays as a boy. The things he learned about the Bible came from his Episcopal Sunday school, not his family. The family Bible was seldom read and yet was treated with awe and respect (p. 16). At home as a boy alone he played “Let’s Pretend” games including delivering sermons which he preached with much fervour, singing hymns, offering prayers and dispensing make-believe communion elements. As other ‘normal’ boys played with toy trucks, pirate’s hats

and cowboy’s outfits, dreaming of becoming truck drivers and gangsters, young John was indulging in ecclesiastical fantasies.

Confirmation and religious zeal



John Spong was confirmed at St Peter’s Episcopal Church, Charlotte, North Carolina, in April 1943. He attended a single preparatory class on Saturday morning following choir practice and was confirmed the next day. Looking back he admits it was “shoddy

preparation that would have embarrassed him as a priest years later, but it did not embarrass me then” (p. 28). The one class amounted only to a definition of the word “confirm”. In order to “make up for [his] inadequate confirmation preparation” he memorised the catechism found in the Book of Common Prayer and said the prayers in the Offices of Instruction seven times each night (p. 29).

Although he states that “this decision [to get confirmed] would prove to be the single most determinative moment on which the story of my life would turn” (p. 28), its significance is only explained in sociological terms. It only appears to have signalled his move beyond his “family’s orbit” in that he saw it as “doing a dramatic and independent thing”. There is nothing stated suggesting he had truly come to saving faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord of his life or grasped the true meaning and claims of the Gospel message.

The reality of his father’s death in 1943 produced in him “some strange psychological feelings” - a sense of failure and resentment. “I had bargained with God many times in my life”, he writes. “I do not know where this intimate God association came from, but I never doubted its reality in those early years” (pp. 28-29). As he saw it then, the death of his father meant he “had failed God, and God had exacted the penalty!” He was sure that his failure to do his full quota of prayers the night his father died, was responsible for the death. Denied the chance to attend the funeral and “forced to miss that essential bit of closure [he had] resented [his] demotion greatly” (p. 30).

He recalls as a boy receiving two “primary gifts from Santa”. One was a large portrait of Jesus, “the typical schmaltzy, pious, lowbrow picture of Jesus, complete with long blond hair, fair skin, and blue eyes [complete with] a nimbus over his head and a heavenly light coming from heaven itself that seemed to illuminate his face”. (p. 32). He was thrilled with this gift, and it hung on the wall over his bed from that day till the day he went to university. After receiving a “Santa gift” of a King James Version Bible, he states that “a lifetime love affair with that book was first born in me. It has never yet departed. I began on that Christmas Day the habit of daily Bible reading. I suspect I have read the Bible through twenty-five times

by now. I only know that it was there and that it was intense" (p. 32).

In the mould of Robert Crandall

The young Spong's Rector, Robert Crandall, who as noted earlier, helped him discover his "own call to the priesthood" (p. x) was an Anglo-Catholic "High Church Episcopalian". He loved being called "Father" and when Spong was invited to call him "Padre" instead, he reports: "I felt as if I had been invited into his inner circle" (p. 37). "I adored this man", writes Spong and "quite obviously I fashioned my life on his in every way I could" (p. 39). "I was captivated by [him]. He was such an immediate hero to me that I know I was a fawning groupie" (p. 37). "I was a zealot, a Crandallite, and so I vowed to make myself into a perfect acolyte and a true believing Catholic churchman" (p. 38). Because of that "primary relationship", he "determined then and there that [he] wanted to be a priest - not just any kind of priest, but one in the mould of Robert Crandall. Every other ambition paled when compared with this goal in my life". All his childhood religious zeal and interests "were focused and incarnated in [his] Padre, Robert Crandall" (p. 40). He was also "smitten" by Crandall's fashionable wife - "the most amazing and even tantalizing woman [he] had ever seen" ... who smoked cigarettes from a "long golden cigarette holder" (p. 37).

Later, as Spong recalls, he was to cut himself loose from Crandall's Anglo-Catholicism, his narrow view of the Church as the source of all truth, and his conservative liturgical commitments: "I care little [now] for the trivia of ablutions or hand motions and genuflections that once accompanied my celebration of the Eucharist" (p. 40). It is noteworthy that as a teenager, Crandall was the only adult who Spong felt talked with him and not at him.

In 1947 Spong was elected treasurer of the Young People's Service League (YPSL) of the Diocese of North Carolina and the diocesan youth convention which he calls "the first significant honor to come to me in my life" (p. 42). Later he was elected president and he recalls how "Padre" Crandall asked him to stand during a church service at St Peter's to congratulate him, linking him with the newly consecrated Bishop William Jones Gordon, who eleven years earlier, like Spong had been elected president of the YPSL of the same diocese. Spong recalls Cradall's exact words:

"I predict the day will come when he [Spong] too will be elected one of the bishops of our church". Spong comments "My fantasies knew no bounds" (p. 45).

These "fantasies" of the ego are well-documented in this book which marks a new low in ecclesiastical hubris. The boundary between egocentric and egotistical is regularly traversed in the chronicles of a career punctuated by pitiful phantasmagorical recollections of the path to ecclesiastical stardom and post-modern feigning luminosity.

The bishop's ring and a taste of "glory"



Spong recalls the sense of sheer excitement he had experienced, while still the treasurer of YPSL, when he was invited by Bishop Edwin Anderson Penick of Raleigh, to come to Raleigh for Bishop Gordon's consecration

as bishop of Alaska. He was asked to present the bishop's ring to him during the service on behalf of the young people of the diocese. As treasurer he had demonstrated noticeable leadership prowess in helping to raise the money needed to purchase the ring. He accepted the invitation and attended the first consecration of a bishop he had ever witnessed, involving about a hundred of the clergy from the Diocese of North Carolina. "I helped to put the bishop's ring on his finger", he recalls. "The glory of being among these luminaries of the church was lasting. I was a church romantic for sure" (p. 44). He still no doubt emanates this "lasting glory" and it may well explain his wide appeal to fellow romantics besotted by ecclesiastical trappings.

Spong had become well known for his leadership prowess in the campaign for funds for the bishop's ring. Riding high on the euphoria following his association with the luminaries in Raleigh, he was nominated and elected without opposition to be president of the young people of the diocese for a one-year term. "Once again the church had been the place of affirmation and honour for me", writes Spong. "It is no wonder I reveled in ecclesiastical things and entertained no other possibility for myself than the life of the priesthood" (p. 44).

As a senior acolyte he attended as a delegate the North American Christian Youth Conference held in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He recalls how, in his first report on this conference delivered at Christ Church in downtown Raleigh, he stated: "I went to Grand Rapids an Episcopalian. I returned united, committed to Christ". At this racially integrated conference he had his "first experience of meeting and talking to young black Christians as peers" (p. 45).

High school education

Through grades ten and eleven Spong admits that his school grades had been "academic disasters" and his "academic record was not college-worthy" (p. 46). Without a university degree he could not study for the priesthood which at the time was his life's ambition. With renewed effort in his senior year he succeeded in lifting his grades and winning a scholarship based on need and merit, and admission to the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. He writes:

"My high-school status continued to rise during the year. I was frequently asked to lead devotions in assembly programs. I was the first nonfundamentalist student to be elected president of the Bible Club. When the prophecy

was written, it was said of me that I would be the chaplain of the U.S. Senate” (p. 47).

His quest for “a knowledge of the Scriptures” was fuelled by his Bible teacher Miss Janet Robinson “a lovely unmarried woman, probably in her forties” who was “sweet [and] not strident”. Spong notes:

“She loved the Lord and talked about him as a living presence, but was a biblical literalist to the core. She represented an interesting polarity with Mr. Crandall who in true Anglo-Catholic tradition saw the authority of the church as infinitely superior and far more sophisticated than Miss Robinson’s approach. Her last word on every subject was, ‘The Bible says ...’ Mine had become ‘The church teaches ...’ Both were fundamentalist positions, but I did not recognize that truth at that moment.... She had something I wanted - a knowledge of the Scriptures.... Her love for the Bible fed my love for the Bible. I became her star pupil” (p. 46).

He recalls the assignments she gave as requiring the class “to see the whole story of salvation, from the goodness of creation to the literal fall of Adam to rescue operations mounted by God in the person of his son Jesus in the acts of crucifixion, his physical resuscitation, and his literal ascension back to the heavenly throne from which he had come”. (p. 46). Salvation was presented as a “magnificent overall scheme, but if any part of it proved to be less than literally true, the whole edifice came tumbling down” (p. 47). On the question of evolution, he notes that “the thought of Charles Darwin had been in the public domain for eighty-nine years at this point, but it had not permeated Miss Robinson’s thinking. She reduced Darwin to the simple proposition that we descended from apes - a proposition she rejected as absurd” (p. 47).

At the time Spong considered “Padre” Crandall’s viewpoint as having been “equally in denial”. For “[h]e only carved out a bigger role for the church in the post-ascension phase by suggesting that God’s grace only operated through the sacraments of the catholic tradition, which of course bound them to being the gifts that only the ordained could offer” (p. 47).

University of North Carolina

Spong arrived at the University of North Carolina with his mother as “one frightened eighteen-year-old”. The “sense of lostness overwhelmed” him when she and his brother drove off. His anxiety stemmed from not knowing another soul, being on a very tight budget, and not having the slightest idea what university life would be like. His candour at this point is refreshing as he describes his sense of “fear and chaos”. He took a basic liberal arts course of English, history, science, and math with philosophy as major, finishing his course in three years in the class of 1952 at the age of twenty-one. Of his eight roommates during his years at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill three became priests.

He did Greek as a minor and a “good bit of work” in the zoology department, where his chief mentor was Dr Claiborne Jones, an active member of the Chapel of the Cross. He was an evolutionist, “the first Darwinian

Christian [he] had ever met” (p. 51). In those classes he “tried to defend the literal creation story against



Darwin’s theory”. He adds: “Claiborne Jones was always gracious, but even I knew that I had lost that fight. But I was to need some help before I would be able to get my Christianity out of the realm of my childhood faith system and into engagement with the modern world”.

Virginia Theological Seminary

Spong went from Chapel Hill to Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia where he met his wife, Joan Lydia Ketna. By Christmas 1951 he decided to marry before he entered the seminary because having children when he was still young was a conscious priority for him. He married in Salisbury on September 5, 1953.

He describes himself and his wife as “deeply repressed puritan[s] who identified desire with sin and saw sex outside of marriage as simply wrong” (p. 61). Such a self-critical appraisal is not surprising given that he has taught in recent years that sexual intercourse before marriage in committed relationships can be holy, that homosexual sex is a valid form of “love” and that non-celibate homosexuals and lesbians can be ordained to the priesthood. He writes: “I suppose that no two more naïve, apprehensive repressed and fearful people ever got married before. The embarrassment of living together was overwhelming” (p. 63).

If such a commentary is supposed to be reflective of the normative experience of puritan couples or those from conservative Christian backgrounds of that era, it is clear that he has overreached himself to make a point. Much of his acrimony, directed at evangelicals and conservatives who do hold to the Scriptural teaching that sex outside marriage, is wrong, stems from his flawed assumption that they too are at least as repressed as he was, or claims he was. However, his personal crusade to exorcise the ‘demons’ from the ‘straight-jacket’ of his own “fundamentalist” past, fails to take account of the fact that conservatives yesterday and today did not and do not live in the world of the “Southern code” under which he was brought up.

Spong describes a 24-hour prayer roster vigil he participated in while in seminary, for the wife of a faculty member dying of leukemia, as a “heroic” and enjoyable “ego-filling experience”.

“Those of us who volunteered to stand watch and offer prayers alone in the dark seminary chapel in the wee hours of the morning thought of ourselves as the most virtuous, the most

romantic, and the most stalwart of all God's soldiers. I am sure we enjoyed *the ego-filling experience* of being visibly sleepy and exhausted in public the next day...Helen died in the hours before dawn of the fourth day of our heroic effort. I had never been part of a religious vigil that had clearly failed in its purpose of hurling back the forces of evil. All of these realities conspired to make this an indelible moment of high unforgettable drama" (pp. 67-68. Emphasis added).

Even when recalling the deep grief of others, a hypertrophic ego appears to emerge. Spong's characteristically over-simplified analysis seems evident in his remark about a religious vigil having "failed". His remark smacks of a Rationalist Press Association-level gibe directed at the traditional Christian understanding of solidarity with suffering.

He recalls studying homiletics under Walter Russell Bowie, who he describes as "one of the giants of liberal Protestant movement in America in the 20th century". He identifies the writings of Arnold Toynbee as very important to his thought processes while at seminary (p. 71) and those of Paul Tillich, the German Reformed theologian, as those that most shaped him theologically (p. 70). God was not a person to Tillich. God was "the Ground of Being", unknowable, mysterious, without form. Most people do not worship God, said Tillich. They worship, rather, a human creation endowed with supernatural qualities. He correlated God with Being, Christ with existence, and Holy Spirit with the Church (p. 70). Spong struggled with such concepts, for as he states:

"My personal God, a kind of divine father protector, a bit of a Mr. Fixit, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would later call the God of the gaps, began to shake visibly, to wobble before my eyes, and to fade perceptibly. I began my long theological journey into maturity" (p. 70)... I... abandon[ed] ... Anglo-Catholic piety.... It became for me just a new ecclesiastical form of fundamentalism that I could tolerate no more than I could tolerate biblical fundamentalism (p. 72).

While at Virginia Seminary he was required to do his institutional unit of clinical pastoral education (CPE), one of the first prerequisites for ordination. During this unit he was invited for the first time into a "deeply introspective mode". He writes: "I began to understand how my interior life was constructed and what motivated me. I got in touch with feelings ... I even became able to discover the infantile aspects of my understanding of God.... It remains for me today the most intense growth opportunity I have ever known" (p. 74).

Spong erroneously assumes that most conservative and evangelical Christians still cling to the same immature "God-of-the-gaps" that he once did in his childhood - One who is accused of being capricious, tyrannical and operating like an absentee landlord, only periodically intervening in the world like a benign protector to try and establish His credentials. He

appears to project his truncated and juvenile view of God onto most of his opponents.

Ordination to the diaconate and priesthood

Spong states that the priesthood "was the only ambition I ever had" (p. 76). In June 1955. He was ordained to the diaconate. This was "not the priesthood" as such, he writes, "that would come six months later - but this was the Rubicon moment for me, the great divide, and once I stepped over I would never be the same. From this day forward the world would relate to me as a minister" (p. 81).

Now a minister, his preaching became more and more issue-oriented and he attempted to make church discussions on Sunday nights "hotter and more engaging" (p. 87). He also began to share in that sermon hour many of the critical issues of biblical scholarship that had challenged him at seminary. In the September 1955 to June 1956 year, he presented more than sixty candidates for confirmation to the bishop on four different Episcopal visitations. All of them were young adults. With evident pride he comments: "Clearly something in this church was feeding them. It was for me a heady experience" (p. 87).

He was ordained to the priesthood on Holy Innocent's Day, December 28, 1955, by Bishop Edwin A. Peneck and at this time began to focus his ministry on the young graduate students at St Joseph's Episcopal Church, West Durham (p. 88). "Many of them had been raised", he writes, "in small-town Christian churches that were significantly uncritical of fundamentalists in their outlook. Their minds had been stretched in great institutions of higher learning. That learning challenged, day after day, the simple assumptions of their pre-modern religious upbringing, which still spoke of God as a personal being, supernatural in power, who invaded history periodically in a variety of ways. Such a view of God did not fit the concepts of life in their expanding postmodern world".

He prides himself in having liberated these hapless souls from the riggamortis of pious and primitive fundamentalism. Before finding St. Joseph's, he writes:

"... these graduate students had begun to feel that if they entered a house of worship, they were required to park their brains by the door in order to participate. They had not been encouraged in their churches to worship God with their minds. The ancient assumptions of their primitive religious past continued to come at them in worship. Among those assumptions were that they lived in a three-tiered universe, that God dwelled in that third tier beyond the sky, that life was created good, but then fell into sin, and that Jesus was the divine rescuer who entered human history through a virgin birth and exited human history through a cosmic ascension. His death was a sacrifice required by our sins. That was the tradition!" (p. 88).

He argues that their minds "could not translate these images or process their truth. So they had entered a crisis of the spirit and of faith itself. Either they had to

give up the only religious heritage they knew or else they had to give up their modern education. Most of them had chosen with great reluctance to sacrifice their religious upbringing...". A few of their number "had chosen to become anti-intellectual and to cling to their religious traditions in the face of all the odds. They became the religious fanatics of the campus who revealed anxiety, fear, and vulnerability beneath their closed minds and deep religious anger" (p. 89).

He displays disdain for the "rather fundamentalist" views of a sincere couple who had "consoled themselves with the idea that [their] child's death was somehow God's will". They had convinced themselves, he writes, that the death "was not meaningless but rather was filled with an inscrutable divine purpose and ... that it was their task to trust God without equivocation". He claims they had a dreadful superstitious fear that if they ever did vent their intense anger God, this divine, omnipotent, and powerful Being just might strike their family once more (p. 92):

"Neither they nor the religious voices that led them to this particular resolution of their pain seemed to embrace what this solution did to the reality of God. The deity became a capricious, malevolent power who imposed a purpose on life that required a child's death. It also meant God was a Being who needed to be served and placated lest this capricious deity strike again" (p. 91).

Apparently bereft of any real understanding of the theological issues involving the sovereignty and foreknowledge of God, Spong's feeble attack on the biblical basis of the call to the Christian to trust God in the midst of adversity collapses, as it is based on a non-sequitur. It does not follow that in acknowledging the inscrutable divine purposes in suffering, we must accept or believe that God *required* the death of the child.

Spong states his view as not a "sentimental, childish, and dependent view of God as the heavenly parent who knew best, who intervened often and watched over each of us in guarding protective ways". Such a God, he writes, "I was prepared to jettison" (p. 92). "If preachers are going to touch life significantly, they must be willing to live deeply with their people" (p. 92). He saw his vocation as "to call people into being and to free them simultaneously from the clutches of those religious systems, including [his] own, that create a false security, provide a *phony* peace, and pretend to solve the profound questions of life with simplistic answers" (p. 93, emphasis added).

As he moved into 1957, he records that "the shadows of his ill-health (rheumatoid arthritis of the spine) combined with my own ego needs caused me to be seduced by my own ambition" (p. 93). One suspects he began to secretly relish the comments of those who predicted that he was destined to make his mark on the wider church and leave St Joseph's.

Calvary Church, Tarboro

Spong accepted a call to take up the responsibility of the rectorship of Calvary Church, Tarboro, a town of

7,500 in North Carolina, at the age of 26. Here he first discovered the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer through one of his parishioners, a woman in her mid-sixties. He notes that Bonhoeffer's thought "had not permeated the consciousness of my seminary faculty" (p. 99).

While the rector at Tarboro, where he served for eight years, he was declared public enemy number one in Edgecombe County at a public rally by the Ku Klux Klan, for his reputation as one who would "give in to the Negro demand" and assisting "the Negro cause" (p. 107). He refers to this as "among my highest compliments".

It is noteworthy that in urging his congregation in Tarboro to comply with the new desegregation laws for schools commenced in September 1964, Spong had appealed to the authority of the words of Christ, namely: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt. 22:21) and had quoted Paul, who urged Christians to submit themselves to the higher authority (Rom. 3:7). In the light of Spong's denial of the divine authority and inspiration of Scripture, and the divinity of Christ, his appeals to Scripture reveal the inconsistency of his approach. Furthermore, he recalls preaching on "the reality of the God who rules history" at Calvary Chapel on the day of the funeral of John Kennedy (p. 114). No doubt this was to assure a grieving congregation that God does indeed rule and care - and thereby fulfils His purposes - even in the midst of human tragedy. And yet this message (which is quite biblical) is the very one he had sought to dismiss as pre-modern humbug when relied upon by the grieving fundamentalist couple discussed earlier. His consistent denial of the Personhood of God destroys any notion of a God who rules.

Spong confirms that the teaching side of his professional life became the source of his books and of his pushing theological frontiers with radical new possibilities for the future of Christianity (p. 122). He has strived to close what he sees as "a growing gap" that "was developing between the work of the theological academy and the traditional preaching that took place in the congregations".

J.A.T. Robinson and his book *Honest to God*

It was during a family holiday in the summer of 1965 that John Spong first read a book called *Honest to God* by John A.T. Robinson, the bishop of Woolwich, which he says changed his life. He was "riveted" by this 1960's bestseller, reading it "three times from cover to cover" before thinking about picking up anything else to read (p. 127). Robinson dealt with issues that Spong "had not been willing to talk about or even think about publicly". It created a huge furore when published in 1963 for it set out the case for a monist alternative to the theistic Christian worldview. Robinson argued that the latter was "dead". God could no longer be viewed as the transcendent *creator ex nihilo*, but rather must be conceived of as the ground and source of all being to be encountered only in and through creation, in particular through human relationships.

While the book had been published over eighteen months before Spong read it and its message had

already well and truly “permeated the public consciousness”, he had been unable to “understand what the debate was about” (p. 126). This is not surprising, as Robinson had quoted at length the writings of “major contemporary theologians” like Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Rudolf Bultmann, who Spong concedes he knew little if anything about due to his impoverished and inadequate theological training. He had not even heard of Bonhoeffer until introduced to his writings by a wealthy woman in his Tarboro congregation, who made it her “project” to “help shape [his] intellectual; and spiritual development” (p. 98). She discerned “potential” in “the young priest” and he admired her for being “broad-minded and well-read”. As for Bultmann, his writings had been “ignored” by his seminary lecturers. Spong writes of the impact on him of *Honest to God*:

“John Robinson touched every issue about which I felt a general dis-ease in the church’s life, and he showed me why. I knew from that moment on that my theological education had not prepared me to deal with the world in which all of us were now living. If I were honest, I could never again use the pious clichés of my profession as a substitute for hard study and effective scholarship. It was as if I knew that I could not continue to be the kind of priest I had been.... it did challenge radically my theological convictions, for increasingly I realized they did not have either depth or integrity. I could no longer pretend that the Bible had the answers when its verses were read literally. It was as if I had seen the future and must now equip myself to enter it” (p. 127).

To discover at the age of 34 that his theological convictions lacked “either depth or integrity” must have been a traumatic experience for Spong. Faced with what he still considers an erudite apologetic for a revised Christianity of integrity, love and equality, Robinson’s writings had exposed the ‘charlatan’ in Spong. It precipitated a number of his personal “faith crises” in which he grappled with the so-called “God problem” and progressively discarded traditional Christian doctrines. His lack of in-depth scientific training and ignorance of sound metaphysics led to his ready acceptance of Robinson’s ill-founded conclusion that Albert Einstein’s theory of special relativity “had made ethics based on natural laws or the revealed will of God problematic” (p. 127). Not surprisingly he accepted Robinson’s caricaturing of traditional Christian faith as involving literally a “God above the sky” whose existence was now “obliterated by the insights of astrophysics”.

St John’s Church, Lynchburg, Virginia

Spong’s third rectorship was that of St John’s Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, a very conservative Southern city. Throughout this ministry there, which began shortly after reading *Honest to God*, he says he “call[ed] people to a deeper devotion to the Christ [he] served” (p. 139). In his adult Bible classes he sought to “duck no issues, compromise no truth, and avoid no frontier to which [his] thought and study led [him]” (p.

139). Brave words indeed ! Furthermore he adopted as his motto the words of his theology professor Clifford L. Stanley, “Any God who can be killed ought to be killed”. Spong interpreted this to mean that any core doctrine of Christianity that did not stand up to scrutiny should be jettisoned and replaced with one in keeping with the so-called ‘hard data’ (e.g. Darwinism and the Graf-Wellhausen ‘theory’) of the post-modern world.

One of his first crusades was to remove “any possibility of taking the creation story literally” from the minds of his congregation (p. 141). He proudly declares that he achieved this “without ever mentioning Charles Darwin” but rather by “introduc[ing] ... the four-document theory of the Graf-Wellhausen school of thought” (p 141). Alas, and perhaps the learned Spong has not caught up with modern scholarship yet, but this hypothesis, in retreat for over a century, has been well and truly discredited for over twenty years now.⁸

It is characteristic of Spong to uncritically embrace as the latest novelty an essentially untenable nineteenth century evolutionary reconstruction of Israel’s history, one which marked in many ways the high point of the hubris exhibited by the Hegelian “Higher Criticism”. The Hegelian school of thought has had many of its claims refuted, particularly from the 1920’s onwards, in the light of archaeological and comparative religion discoveries. It was rightly regarded as more than a little crackpot, even by the overconfident and rationalistic standards of the latter part of the Nineteenth Century: one cannot escape the suspicion that like has called to like.

Interestingly, one of Spong’s ministerial colleagues in Virginia was the Rev. Jerry Falwell - who has since emerged as a national leader of the so-called “Religious right”. He refers to “his racist behavior” as “obvious” without providing any real evidence. He alleges that the school Falwell founded, which grew into Liberty Baptist College, “began as a means of providing a haven from integration”. Furthermore, “the justifying cover for this racism was always ‘giving our children biblical and religious values’ that were being eroded in the public schools by secular humanists and communist sympathizers” (p. 142). He calls the rhetoric of the younger Falwell as vigorously supporting the apartheid regime of South Africa.

While at St John’s he recalls that “issues that would someday be common in feminist thought were just dawning in [his] thick patriarchal brain” (p. 151). He gives credit to the influence of his daughters for “bringing him into the twentieth century on women’s issues”.

The “twin emotions of fear and excitement” he writes, gripped his St Joseph’s Bible class when he ventured after three years of teaching on the Old Testament, into a “toe-dip at least into the New Testament” (p. 167). He had “dropped provocative hints” like “subliminal advertisements” in his class as to what was to come - keeping “alive” the prospects of full debate on the claim of the divinity of Christ, the historicity of the birth narratives of Jesus and such-like. In doing so, he recalls: “Little did I realize that I was embarking on a way of life that would someday issue in

my writing career and that would stamp me forever in the minds of traditional Christians as a provocateur”.

Such modesty as to the consequences of such “high drama”, as he refers to it (p. 167), belies the real intent of his ambition to gain notoriety by attempting to destroy the “traditional foundation stones of [the] faith”, as he refers to them. While a sincere Christian apologist enters into rigorous debate and scrutinises the merits of the “faith once delivered to the saints” from every angle, his intention in doing so is not that of a provocateur like Spong. The former seeks to contrast truth with error, provide rational arguments for the existence of God among other things, call God’s people back to the trustworthiness of Holy Scripture, and call sinners to repentance.

Reflecting on his “success” in his provocative Bible class series Spong states:

“I looked forward to the adventures that lay before me in this parish, in my diocese, and throughout the whole church. My leadership and my priesthood were clearly growing beyond the traditional boundaries of my profession” (p. 168).

St Paul’s Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia.

The next adventure came in the summer of 1969 when he accepted a call and moved to become rector of “arguably Virginia’s best-known church” (p. 168), St Paul’s Episcopal Church located at the “heart” of Richmond. It was “a wealthy predominantly white congregation worshipping in the heart of a majority black city that had pockets of dire poverty and patterns of deep racial injustice all around it” (p. 190). It was known as the Cathedral of the Confederacy and both Confederate heroes Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis had been members of the congregation.

As at St Joseph’s in Lynchburg, Spong chose to “confront the issue of fundamentalism head on” (p. 182) in his new St Paul’s Bible class by feeding theological insights gleaned from Gerhard Von Rad’s book entitled *Genesis, A Commentary*. Studying this book until it was “incarnate[d] in me” led to a “quantum leap forward” in “my biblical and theological education” (p. 182), he writes. Following a full year’s study of the book, he made a conscious decision to study “at least one major theological or biblical book a year until [he] had mastered its content in similar fashion” (p. 183). He reports:

“My personal study and devotional life was at that time organized around the daily office of morning prayer. By making morning prayer the basis of my personal devotional time, I would regularly engage the Scriptures and for the sermon part of this prayer activity I would work through the study book I had chosen to master that year” (p. 183).

The St Paul’s Bible class also studied Mark’s Gospel, for which he used D.H. Nineham’s commentary as a guide. Again the enemy targeted was “literalism”, for “the class was designed to shatter any

literalism the people had brought with them from their church-school days” (p. 189). While he never defines literalism in his book, it is generally clear what is meant: an approach to Scripture that attempts to discern the mind of the author and then holds such insight in its proper context to be divinely revealed and binding truth. Spong recognised that to teach that aspects of the New Testament record, as compared to the Old Testament, “are not historically true” is risky:

“Talking about the Jesus story is riskier, however, because people have much more of their religious security invested in it. Yet so much of the Jesus story reflected long abandoned theological concepts and an unbelievable first-century worldview, which meant that for many the literal narratives had become a barrier to faith!” (p. 190).

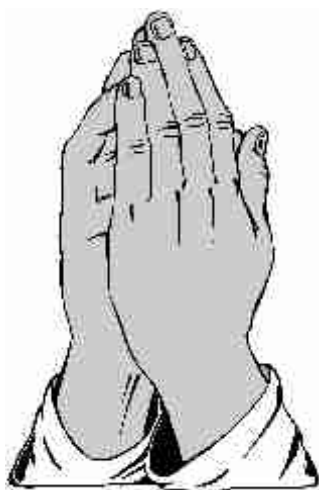
While it is true as Spong states that “an unexamined faith or a religious system that [does] not confront the real issues of credibility [can] never endure” (p. 190), his apologetic modus operandi is to lambaste all who disagree with his revisionism. Referring to his St Paul’s class he writes: “I sought to carry these people with me into something rare and new - religious intellectual integrity” (p. 190). Throughout his autobiography he attacks with mordant pen his colleagues, consigning them to the trash can labelled “lacking intellectual integrity”.

The Episcopal House of Bishops

The inner workings of the Episcopal House of Bishops are represented by Spong as the religious equivalent of the Mafia. We are told many times that “anger” abounded within the precincts of its formal gatherings and beyond. The fallout from the Seattle and South Bend Conventions of 1967 and 1969 respectively, involving racial confrontation, had been so serious that the Presiding Bishop John Hines “had received so many death threats that he was compelled to wear a bulletproof vest and hire bodyguards” (p. 192).

The “sarcastic, cutting, and pious” attacks made on his mentor, John Hines, who Spong states was “destined to be the greatest and most significant twentieth-century leader in American Christianity” (p. 194), came from elected bishops. One bishop who revelled in such “attacks” was “rewarded for his efforts by being elected by his fellow bishops to the executive council” (p. 192). Whether this cynical appraisal by Spong is correct we cannot tell. But a picture emerges of a vociferous and tawdry array of largely conceited prigs jockeying for position in a madhouse in order to glimpse a view of their own egos. Amid this maelstrom of dissent and rancour emerges one of sublime intellectual stature and integrity who alone has the answers to resolve such “creative tensions” and reformulate Christianity onto a path of “integrity, love and equality” - John Spong.

A personal crisis of faith: what is prayer?



In an account of a pastoral visitation to a dying friend, Mrs Cornelia Newton, Spong reveals the background to yet another personal “crisis of faith” he went through. The woman suffering from inoperable cancer had requested the visit and he spent about two hours listening to her unburden herself. As he writes, she “was inviting me to enter into the depths of her

being where she needed a companion” (pp. 196-97). He felt “touched and honoured” to be the one she “trusted to help her do her painful grief work”. For once the sheer honesty of a “weak and vulnerable” human being impacted on Spong to the point that he would admit that he realised he was a real phoney. He prayed with her but found himself appalled at his own phoniness:

“I do not recall the words of that prayer, but will never forget my feelings about it. It was phony and pious God-talk, made up of one religious cliché after another. I was embarrassed about it when it was over. It added nothing to the depth of our conversation or the meaning of our relationship. Indeed if anything it detracted from both.... The lack of reality present in the words of that prayer ... contracted at least my life ... If prayer contracted life, I wondered, was it still prayer?”.

He was forced to “confront [his] own growing faith crisis” which arose from this encounter. John Robinson’s “probing theological questions just would not go away”, he writes, “[for] now they had become both personal and existential”. The question came to him: “If I could not pray with honesty then, ... could I really pray at all?” The reader can only but conclude in the negative, as there is nothing in this book to indicate that this ‘man of the cloth’ has any real biblical understanding and commitment to real prayer. How could he as he rejects any concept of a transcendent personal God and belittles any notion of praying in child-like faith to a Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ, One who seeks to attend to man’s deepest needs. Following the encounter with Mrs Newton, Spong writes:

“I vowed I would never again pray in a pastoral visit until I could pray with as much honesty as I could find in my ability to talk with and to the person I was visiting. This internal conversation also forced me to confront my own growing faith crisis...I decided that I must figure out what, if anything, I really believed about prayer and that either I would act on that with honesty or stop pretending to be a person of prayer.

When I say these words now, they sound rather dramatic, but it was an intensely real vow for me at that time. I began to recognize that what I had been doing in my ordained career was playing the role of the praying pastor” (pp. 197-98).

Clearly he had not matured beyond the games of his boyhood - those “Let’s Pretend” games where as a child in solitude he delivered “pretend sermons” to make-believe congregations. Stripped of pretence and exposed as a fake, a truly humble man seeks to acknowledge wrongdoing and make restitution with God’s grace. However, for Spong the path to resolving “his growing faith crisis” became yet another “ego-filling experience” that began in the left-brain but never permeated the right, using the language of the so-called “New Age”. He writes:

“In my typical left-brained way I retreated to my library. I must master my inner debates [concerning prayer] intellectually before I can master them emotionally”.

However, mastery of prayer begins in the heart. The questions he posed and sought to address reveal his complete ignorance of the meaning of prayer and the closed-minded approach he had to his ‘investigation’ of it. “Was prayer a kind of *magic* game that people didn’t really value, but would still not relinquish?” he asked himself (p. 198). “Would people be willing to let this *fantasy* called prayer go? Did it have a *neurotic hold* on them that would be tenacious? ... I knew full well that if people felt that they had no alternative to this *magic potion* called prayer, then I would be perceived as ripping away from them a piece of their security system....I was looking for answers in a very public way, and I was fascinated to discover that so were the majority of our Sunday worshippers” (pp. 198-99, emphasis added).

Having convinced himself that prayer for traditional Christians is only a “fantasy” and nothing more than a “magic game” or “magic potion” which holds them in a vice-like “neurotic hold” (p. 198), he embarked on an ‘open-minded’ quest to discover its reality. Spong paraded his ‘new’ theories on ‘Christian prayer’ before his Sunday worshippers.

In his “left-brained” ‘research’ endeavours on prayer he turned to the brief chapter entitled “Worldly Holiness” in Robinson’s “pivotal book” *Honest to God*, a book which he says “still captivated [him]” (p. 199). In doing this study he writes “I began, for the first time, to grapple seriously with the theistic limits to the definition of God”. (Later he was to reject completely the concept of theism). He devoted twenty weekly sermons to grappling with the subject of ‘prayer’, rating them a roaring success with his congregation. So much so, he writes, that “I suspect the members of St. Paul’s were responding to the existential quality revealed in these sermons”. Eventually he was to publish this sermon material as a booklet entitled *Honest Prayer*.

“As I engaged the task of thinking theologically”, writes Spong, “I began to recognize that what people called the basic concepts of Christianity are not as secure as believers hoped”. He also discovered “that

honest theological questions raised by the exigencies of life itself could be addressed, questioned, debated, and explored publicly without disturbing faithful believers". This observation posed a question to him: "Who ...had we been protecting in our fear of raising these questions openly in the church life before?"

More and more he began to suspect that he was one of "the insecure ordained ones", who had been merely "protecting" himself against engaging the unsettling questions. "This would be a premise", he writes, that "I would test again and again, and every test led to the same conclusion" (p. 200) - namely that God had called him *not* into security, but to "embrace the radical insecurity of life as [a] free, whole, and mature person" (p. 469). He recognised that he had "entered the priesthood ... seeking security for [his] anxious and insecure soul" and had now repudiated as an aberration of Christianity any notion of faith involving "passive dependency" on God or offering "secure" answers to the genuine seeker after truth.

"Honesty and integrity were more important to me than either popularity or tranquillity", writes Spong (p. 207). Furthermore: "Remaining true to what you believe is right in the face of defeat is the only essential for God's service. To recognize that God shares in eternity makes one aware that being faithful publicly and consistently is the only way that both the future and eternity will reflect God's will" (p. 218). Such statements are hard to reconcile with his outright denial of the transcendent and personal character of God.

In defence he would argue that his "developing new theology of God" was merely placing *more emphasis* on God "as a divine presence" (immanence), than as "an external supernatural being" (p. 256). However, his 'theology' is clearly built on monism - the philosophical belief that all reality is ultimately one, no matter how differentiated it is in appearance. God in His essential Being is not viewed as transcendent - He is not distinct in any sense (including ontological distinction) from the cosmos, which in terms of space-time-matter, is seen by Spong to be co-eternal with 'God'. Spong embraces religious monism since he sees all religious truth as part of the "One" and all religions to be celebrated as equally valid entry points into the heart of the divine and paths to 'salvation'.

Furthermore, in his commitment to evolutionism and his advocacy of an "immanent god" - constituted solely of collective and evolving "Being" - he embraces pantheism which is anathema to Biblical teaching. He sees the cosmos as a kind of emanation from Being (God) to the realm of beings, an eternal flow from a sort of necessity within the divine. The doctrine of *creaton ex nihilo* is rejected as well as any belief in the Creation as the outcome of the will of God. An impersonal God has no will or purpose. The Bible teaches that God "inhabits eternity" (Is. 57:15) and made all things (Gen. 1-2; Col. 1:16) as an act of His will and by His Word: "By thy will they [all things] existed and were created" (Rev. 4:11). "The worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible" (Heb. 11:3).

Spong the provocateur

Spong's attack on the Christian creeds is based in part on his claim that they are "more about power than truth". He writes: "Somehow the church had been infected historically with the idea that the truth of God could be fully recorded, that it could be reduced to propositional statements, and that it was the church's possession. That is idolatry, and idolatry will never be eternal". His disavowal of the notion that theological propositions derived from Scripture can summarise truth claims, and his misunderstanding of the true nature of idolatry, could lead one to easily conclude that he is a philosophical dullard of the first order. Furthermore his misrepresentation of the Church's attitude to the creeds appears to discredit his claim to having true scholastic insight. The Church has never taught that "the truth of God could be fully recorded" in its creeds.

Spong's adventures into new territory as a provocateur, both in his writing and lecturing, filled a deep personal void. "It was growing increasingly clear", he writes, "that my excitement with my professional life was in fact filling up the ever widening void in my personal life". This void related to the ever widening gap between himself and his wife Joan, who progressively declined due to a mental illness. Their relationship was marked with "enormous tension" as the sickness developed. The most frightening thing for Spong in writing his autobiography was how he would tell the story of his wife Joan, who died of cancer in 1988. She "endured overtly" her "mental illness", he writes, for fifteen years and this "was such a major piece of our family's history and provided so powerful a background to both my personal and professional life that I could not omit it" (pp. x-xi).

Election to Bishop coadjutor of the Diocese of Newark

On March 6, 1976 John Spong was elected the eighth bishop coadjutor of the Diocese of Newark, a diocese which had been in a steep membership slide since the mid-1960s with many churches regarded as simply no longer viable (pp. 266-7). "Intense loneliness", he writes, "mark[ed] my life in this new role" (p. 267) and his election was "challenged by conservative church voices around the nation" (p. 268). His wife's mental state deteriorated during this period as "she retreated into a world of fantasies" (p. 288), eventually being diagnosed with acute or true paranoia. Because she refused to be hospitalised voluntarily (p. 225), he lived with the anguish of possibly having to force her to be committed to a mental institution (p. 300), a decision he chose never to take. She had a complete mastectomy (p. 297) but refused the needed chemotherapy. He concedes that he "had not been sensitive for years to Joan's burdens" (p. 224).

In his new role as bishop he began his attack on the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of Christ. He reports that at his first New Dimensions day lecture series: "I began a series on the Resurrection... my first effort at reconstructing the Easter moment as something other than a *physical resuscitation*. I wanted to address this primary Christian affirmation in new way..." (p. 288, emphasis added). However, only a theological illiterate

would represent the Church's teaching on the resurrection as a "physical resuscitation". Again, confusion reigned (and still reigns) in Spong's mind. The Christian doctrine has always laid bare the truth that Christ's human body was divinely reconstituted as a "resurrected body" - a "new creation" as the Apostle Paul teaches, yet ontologically linked in every sense to the temporal mortal body.

In early 1983 Spong notes that his mentor John A.T. Robinson died of cancer. Spong wrote the American tribute to him in *The Christian Century*, stating in his autobiography:

"He had loomed so large in my growth and development that I was not prepared to lose him. I also felt some responsibility to carry on in the direction he had set. A bishop who is engaged in a theological reformation is rather rare. I did not feel prepared to take his place, but I saw no one else ready to do that either" (p. 307).

Spong deliberately sought to make his book *Into the Whirlwind: The Future of the Church* (Winston Press) a *Robinsonesque* book" and one that "would presage every direction my intellectual life would take for the balance of my career" (p. 307).

Intent on informing his readers of his "competence" and "popularity", Spong recalls how people from a rival bishop's diocese had warmed to his lectures. "They had made him [Bishop Harold Robinson] aware of my competence, as revealed in these lectures, as well as my popularity with these audiences" (p. 308). He then speculates, "Perhaps this is what encouraged [Harold Robinson] to ask me to be one of the four or five bishops who would help him...". Spong writes this after having just berated Robinson as "lov[ing] the trappings of the bishop's office and the delusions of power that these trappings produced". Robinson, he recalls had invited him to prepare an important paper on the subject of worship to be delivered to the House of Bishops. Reflecting on his delivery of this paper he writes:

"In all my years in the House of Bishops, I recall no other time when the House would be asked to give as much as four hours of a single day to interact with the thought of a single bishop. It was a rare opportunity, and I was pleased at the confidence this group of my peers expressed in me" (p. 309).

He fails to recognise that those he dismisses as intransigent conservative hard-liners, are the same ones who gave him enormous freedom to express his views. The frequency with which he attributes motives of malice and hatred to those who disagreed with him is hard to reconcile with his stated goal to celebrate diversity and allow others the right to fully express their spiritually.

To the charge from his conservative critics that he is an "unlearned, naïve amateur theologian - 'at the low end of the intellectual curve'" - he writes:

"It is an interesting charge. I have authored more books than any other bishop of our church. These books have sold more copies than all

other books by all other bishops in the House combined. I was elected to Phi Beta Kappa at the end of my sophomore year at the University of North Carolina and was chosen to be the Quartercentenary Scholar at Cambridge University in 1992. I am today an honorary fellow at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. I have been invited to be the William Belden Noble lecturer at Harvard University. I have been awarded two honorary Doctor of Divinity degrees and one Doctor of Humane Letters by recognized institutions of higher learning. *All of these are academic honors none of my critics has ever thought about achieving*, and yet they have constantly sought to minimize my credentials as their way of opposing my challenge to the church's traditional stances. I have not responded to these demeaning comments" (p. 311. Emphasis added).

Spong is quick to point the reader to the image he thinks others have of him. Following an account of a lecture to the House of Bishops he writes that most bishops' "image of me, created by that day, remained vivid. I was regarded as thoughtful, articulate well-read, and able to defend myself in a public arena or debate. That was not a bad image to see developing" (p. 312).

In this lecture his "recurring theme" was that "The heart cannot worship what the mind rejects" (p. 310). By this he meant that the God of the conservative Christian - the One proclaimed in the traditional formulations of Church, was unworthy of worship, as the God concept needed to be reformulated in post-modern terms, to capture the heart of modern man. Spong even delved into his latest sexual theories in a desperate effort to try and grab the Bishops' attention:

"I even suggested that the almost nude figure on the crucifix that adorns the cells of monks was erotic if you were a homosexual male. I looked at the items that were kissed liturgically by the priest, the stole, the altar, the missal, and raised questions about misplaced sex symbols. It was a passionate attempt to raise to consciousness the church's incredible duplicity about sexual matters. It certainly got people's attention". (p. 313).

It is surprising Spong did not extend his insightful comments to give us his 'Freudian-Spongian' analysis of Pope John Paul II's *real* reason for often kissing the earth at his arrival on the soil of countries he visits.

Spong seems to travel to the point of betraying confidences if he can score a point. For example, he released an extract from a confidential letter marked "personal" sent to him by the Roman Catholic archbishop of Newark, Peter Gerety, who he says exploded over what he called his "personal" crude insults which questioned the integrity of Gerety's church (p. 315). Gerety had taken exception to many of his public statements including the suggestion that his [Roman] Church was riddled with closet "gays". When asked by the archbishop to reveal "how many Roman Catholic priests had written [to Spong] supportive letters and spoken encouraging words to [him] regarding his views" on "gays", Spong refused to

answer. To do so he writes “would have violated their confidentiality” (p. 315). By the end of 1983 he writes:

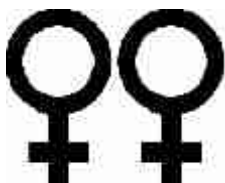
“I was emotionally drained and very near to being a broken man.... I felt like I was on the way to being a failure in my Episcopal activities. I did not know where to turn....My publishing career had now become a source of enormous hostility in right-wing circles, which I could only absorb. None of my fellow bishops ... was eager to be supportive. My fuse had become quite short and my temper was spoken about openly. It was the nadir. There was no more room on the downside. I had clearly hit bottom” (p. 316).

The ordination of practising “gays”



On or about February 1, 1987, an article appeared in the official publication of the Episcopal Church, signed by John Spong, the bishop of

Newark, calling the church into discussion and debate on issues of human sexuality, including homosexuality. “This was in and of itself”, he writes, “unprecedented”. His diocesan Task Force examining the issues consisted



of a body of 12 people, six priests and six lay people. Three of the priests had been through a divorce. Two of the priests were homosexual, one “out

of the closet” and one “deeply closeted”. Two of the priests were women and four were men (p. 338). The Task Force in its report “in effect” welcomed the incorporation of active homosexuals and lesbians into the ordained ministry (p. 349).

Spong recalls with evident pride his role on December 16, 1989 in the ordination of Robert Williams, “the first openly gay priest living in a publicly acknowledged partnership”. He describes this Master of Divinity graduate of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as an “out-of-the-closet gay man who lived in what he [Williams] described as a permanent, committed relationship of several years duration with his partner, Jim” (p. 348). Williams knew that his diocese, the Diocese of Dallas, would not let him be considered for ordination on that basis alone, so he wrote to Spong and challenged him to live up to his claims of championing the “gay” ordination cause by allowing him to be considered for ordination in his Diocese of Newark.

Spong warmed to his request and his plan to “build a diocesan-sponsored ministry that would deliberately reach out to the homosexual population” (p. 349). He found even “more appealing” William’s stated “long-range plans ... to be the first openly gay, male theologian of the church who would specifically help the church look at theology through the eyes of an authentic gay male experience” (p. 349). Robert’s recommendation from his faculty, he writes, “was

glowing, probably the most laudatory report on a seminary graduate [he] had ever read”.

Spong agreed to William’s request but could find no one willing or suitable among his “finest priests” (p. 351) who would offer to be a “supportive rector” to him, due to their lack of faith and fear in the possible repercussions of assisting with the ordination of a “gay” man. Spong remains highly critical of their response. “I saw”, he writes [in their responses] “what I would learn to recognize as the ultimate weakness of most liberals. They can’t walk the walk nearly as easily as they can talk the talk” (p. 352).

Finally, one of them, Rev. Gerald Pisani, rector of Trinity Church, Bayonne, and Spong’s “one gay priest” stepped forward and offered to sponsor Williams. Spong reluctantly accepted his offer, knowing full well that “Gerry would be seen [by those opposed to the ordination of Gays] as self-serving, while the others would have been perceived as doing it out of principle” (p. 352).

In February 1988 Williams was one of five aspirants who came before a commission to be screened for recommendation as a postulant for holy orders. Spong describes the debate that ensued among the committee members over William’s suitability as “the longest and most emotional” that he could “ever recall” (p. 358). On a one-to-four scale Williams received 12 grade “ones” meaning “recommended without qualification” and eight “fours” meaning “not recommended” (p. 358). There was clearly no consensus, with 40% of the vote rejecting his candidacy outright. But despite these “warning bells”, Spong enthusiastically endorsed his candidacy for ordination (at that time there was no requirement beyond a majority vote).

Six months later Williams was required to come before the standing committee of the diocese which voted 6 to 2 to have him ordained as a deacon in early June 1989. After much heated debate which started with only two committee members in favour of the ordination, Rev. Wade Renn,⁹ the rector of Grace Church, Nutley, finally slapped the table and said “Hell, let’s do it! The time has come” (p. 368). He carried every undecided vote with him, according to Spong. On June 3 1989 at 10.30 am at St. Peter’s Church in Morristown, Spong ordained Robert Williams to the sacred order of deacons and he was assigned to assist at All Saints’ Church in Hoboken. At the time there was little publicity but later that month a report in the *New York Times* on William’s Ministry to Gays (called “Oasis”) identified him as openly gay and named his partner. The repercussions of this ordination were to be felt world-wide (see later discussion).

In sickness and in health versus Living in Sin

During the time leading up to William’s ordination Spong chose to live apart from his wife, whom he knew needed his compassionate care during her debilitating illness. During what was to be the final nine months of her life he agreed to her moving back to Richmond to live alone, although close to their daughter’s family, and sent her a cheque in the mail every month. He admits he abdicated his responsibility to care for his

wife, “in sickness, and in health, till death us do part”. He now deeply regrets that decision, “wish[ing] a million times that [he] had endured those final months” and admits that he “did not run the full course” (p. 356).

Indulging in the “red-carpet treatment” he was given by his publisher to help promote his book *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* proved very demanding of his time over the period of his wife’s decline. He revelled in numerous city-wide press interviews, television appearances, and lecture tours, all promoting a book which proved so controversial, even before its publication, that the official United Methodist Publishing House, Abingdon Press, which had first offered him a contract, withdrew from the contract to publish.

In *Living in Sin* he advocated the recognition by society and the blessing by the Church of committed monogamous same-sex relationships; the establishment of covenants, that is, “acts of betrothal”, as he would call them, by young people who chose to live together prior to marriage. Abingdon Press, pulled the plug after advertisements were already rolling for Spong’s twelve-city publicity tour for his book, and the covers had been printed. This action was precipitated by the news that a very popular Methodist bishop had recently been exposed, after his AIDS-related death, as having led a double life. He was a prominent bishop with a wife and children by day, but an active promiscuous homosexual by night. The wounds of that scandal were still raw in Methodist circles (p. 359). The book was eventually published by HarperCollins who arranged for Spong to make a “multi-city media tour”.

Later in 1988 he departed without his wife for the Anglican Communion’s once-a-decade Lambeth Conference of bishops. The one he attended in 1978, he writes, “had bored me beyond measure” (p. 361). However, the controversy his just published book *Living in Sin* had generated was to elevate Spong to world-wide prominence at the 1988 conference, during which Graham Leonard, bishop of London, identified Spong in a report in the *Daily Mail*, as the primary problem in the Anglican Communion. Spong comments that “a very hostile personal attack” was “made on me by my old adversary [Leonard]” (p. 362) and that “over the three weeks of Lambeth I was interviewed by the media - television, radio, and print - more than anyone else at the conference” (p. 363). “When Lambeth was over, my name had become a household word throughout our worldwide church, respected in some circles, anathema in others” (p. 363).

Two days before the end of the Conference his wife of 32 years, Joan, died of massive metastasis in her bones. She died alone. “The pain of that realization haunts me to this very moment”, writes Spong (p. 363). “I settled into the real grief work, which involved not just bereavement, but the guilt of having been so inadequate to this lovely, but disturbed, woman, and for not having been able to carry her to her final days and most of all for the aloneness of death” (p. 366).

By March 1989 he had begun to ‘date’ a “friend of long standing” Christine Barney, a member of his church staff. They had begun to discuss marriage, a second for them both, by September, and announced

their marriage two months later in the November column of *The Voice*, the diocesan newspaper. Since their marriage on 1 January 1990 Christine Spong has taken on an important role as editor of her husband’s writings.

Champion of “gay rights”

An obsession with the cause of “gay” rights became a panacea to his grief, following the death of his first wife. “My reputation as a major liberal religious voice in the public arena was clearly building”, he writes. “I continued to be drawn to that apologetic task that seemed to consume me. It could best be summed up in the question. ‘How can premodern creeds be recited with integrity in a postmodern world?’ ” (p. 370).

He records (p. 373, and noted earlier) that at Yale Divinity School he read a book published in the 1930s by Arthur Nock that raised the possibility that the Apostle Paul might have been a deeply repressed gay man and suggested that this was his “thorn in the flesh”. Paul’s dismissal of women and his unwillingness to marry to satisfy passion now seemed, to Spong, to point to his own assumptions that one is born with the homosexual ‘condition’. (p. 374). Paul’s reference to sin dwelling in his “members” (Gk bodily appendages) causing his “members” not to obey the law of his mind, became revelatory to Spong (p. 374), for whom “members” read ‘sex organs’. He was soon to be out proclaiming that it was a “life-giving insight” to suggest that Paul was a “self-hating homosexual man” (p. 375), for if homosexuality is a given, not a chosen aspect of one’s being, then homosexuality is not abnormal. John Boswell, a practising homosexual ‘academic’ of Yale’s Department of History “came powerfully to [his] aid” (p. 389) in advancing his “gay-rights” causes. Spong, who has leaned heavily on Boswell’s research,¹⁰ is clearly still unaware that Boswell’s research has been largely discredited. Boswell eventually died of AIDS.

As noted, the repercussions of the ordination in Hoboken on December 16, 1989 of the homosexual Robert Williams were certainly felt word-wide. One-third of the congregation that attended the ordination was gay and lesbian. Robert had a “short fuse” and when badgered by a reporter sometime afterwards (p. 385) he was to utter words that led to his dismissal from his ministry by Spong. Williams had “felt quite adequate to continue his aggressive style” even after his ordination and running into strife with the media. Rev. Gerry Pisani, the homosexual minister who acted as his sponsoring rector, had been so irritated by his manner, that as a personal protest he declined to be present at his ordination to priesthood (p. 385). Pisani had served as one of his presenters at his ordination to the diaconate.

Even the gay community became concerned and tried to offer help to sort out Williams. It was to no avail. “It was as if in achieving his goal to become a priest”, writes Spong, “his personality had undergone a change” (p. 385). The crucial blow to Spong’s dream of having Williams serve as a practising homosexual priest came when a reporter from the Detroit Free Press interrogated Williams “rather aggressively”. The reporter had asked Williams whether or not “sex is good for everyone”. Williams responded by asserting that

faithfulness and monogamy are part of a scheme to impose heterosexual standards on the gay community.

Spong quickly called together the board of Oasis and laid out the problem to them: "Unless Robert reaffirms the basis on which he was ordained, I cannot in conscience continue to support his work at the Oasis or ask the diocese to underwrite it". Robert refused to and was forced to resign by the very one who had advanced his ordination at every turn, as a means of delivering "true justice" to "gays".

"This incident only proved how incompetent I was allowing this ordination to take place in the first place", writes Spong. "Pressure for my resignation continued to mount" (p. 387) ... I was being manipulated to save something idolatrous called 'the unity of the church'" (p. 388). The residing bishop and the provincial presidents had officially dissociated themselves from his action in ordaining Robert Williams and from his diocese for agreeing to that ordination. "I did not bother" to read their letter of dissociation, writes Spong. Such arrogance from one who admits that he "could count only on one supportive bishop [for his actions] in the entire country" (p. 388) is staggering. He recalls that he told them "how history would validate [his] initiative and cover their response with shame". He indicated that he "would take the battle on the road and appeal over the heads of the bishops to the people of the church".

Following the departure of Robert Williams, Rev. David Norgard¹¹ was called to be the executive director and missionary of "Oasis", based at All Saints Church, Hoboken, NJ. Spong, writes that "a more effective priest would be hard to imagine. His [homosexual] partner Joseph was a great asset" (p. 389). Just a few years later Joseph was promoted and transferred to San Francisco and David resigned from Oasis so he could be with him. There David founded "Oasis", California (p. 414).

Spong then spent his sabbatical "plotting a national campaign to deliver the church from the peril of seeing its prejudice against homosexual persons become a perceived virtue" (p. 388). He saw it as his task to be "aggressive in seeking to turn this negativity around" generated by the William's affair (p. 389) and he told his diocese staff that he: "must be allowed to speak everywhere [he] was given the opportunity or the invitation" (p. 389). Homosexual lobbyists are renowned for this style of battle plan. For example, the pandemic of AIDS is never seen by "gay" activists as calling into account the very premise that homosexual/gay sex is a natural and a healthy pursuit. Rather the negativity generated by AIDS deaths is turned into a 'positive' "consciousness-raising" exercise for the group via Hero-parades and the like.

The second openly gay candidate for holy orders Spong ordained was Rev. Barry Lee Stopfel, who together with his homosexual partner Will Leckie, an ordained Methodist Minister, was a graduate of Union Seminary in New York. Barry worked part-time as a lay assistant to Rev John P. (Jack) Croneberger, rector of the Church of the Atonement in Tenafly, NJ. (Rev. Canon Croneberger [b. 1938] was elected in June 1998 as bishop coadjutor in the Diocese of Newark and then

replaced John Spong as Bishop of Newark when he retired).

A "long" public "fast" was orchestrated by "gay" activists in Spong's church to try and force him to ordain Stopfel. "Gays" came to the altar at Eucharist but then refused to accept the "Bread of Life" from Spong's hands - because they believed he did not "give integrity to [his] words" (p. 390). Spong was cornered, for he wrote: "I could not refuse to ordain him [Stopfel] and still have any credibility in the gay community".

The 14-20 September 1990 meeting of the House of Bishops discussed the question of the ordination of Robert Williams and voted 78 to 74 (with two abstentions) to dissociate itself from John Spong and the Diocese of Newark in the action of ordination (p. 392). Prior to attending Spong writes: "No matter what its outcome, I planned to ordain Barry Stopfel when it [the meeting] was over. I would rather be forced to resign with my integrity intact than to continue to serve as a bishop without it... We would not play the role of either victim or wimp" (p. 391).

Fighting words indeed! In fact he goes on to write that if "permission" had not been granted him from the presiding bishop, Rt. Rev. Edmond Browning, to carry out the ordination, he had fully intended to disobey the order. The truth is he never even had the integrity of character to seek permission from Ed Browning *directly* but rather worked behind his back approaching his "two closest associates" for permission (p. 394). When granted permission by them, he proceeded with the ordination and just assumed they had cleared it with Ed Browning.¹² So rather than ordain Stopfel to the diaconate himself, he agreed to a plan hatched by Ed's "associates" to get bishop Walter C. Righter, the assistant bishop in the Diocese of Newark, to do the ordination and so take the heat off himself. These "associates" saw the need to distance Spong from the action to "diffuse it a bit", as the press had been following him too closely.

Spong comments: "It was an interesting solution. My *primary concern* was to get Barry ordained, not who did the ordaining.... The strategy had worked" (p. 394, emphasis added). It is ironical that Spong, who accuses his fellow liberals of being unable to "walk the walk nearly as easily as they can talk the talk" (p. 352); showed a lack of courage in his convictions by agreeing to use Righter to do his 'dirty work'. He personally asked Righter, who he describes as a "white-haired, grandfatherly man of tough German heritage" (p. 420) to do the deed.¹³ Reflecting on this 'cop-out' he admits that it had been a decision made to "avoid conflict".

Six years later in 1996 Bishop Walter Righter, *not Spong*, was put on trial for "heresy"¹⁴ for performing Stopfel's ordination to the diaconate in September 1990, which he had only been able to do because permission had been granted him by Spong (pp. 394, 421). (It is certainly 'queer logic' on Spong's part to argue that one's "integrity" hinges on one action, do the opposite, and then declare one's 'integrity' intact).

Spong did eventually ordain Stopfel to the priesthood but *only after it was safe to do so* when the House of Bishops voted by a 95 to 85 margin (with five

abstentions and two absentees) not to write into the canons of the Church a prohibition against the ordination of non-celibate homosexual people (p. 403). (It would take the Church another decade before it passed the positive legislation affirming the rights of “gays” to be ordained). Once the vote was announced, he telephoned Stopfel and they both “set the date for his ordination to the priesthood for the first mutually convenient Saturday...” He adds: “I insisted on doing the ordination *personally*. I would never again step aside for political reasons *to avoid conflict*, no matter who requested it” (p. 403, emphasis added. Here he alludes to the pressure put on him by fellow bishops *not* to personally ordain Stopfel to the diaconate).

Bishop Righter was acquitted by the Church Court of the heresy charges brought against him by ten bishops in the House of Bishops (and supported by 66 other bishops), in a seven-to-one vote on May 15, 1996. Spong and all those lobbying for the ordination of “gays” celebrated this decision as a real victory for “gay rights” but admits that it “drained the energy from the life” of Walter Righter, Barry Stopfel, and Will Leckie (p. 423). Stopfel and his “gay” partner Leckie published a book entitled *Courage to Love*¹⁵ soon afterwards, defending their homosexual lifestyle choice and exploiting the publicity gained from the trial. Their book argues a case for God’s “healing and redemption” based on “sexual intimacy” and “erotic touch”. Rev. Stopfel served as Rector of St George’s Episcopal Church, Maplewood, NJ for six years. Spong does not inform readers that Rev. Stopfel resigned from the priesthood in September 1999, giving as a reason for the decision the stress of the Righter heresy trial, which he said had taken a huge toll on him and his partner, Will Leckie.¹⁶ Both decided to relocate to the Amish country of Pennsylvania and leave the Episcopalian church.¹⁷

Academic mentors

One glaring gap in Spong’s autobiography is any reference to in-depth scholarly exchanges he had over the years with any conservative Christian scholars, let alone conservative New Testament Christian scholars. The ones he counts as “mentors” and significant influences on his theology are all either extreme liberals (e.g. John A.T. Robinson), atheists (e.g. Don Cupitt, Michael Goulder), new age pantheists (e.g. Mathew Fox) or new age pluralists.

It is surprising that he was not even aware of the work of New Testament scholar Professor Michael Goulder until 1990 when he was first introduced to him at Magdalen College, Oxford. Goulder’s work, he writes, “shaped my study life for five years”. It influenced his thinking in the writing of *Born of a Woman, Resurrection: Myth or Reality* and *Liberating the Gospels*. He ranks Goulder and the radical Cambridge theologian Don Cupitt as having become “mentors and friends”. He first made contact with Cupitt in 1991 after reading his book *The Sea of Faith* (1984). This book he writes, “I read ... with increasing enthusiasm and with the same response that I had to *Honest to God* more than fifteen years earlier. It moved me to a totally new place” (p. 398). Where or what this “totally new place” is, is almost incomprehensible to discern for the average reader.

Threadbare positivism

Spong’s concept of God is wildly at odds with the teachings of the Christian Church. He appears to cling to a threadbare positivism which a priori dismisses the possibility of a transcendent supernatural personal God. His rhetoric is largely based on caricaturing Christian orthodoxy and heaping opprobrium on all those committed to the orthodox faith. In his mind they are a scourge in this modern world and it is his ‘holy’ duty and calling to use his ecclesiastical and scholarly ‘rank’ to pillory them. As one of his critics notes, he lumps such religious folk “together with all who in the name of God carry out inquisitions, pogroms, heresy trials, witch hunts, holy wars and crusades”. The irony is that he has become the very mirror image of the breed of “fundamentalist” he so despises and rails against.

Spong writes, “Our world is not one of miracle and magic, in which virgins give birth, wise men follow



wandering stars, or resuscitated bodies walk out of a tomb three days after burial. Literalized, these stories are nothing but religious nonsense” (p. 400). The skill of his rhetoric is to make, in one phrase, a bad idea look like a self-evident truth. In this case the rejection of *all* literal interpretations of the Gospels is made to look like a self-evident truth. By manipulative and gross misrepresentation of traditional teaching he creates a nonsense, advances it as representative of orthodox Christian teaching, and then calls on readers to a whole-scale rejection of literalism. (It is thus curious that he has at least insisted among other things on the literal historical truth of Jesus’ death by crucifixion). One is left wondering how much of his own banal ‘theology’ differs from nonsense. In concluding his book he states:

“I was throughout my life and am still today deeply convinced of the reality of God. Indeed, I am more deeply convinced of this reality at this moment than ever before. I walk inside the wonder of this God in every experience of life. I have become more of a mystic than I ever thought possible for a rationalist like me. I still meet this God in the life of the one I call Lord and Christ, who is supremely important to my spiritual journey. I still love the church, at least as an idea if not in its corporate institutional form” (p. 460).

Having claimed earlier to have rejected and moved beyond all *personal* images of God, Spong finds himself obliged to use the language of persons [e.g.

“meet”, “who”] to describe the ‘divine’ presence he encounters. In his earlier book *Into the Whirlwind* he writes that words adequate to this *impersonal* and all-embracing reality must reflect God as present when “consciousness is expanded and personhood is enhanced” (p. 61). He strives vainly to ennoble such encounters with an impersonal force with the language of the personal.

His failure to comprehend the true nature of personhood stems from his commitment to the philosophy of evolutionism and monism. Elsewhere he claims to *meet* this immanent God deep within life as “the Divine Energy that is a force for wholeness and healing.”¹⁸ However, a “God” deprived of Personhood, is no more capable of being *met* or encountered *as a Person*, than are the healing powers of mineral water or the force of electricity. Both offer wholeness, even electricity (an escape from this life) - when longed for and encountered in the manacled body of a criminal on death row or by a suicidal individual with a death wish. The force of electricity brings salvation therefore: All is one - praise be to divine electricity!

“Theism as a way of defining God is dead”, writes Spong, “and since God can no longer be conceived in theistic terms, it becomes nonsensical to seek to understand Jesus as the incarnation of the theistic God” (p. 468). Pray tell us then learned Bishop why thou commenceth thy book: “I give thanks to the God my life has sought to serve and to the people through whom this God has been revealed” (p. xiii)?

The Emperor’s New Clothes

Despite his retirement John Spong is never far from controversy. He hit the front page of the *New York Post* (17 May 2000) recently in a headline which blared “The Bishop of Cybersex”. He is now writing a monthly column for a sex website [www.ThePosition.com] set

up by former *Penthouse Magazine* editor, John (Jack) Heidenry, who describes the online magazine as “deal[ing] with the full spectrum of sex from the serious, intellectual and moral aspects of our time to the fun aspects”. A successful porn merchant like Heidenry has found a perfect partner in John Spong whose column appears alongside that of former porn star Candida Royalle, gay erotic art and salacious news stories.

In his inaugural editorial Editor-in-chief, Jack Heidenry, calls the website launch “an historic moment”, and concluded with a hyperbolic riff on Martin Luther: “Here I stand, we can do no other” as if there were actually something audacious about publishing porn these days. As *The Toronto Star* (25 June 2000) reported: “No doubt Heidenry’s ‘reformation’ battle cry was inspired by his most notorious columnist: retired Anglican bishop (and unretired troublemaker) John Shelby Spong”. He is reported as saying “I thought that hiring the controversial cleric was a fine idea, mostly because ‘John Spong’ sounds like a porn-star name”. Kathy Shaidle writing for *The Toronto Star* concludes that Spong’s first column “doesn’t live up to its pre-launch hype” for it lacks intellectual rigour indulges in “sweeping generalizations”, “patronizing” comments and cites unnamed ‘experts’. The 69-year old Spong, she writes, “like the fairy tale emperor, has no clothes”.

In his November cyber-sex column entitled “Virgin Mary vs. Wonder Woman” Spong concludes: “Wonder Woman has done more to break the culturally imposed boundaries on women than the Virgin Mary ever did... If it were possible to do so, I would nominate her for sainthood”.¹⁹ While a successful porn merchant might claim to discern the intellectual rigour behind such ‘wisdom’ from the emperor, many lesser mortals would view it is arrant nonsense. The battle cry “Here I stand” has a hollow ring to it when uttered by an emperor without clothes!

Endnotes

- ¹ Andrew Carey, The New Liberals, See <http://www.anglicanmediasydney.asn.au/cul/NewLiberals.html>
- ² Christopher J. Nichol BA BD M.Theo., is currently Communication Manager for Presbyterian Support (Upper South Island, NZ). He is also Spokesperson for the Association of Reconciling Christians and Congregations which has strongly argued the case for the ordination of practising homosexual and lesbian ministers within the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand..
- ³ Ian Harris, currently a lead writer for the Dominion (Wellington), is an ecumenically minded layman and journalist whose career has straddled both church papers and secular papers. He is author of *Creating God: Re-imagining the Christian Way in a Secular World* (1994) and *Creating God; Re-Creating Christ* (1999). Both are published by St Andrews on the Terrace Trust for Religion. The keynote of his 1999 book is a quotation from Iris Murdoch: “God does not and cannot exist, but what led us to conceive of him does exist and is constantly experienced and pictured”. For review see <http://www.sofn.org.uk/harris.html>
- ⁴ <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~crew/bishedu.html> As at 1998: theology degrees: D.Min. (24); D.Th. (2); Th.D. (22); Secular degrees JD (8); Ph.D. (8). For qualifications as of the year 2000 see <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~lcrew/bpsprof2000.html> There are currently 21 bishops who are members of the Episcopal House of Bishops who have *earned* doctorates.
- ⁵ Recall Martin Luther’s answer in the Diet of Worms, “If the emperor desires a plain answer, I will give it to him. It is impossible for me to recant unless I am proved to be wrong by the testimony of Scripture. My conscience is bound to the Word of God. It is neither safe nor honest to act against one’s conscience. Here I stand. God help me. I cannot do otherwise”. This courageous act was held by Protestants to be the beginning of freedom for the Christian world. Some say we can trace Western democracy and religious liberty to this stand taken in the sixteenth century. Luther was claiming that his private study of Scripture was ultimately where his conscience was bound. His faith was not an implicit faith in the Church or in the teaching of men, but its object was the Word of God. Today there is a danger that this principle has been forgotten. If it has then it will not be long before, as a society, we will lose our civil and religious liberty

- ⁶ The bizarre ‘theological’ perspective of a “gay” minister is documented in his book *Just as I am* (Crowdon Publishing, 1992).
- ⁷ <http://www.episcopalian.org/EU/dispatches/righter.htm>
- ⁸ Following the “higher” critics of the 19th century, the traditional view that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch began to be challenged. Such German scholars as K.H. Graf (1866) and especially J. Wellhausen (1868), drawing, in an archaeological vacuum, on Hegelian philosophy to frame a view of the Old Testament that sprang from the Enlightenment, established the theory that the Pentateuch was in fact the end product of many centuries of composition, editing and redaction. This view, known today as the Documentary Hypothesis, and developed from ideas traced as far back as the 11th century, basically stated that there were at least four independent streams of tradition that made up the Old Testament - the J, E, D and P streams, with a crude polytheistic concept of Deity supposedly evolving to a high ethical monotheism. It assumed that written language had not developed by the time of Moses and that the Pentateuch must have been written drawing together a number of oral traditions, sometime after the Babylonian Exile. However, archaeological discoveries had shown conclusively by the turn of the 20th century that records of written language predate Moses by at least a thousand years. Nineteenth Century “scissors and paste” compositional theories were largely overturned by later archeological data demonstrating the presence of early priestly material in all other ancient cultures, the evident literary unity of Deuteronomy as a 13th century BC treaty form, rather than a late anachronistic forgery, the demonstration of the not unusual use of multiple names for God by single authors in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, and the signal failure of the theory in its similar predictions of Koran substrates in a document now widely admitted to be the work of a single author. The late Frithjof Schuon, acclaimed by many leading academics as the world’s foremost writer on comparative religion, has explicitly denied the existence of separate J and E authors in Genesis, pointing out that differing perspectives are common in Sacred Scriptures.
- ⁹ In a footnote Spong writes: “In 1977 Wade Renn had asked the convention of the Diocese of Newark to pass a resolution condemning the action of the bishop of New York for ordaining to the priesthood Ellen Barrett, who was a lesbian living in a committed relationship. This vote on the standing committee [affirming Williams] represented a significant shift in his views” (p. 378).
- ¹⁰ John Spong, *Into the Whirlwind: The Future of the Church* (Minneapolis, The Seabury Press, 1987), p. 107. See John Boswell, *Same-sex Unions in Pre-modern Europe* (Villard, 1994). Boswell argues that from classical antiquity through to medieval church practice, homosexual marriages of some kind were recognised practice. In advancing this now discredited thesis, Boswell has been shown to have sacrificed scholarship to ideology by the feminist pro-homosexual scholar, Camille Paglia, professor of humanities at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, despite her having everything to gain by agreeing with Boswell. See “Plighting Their Troth”, *The Guardian Weekly* (11 Sept. 1994), p. 18 and Robert L. Wilken, “Procrustean Marriage Beds”, *Commonweal* (Sept. 1994), pp. 24-25.
- ¹¹ Rev. Norgard was ordained as an openly gay man in the diocese of Minnesota in 1984. He is currently Episcopal priest and rector of St John the Evangelist Church, San Francisco, continues to live with his homosexual partner Joseph and is Chairman of the national church’s Standing Committee on Evangelism. Prior to his appointment to head up Oasis, in the Newark Diocese, with Elizabeth Kaeton, he served for six years as associate rector at the Holy Apostles Church in New York City.
- ¹² *Here I Stand*, p. 394: “They, I am certain, cleared this with Ed and the next day proposed that Barry’s ordination to the diaconate proceed as planned”.
- ¹³ *Here I Stand*, “He [Walter Righter] acted quite obviously *at my request*, with my permission and authority, and with the consent of the Diocese of Newark’s decision-making bodies” (p. 421, emphasis added). Cf. [Ed Browning’s “two closest associates” suggested] “It might be worth considering [sic] to ask Walter Righter to do the ordination ...” (p. 394).
- ¹⁴ This was only the second heresy trial in the 210-year history of the Episcopalian Church (USA). Bishop Righter stood accused in a Presentment signed by ten bishops of “holding and teaching publicly or privately, and advisedly, doctrine contrary to that held by this church” (Canon IV.1.1 (2) and under Canon IV.1.1.(6) of violating his ordination vows.
- ¹⁵ William Leckie and Barry Stopfel, *Courage to Love: A gay person stands up for his beliefs* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).
- ¹⁶ <http://virtuosity.freesevers.com/Virtuosity/SEPTEMBER1999/24September.htm>
- ¹⁷ Barry Stopfel and William Leckie have authored a book, *Courage to Love; A Gay Priest Stands up for His Beliefs*, which contains a foreword by Bishop John Spong.
- ¹⁸ John Spong, *Into the Whirlwind*, p. 4
- ¹⁹ <http://www.theposition.com/takingpositions/thereligiouswrite/00/10/16/wonderwoman/default.shtm>

Question of credibility a double-edged sword

Question of credibility a double-edged sword

by Brian Davis (d. June 1997)

Former Primate and Archbishop of the Anglican Church in NZ and Polynesia,
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“We are dealing essentially with a mystery, and the great mysteries of the faith require a humble and



Brian Davis

open mind”, writes Brian Davis

Bishop Spong’s book *Resurrection: Myth or Reality* raises again the question of the reliability of the New Testament witness, but also the author’s credibility as a scholar.

Bishop Spong is a lively, provocative and gifted communicator with a genuine desire to make faith in Christ meaningful in the contemporary world.

In this, his latest book he attempts to make a case for the experience of Easter while at the same time rejecting the Gospel witness to “an objective supernatural event that occurred in history”.

Spong dismisses the New Testament Resurrection stories as pious legends and locates the origin of Christian Easter faith in the personal experience of the fisherman Peter rather than in the events recorded in the New Testament Gospels.

The bishop also constructs his own understanding of what really happened. This includes the claim that Jesus

was buried in a common grave, that there were no apostolic witnesses to his death, burial or Resurrection appearances, that Easter occurred first in Galilee with Peter’s subjective insight that the crucified Jesus was alive, and a later return to Jerusalem of the disciples for a Palm Sunday procession into the city.

What are we to make of all this? All but one of the reviews I have read to date (that of Professor Lloyd Geering), are critical of the book.

Gerald O’Collins in the English Tablet says “Fine rhetoric cannot make up for a lack of scholarship and critical judgement shown throughout this book.”

David Powys, an Australian, writing for Church Scene, finds Spong’s claims unconvincing and says that he cannot commend the work.

Luke T. Johnson, in the Christian Century, is even more damning. He says: “If such books offer so little beyond the vagaries of their author’s imaginations, why are they published?”

Bishop Spong is a harsh critic of fundamentalism and those Christians who accept the literal meaning of the words of the Bible.

Any serious student of the Bible knows that it contains different kinds of literature including poetry and parable, as well as biography and history. To read every part of the Bible in a literal way, as though it were a science textbook, is to misunderstand it. Informed orthodoxy stands with Spong on this point.

However, orthodoxy parts company with Spong in his high-handed dismissal of the essential reliability of the Gospel witness.

The Bible deals with events of history, but above all records what these events revealed to the writers, and the communities of faith to which they belonged, of the significance of all that Jesus said and did. The Bible includes history, but history interpreted by faith in God.

What is the nature of the Resurrection event as recorded by the Gospel writers? Spong argues that what we have in the New Testament is midrash, an ancient Jewish way of reworking religious themes and he claims, used by the Gospel writers to create Easter stories out of the Jewish scriptures (the Old Testament) that they had inherited.

N.T. Wright, an Anglican scholar who has specialised in Christian origins, has devastatingly demolished Spong’s midrash theory. He says the bishop

does not know what midrash is, and that he seems unaware of the best contemporary Jewish midrash scholarship. Wright says the Gospel stories cannot be explained as midrash.

Faith and event are inextricably bound together in the New Testament witness. With the Resurrection stories it is clear that the writers themselves believed they were recording something that had happened, for which there were reliable witnesses, and without which there would be no Christian faith.

In attempting to liberate the scriptural text from what he considers to be first-century legend, Spong offers his own account of the truth. It is a product of his imagination and his preoccupation with midrash as he understands it. In his recent books St Paul becomes a repressed homosexual, Mary a rape victim, Mary Magdalene the wife of Jesus, and Simon Peter a fisherman whose post-Crucifixion inner reflection that the "crucified one lives" gives rise to the Resurrection faith of the church.

The reader must judge for himself or herself which account is more credible, the biblical account or that of Bishop Spong. Spong's understanding of the Easter event fails to adequately explain the remarkable birth of Christian faith, focused on Jesus Christ, and its lasting quality.

Spong is far too certain about what the modern mind is not able to accept in terms of religious belief. In fact he is in danger of becoming fundamentalist at the liberal end of the theological spectrum. He is too definite about what could not have happened and what today's Christians cannot believe.

If the Resurrection is a unique action of God in history, a new act of creation (and that is what Christian orthodoxy teaches), then we are dealing with an event that is very difficult to describe or even understand in human terms. We are dealing essentially with a mystery, and the great mysteries of the faith require a humble and open mind.

Given this understanding, the New Testament witness is reassuring.

The discrepancies in detail between the different Gospel accounts of the Resurrection underline the authenticity of its witness rather than detract from it. If the stories are simply stories made up by the disciples of Jesus some time after his death, as Spong alleges, we might expect them to be more harmonious. Eyewitness accounts of an accident in the street normally vary in details. One would expect witnesses to the unique, mysterious Resurrection event to also vary.

The New Testament accounts of the Resurrection are also strikingly restrained. They do not abound in mind-stretching miraculous elements. The stories have a somber, matter-of-fact quality about them.

Alister McGrath an Oxford theologian, in his book *The Renewal of Anglicanism*, is strongly critical of Spong's *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism and Born of a Woman*.

What McGrath says is applicable to this latest offering. "One cannot help but feel that the reasoned argumentation we have come to expect from the Anglican tradition has here been replaced by a special pleading and petulant assertion, more characteristic of the fundamentalist groups to which Bishop Spong takes such an exception. Spong creates a fantasy world, in which his own vision of a politically correct culture leads him to impose political and social stereotypes upon the New Testament with a fierce and uncritical dogmatism and lack of scholarly insight and responsibility ... Many had dared to hope that this kind of thing was not typical of Anglicanism."

The claim of orthodoxy that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead relies on the evidence contained in the New Testament. That evidence has been subjected to severe critical analysis down the years. Alleged parallels between early Christian writings and pagan myths and dying and rising gods have been shown to be superficial or irrelevant. Likewise, Spong's midrash theory has not proved convincing.

Only the unique, mysterious Resurrection event explains the birth of Christian faith and of the church.

The church believes with St Paul that if Christ is not raised our faith is worthless (1 Cor. 15:17). Standing behind this affirmation is nearly 2000 years of Christian faith experience as well as extensive critical review and attack. The faith has remained and its scriptural foundations remain intact.

Bishop Spong is right in affirming, as he does, the ever-contemporary Christian experience of Resurrection faith and hope. He is in the area of unjustified speculation when he provides his own version of the Easter event.

Near the end of the book he says: "Behind the legends that grew up around this moment, there is a reality I can never deny. Jesus lives. I have seen the Lord. By that faith and with that conviction I live my life and proclaim my Gospel.

It is the "reality" that matters, the reality of what God has done in history. It is to this truth that the Gospel writers bear faithful reference.

What's Wrong With Bishop Spong?

Laymen Rethink the Scholarship of John Shelby Spong

Michael R. Bott (B.A.) and Jonathan D. Sarfati (Ph.D.)



Jonathan D. Sarfati, B.Sc (Hons), Ph.D, F.M.

Introduction

John Shelby Spong is an influential public speaker, writer and media figure. He is also Bishop of Newark in New Jersey. He claims he is a Christian yet he champions causes that historic Christianity has often fought tooth and nail against. Bishop Spong is well known for ordaining practising homosexuals, denying the bodily resurrection and virginal conception¹ of Christ, and for deriving his moral code from modern human experience rather than the Bible.

Bishop Spong is often described as a great scholar and intellectual giant who “has the guts to tell it like it is” (see back cover of *Living in Sin* [LS - see the bibliography for abbreviations of Spong’s books]), whereas all Christians who oppose him are ignorant “fundamentalists” and “literalizers”. Indeed, one Australian reviewer said, “Thank God for Spong!” In Spong’s world, works which support his view are described as “well written and even brilliant works of biblical scholarship”; whereas works supporting biblical inerrancy are “tracts, pamphlets, and books from the pens of fundamentalist Christians” (*Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* [RBF] p. x).

It was after reading comments such as these that we decided to investigate the work and theology of John

Spong. We aimed to see whether his case against Christian orthodoxy is as persuasive as he claims.

We also aimed to see whether orthodoxy has any solutions to the doubts he raises. We intend to do this by focusing chiefly on the following overview:

1. Spong’s World View
2. The Bishop and the Bible
3. Spong, Science and Scripture
4. Spong’s View of God
5. Spong and the Resurrection
6. The Birth and the Bishop
7. Spong and Morality
8. Alleged Antisemitism in the New Testament
9. Spong the Scholar

1. Spong’s World View



Spong rejoices in uncertainty and the supposed relativity of all truth in *Into the Whirlwind* (ITW pp. 12ff.). Also, in *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* RMR (pp. 34-35) he claims:

No word is objective; hence no word ever passes from

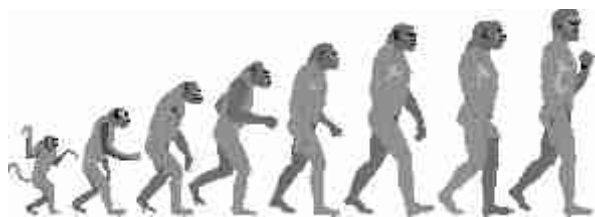
the lips of one person into the hearing of another without being changed in meaning.... Words are never the truth. They are only the medium of truth ... Words become the vehicles by which experiences are shared.

Yet Spong wants us to believe that *his* words are true and that fundamentalists are most certainly wrong. Such absolute and certain statements sound strange from a bishop who condemns a church for prescribing certainty and absolutes. However, we must now look at why Spong thinks that the church has got it wrong and why liberal scholarship and morality is on the right track. To answer these questions, we must look at Spong’s world view.

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The present article has been revised and updated by Dr Sarfati and is republished with the permission of both authors.

1.1 The religion of evolutionary scientism²



Spong jettisons belief in God as the supernatural lawgiver. He sees this belief arising when “men and women, groping for the power to express what they found in him [God], discovered the inadequacy of language, so they lapsed into myth and poetry” (THL p. 184). He argues that this belief should be rejected in favour of the light of truth which he thinks is the monopoly of objective science.

Spong labels the view that ethics, especially sexual ethics, can be derived from the Bible as “fundamentalist” and “pre-modern”, whereas he claims his new framework is “modern” and “scientific”. He says:

I am amazed that given the knowledge revolution of the last 600 years, anyone could still regard the Bible as the dictated³ word of God, inerrant and eternal. (BW p. 3)

In Spong’s world, the findings of objective science continually chip away at our “pre-modern” moral reference, the Bible. For instance, science supposedly has proven that we must change our beliefs about homosexuality:

Contemporary research has today uncovered new facts that are producing a rising conviction that homosexuality ... is a healthy, natural and affirming form of human sexuality. (LS p. 71)

Science, Spong believes, is a neutral sifter and accumulator of facts which produces conclusions based on observation and is untarnished by prejudice. Belief in a literal Bible is primitive and produces such “mistakes” as beliefs in Christ’s bodily resurrection and virginal conception, and the idea that homosexual acts are sinful. But now, thanks to science, we have the facts. We know that Jesus neither rose from the grave nor was He born of a virgin, and that homosexual acts are just as valid as heterosexual acts.

But just how objective and neutral is Spong’s new god Science? The view of science as a neutral accumulator of facts has been debated in several books, such as Thomas Kuhn’s famous book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.⁴ Kuhn maintains that scientific revolutions occur through a shift in the framework or paradigm in which facts are interpreted, and that the shift in framework depends as much upon human and non-scientific factors as on the data themselves. The Marxist evolutionist Stephen Jay Gould also admits that any theory colours perception of fact.⁵ Simply put, scientists are not always neutral.

1.1.1 The Bias of some scientists

Agnostic science writer Richard Milton used to be respected by scientists until he wrote a book which vigorously challenged the dogma of Darwinism.⁶ “Objective” scientist Richard Dawkins, reviewing the book in *New Statesman*, wrote that the book is “loony”, “stupid”, “drivel”, and its author a “harmless fruitcake” who “needs psychiatric help”.⁷ Dawkins is a lecturer at the prestigious Oxford University and is responsible for shaping the minds of young scientists. Yet this is not the objective language supposedly typical of science, but rather that of a religious zealot responding to someone who has blasphemed his faith.

Most secular science magazines censor challenges to evolution. *Scientific American* even sacked their Amateur Scientist columnist, Forrest Mims, when they found out that he was a creationist, although they admitted that his work was “fabulous”, “great” and “first rate”.⁸ Ironically, the founding editor of the magazine was a creationist, as were the founders of most branches of modern science.⁹

Professor DMS Watson, one of the leading biologists and science writers of his day, wrote:

evolution [is] a theory universally accepted not because it can be proven by logically coherent evidence to be true, but because the only alternative, special creation, is clearly incredible.”¹⁰

This quote shows how Spong puts the cart before the horse: he uses “objective” evolutionary science to “disprove” traditional theism; the truth, as Watson admitted, is that (molecules-to-man) evolution is a deduction from the denial of theism.



Carl Sagan’s first line of his best-selling book *Cosmos* is: “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.”¹¹ Such a dogmatic religious statement is typical of one who is a leading priest¹² of the religion of scientism. This confirms the observation by the philosopher Marjory Grene:

It is as a religion of science that Darwinism chiefly held, and holds men’s minds.... The modified, but still characteristically Darwinian theory has itself become an orthodoxy, preached by its adherents with religious fervor, and doubted, they feel, only by a few muddlers, imperfect in scientific faith.¹³

These examples show that many scientists are hardly the neutral observers of facts and data they are made out to be. Yet such scientists have often shaped both modern science curricula and influenced modern opinion.

1.2 Miracles and science



Spong gives no explanation for his denial of the supernatural other than conceptual decree and an appeal to common prejudice. In other words, God doesn't intervene in history because Spong hasn't seen it happen, Spong says it doesn't happen, and we all know it can't happen. A good example of this "logic"

is Spong's discussion of two of his colleagues' views on miracles:

When one Episcopal bishop told me that he accepted the virgin birth story literally because 'if God wanted to be born of a virgin, He could have arranged that', or when another said, 'If God created ex nihilo, the virgin birth would be a snap', I thought to myself, 'How will the church survive in this world with that lack of scholarship among its leaders?' In those statements the bishops were asserting their belief in a God who was in fact a manipulative male person, who would set aside the processes of the world to produce a miracle in order to bring His (sic) divine presence into a human enterprise called life, from which this God was clearly separated. They also revealed no knowledge whatsoever of the biblical studies that have, for at least a century, thrown new light on the interpretation of these birth narratives. (BW, p. 11)

Spong never tells us why belief in the Virgin Birth or belief in Creatio ex nihilo (creation out of nothing) entails a lack of scholarship. The statements of the two bishops quoted disparagingly by Spong are perfectly logical - if God is almighty and can create ex nihilo, then arranging for a virgin to bear a child would be easy (i.e. "a snap"). To declare carte blanche that these things certainly did not happen, just because one believes they cannot, is hardly consistent with a scientific approach.

However, the disparaging reference to the intervening God of history suggests a further dimension to Spong's world-view and beliefs. In his books, reasoned argumentation has been replaced by special pleading and sweeping assertions characteristic of the caricatures of fundamentalists Spong himself attacks. Spong approaches the Bible with his own politically correct spectacles. This leads him to impose his political and social stereotypes upon the Bible with a crude dogmatism devoid of scholarly insight. To add weight to this cause, Spong desperately tries to dress up his claims as scientific and scholarly.

However, Spong fails to understand that science, when commenting on the universe, can only describe things which are observable and repeatable; it cannot prescribe what cannot happen. Scientific laws do not

cause or forbid anything any more than the outline of a map causes the shape of the coastline. The Christian philosopher Norman Geisler stated:

Natural law is a description of the way God acts regularly in and through creation (Ps. 104:10-14), whereas a miracle is the way God acts on special occasions. So both miracles and natural law involve the activity of God. The difference is that natural law is the regular, repeatable way God acts, whereas a miracle is not.

Natural law is the way God acts indirectly in and through the world he has made. By contrast, a miracle is the way God acts directly in his creation from time to time.

Natural law describes the gradual activity of God in the world, whereas miracles manifest his immediate actions.¹⁴

It is also impossible to derive moral codes from science. Morality tells us what people ought to do, while science can at best only tell people actually do. Science may indicate that if a 20 kg weight is dropped from a height of 100 metres on someone's head, it would probably kill him; morality decides that this is murder and therefore wrong.

1.3 Conclusion

According to Spong:

- (i) There are no absolutes. This is self-refuting, as that statement is itself absolute.
- (ii) Miracles don't happen. Spong hasn't proved this, he just can't stomach the idea of a "manipulative" being intervening in history, or the Biblical God's social agenda.
- (iii) Science is superior to the Bible because it is objective and neutral, and is therefore the more qualified to make pronouncements on morality. However, as we have seen, scientists are often anything but neutral and objective.
- (iv) It is a logical fallacy (called the Naturalistic Fallacy)¹⁵ to argue for moral (ought) conclusions from scientific (is) premises.

2. The Bishop and the Bible

For years in my writing career, I have examined such parts of the sacred text as the person of Jesus, the Ten Commandments, the resurrection narratives, and the biblical teaching on human sexuality. In each instance, I narrowed my focus to the subject at hand and studied it with great intensity. But increasingly I felt a need to look at the Bible itself as a whole. How can this book be used with integrity by men and women of faith? How can it be lifted out of the prejudices and cultural biases of bygone eras? How can it be a source of life to a twentieth-and-soon-to-be-twenty-first-century generation? If it continues to be viewed literally, the Bible, in my opinion, is doomed to be cast aside as both dated and irrelevant.

Can modern men and women continue to pretend that timeless, eternal, and unchanging truth has been captured in the words of a book that achieved its final written form midway into the second century of the common era? Would not such a claim be dismissed as ludicrous in any other branch of human knowledge? (RBF, p. 15)



Spong claims that he is “a Christian who loves the church” (RBF p. 10) and even loves the Bible (RBF pp. 11, 14-15, 245, 247). But he claims that the Bible is full of contradictions, errors, objectional passages and repugnant concepts (RBF pp.

16-23). He even claims that “There are passages in the Gospels that portray Jesus of Nazareth as narrow-minded, vindictive, and even hypocritical.” (RBF p. 21) Statements such as these appear strangely at odds with the claim that he loves the Bible. Also, his last sentence in the above quote presupposes that the Bible can be viewed as just another branch of human knowledge.

2.1 Fundamentalism

Spong’s pet hate is fundamentalism. He never defines the term, but Paul Enns states:

Historically, fundamentalism has been used to identify one holding to the five fundamentals of the faith adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the USA in 1910. The five fundamentals were the miracles of Christ, the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, and the inspiration of Scripture.¹⁶

Spong exploits the negative modern connotations of the term to attack those who hold to the original meaning. According to Spong, fundamentalists are “afraid of knowledge” (RBF p. 27), incapable of abstract thought (RBF p. 155), and are fearful and insecure Christians who do not even bother to read the Bible they pretend to defend (RBF pp. 3-5, 79, 133, 217). He also criticises them for taking the Bible literally. By this he does not mean that they take literally passages which are clearly expressed in poetic or figurative language. Rather, he criticises them for accepting the Bible’s doctrinal, moral, and historical propositions as actually true. In particular, his attacks centre around the “five fundamentals”. Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism attacked the inspiration of Scripture; Born of a Woman attacked the Virgin Birth of Christ; and Resurrection: Myth or Reality? attacked His bodily resurrection.

Spong implies that there are no fundamentalist scholars. Works supporting liberalism are “well written and even brilliant works of biblical scholarship” whereas works supporting biblical inerrancy are “tracts, pamphlets, and books from the pens of fundamentalist Christians” (RBF p. x). But how broad is Spong’s

reading on these issues? Examining the bibliography of RBF one finds that the only fundamentalist author cited in the is Jerry Falwell. However, our bibliography contains works of many fine scholars ignored by Spong.

2.2 Biblical inerrancy

Biblical inerrancy may be defined as follows:

Inerrancy means that when all the facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything they teach, whether that teaching has to do with doctrine, history, science, geography, or other disciplines of knowledge.¹⁷

Inerrancy does not mean that the human writers of the Bible wrote in the same style and suppressed their individual personalities. It also does not require verbatim quotations from the OT in the NT, but only requires that the quotations are accurate. As Dr Charles Ryrie comments:

The inerrancy of the Bible means simply that the Bible tells the truth. Truth can and does include approximations, free quotations, language of appearances, and different accounts of the same event as long as they do not contradict.¹⁸

The inerrancy of Scripture was the view of Christ (John 10:35) and His chosen Apostles (2 Tim. 3:15-17, 2 Pet. 1:21).¹⁹ To a professing Christian, the testimony of Christ outweighs the speculative theories of all the 19th century German higher critics and their 20th century followers combined. Spong cites (RBF p. 78) a debate opponent (correctly) saying to Spong, “I would rather trust Christ than you”, to much applause. Spong dismisses this argument by denying that we know the words of Christ. First, it is absurd for Spong to claim to be a Christian if he cannot be sure that he is really following Christ. Second, even many liberal scholars believe that there is overwhelming evidence that Christ affirmed biblical inerrancy, although they disagree with Him. The evangelical scholar Harold Lindsell²⁰ cites the liberal scholars H.J. Cadbury, Adolph Harnack, Rudolf Bultmann and F.C. Grant to prove this point. Such independent support of Christ’s statements prove that evangelicals do not necessarily commit the fallacy of arguing in a circle, of using the Bible to prove the Bible.²¹

The inerrancy of Scripture had also been the dominant view of the Church in the first 1800 years of its history. Those who deny it have departed from orthodox Christianity. Even the liberal NT scholar Kirsopp Lake confirmed this:

It is a mistake often made by educated persons who happen to have but little knowledge of historical theology, to suppose that fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the kind; it is the partial and uneducated survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians. How many were there, for instance, in Christian churches in the eighteenth century who doubted the infallible inspiration of all Scripture? A few,

perhaps, but very few. No, the fundamentalist may be wrong; I think he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he, and I am sorry for the fate of anyone who tries to argue with a fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The Bible and the Corpus theologicum of the Church is (sic) on the fundamentalist side.²²

All Christian doctrines originate in the divinely inspired Bible. Therefore, once a church denies biblical inerrancy, it has started down the slippery slide to total apostasy, like Spong himself. This has happened repeatedly in the last few century. Francis Schaeffer warned:

... the generation of those who first give up biblical inerrancy may have a warm evangelical background and real personal relationships with Christ so they can 'live theologically' on the basis of their limited-inerrancy viewpoint. But what happens when the next generation tries to build on that foundation?²³

Paul Enns points out an important similarity between Christ and Scripture:

There is, in fact a correlation between the two aspects of special revelation: the Scripture may be termed the living, written Word (Heb. 4:12), while Jesus Christ may be designated the living, incarnate Word (John 1:1,14). In the case of Christ there was human [only maternal] parentage but the Holy Spirit overshadowed the event (Luke 1:35), ensuring a sinless Christ; in the case of the Scriptures there was human authorship but the Holy Spirit superintended the writers (2 Pet. 1:21), ensuring an inerrant word [see Ref.]. The Bible accurately presents the special revelation of Jesus Christ.²⁴

Jesus Christ Himself told Nicodemus (Jn. 3:12):

If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you of heavenly things?

Similarly, if the Scriptures can be wrong on testable matters such as geography, history and science, why should it be trusted on matters like the nature of God and life after death, which are not open to empirical testing?

2.3 The reliability of the Gospels

Spong and liberal scholars usually argue that the Gospels were written long after the events they claim to record. Therefore they cannot be trusted to be reliable, because no eye-witnesses were around to correct false reports. Spong dates Mark between 65-75 AD, Matthew at mid 80s, Luke and Acts between 83-90 and John about the turn of the first century (RBF p. 82). So with a time gap of 35-75 years, there is allegedly no chance that the Gospels are reliable records.

However, Spong appears to be unaware of the cogent arguments of J.A.T. Robinson, who was fellow liberal and Bishop of Woolwich, for redating the Gospels between 40 and 65 AD.²⁵ It is ironic that Spong sees himself as a spiritual heir to Robinson

(RMR p. 13), yet ignores his conservative early datings of the NT.

If Robinson is right, the Gospels were written in the lifetimes of people who knew Jesus personally (~6BC to ~30AD for His earthly lifetime). Matthew and Luke record Jesus' prophecy of Jerusalem's demise (Mt. 24:2, Lk. 21:20-24) but do not record its fulfilment in 70 AD. Matthew, especially, would not have failed to record yet another fulfilled prophecy if he had written after the event. Acts, written after Luke, mentions neither the fall of Jerusalem, the horrific Neronian persecutions (mid 60s) although other persecutions are mentioned, nor the martyrdoms of James (61), Paul (64) and Peter (65), so was probably written before then.

Also, if the Gospels were written by church communities instead of the four evangelists, it is likely that they would have tried to solve their problems by putting solutions into the mouth of Christ. But the Gospels do not mention some of the controversies of the early church (e.g. circumcision), but record things quite irrelevant to a mainly Gentile Church, such as Christ's being sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:5-6). Thus the internal evidence points to the Gospels' being written before many of the Church's problems arose.²⁶

Paul wrote even earlier: the summary of the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 was written in c. 55 AD, but Paul says he is reminding them of something he preached to them about 15 years earlier. Therefore Paul records a tradition which was well established within a decade of Christ's death.

Julius Müller challenged 19th century sceptics to show anywhere in history where within 30 years, legends had accumulated around a historical person and become firmly fixed.²⁷ But even if one accepts Spong's late dates, one must note that the classical historian Prof. Sherwin-White has pointed out that legends require a time gap of more than two generations. Therefore, if the Gospels are legendary, the rate of legendary accumulation would need to be "unbelievable".²⁸

Also, John claims to be an eye-witness (Jn. 21:24). Luke claims to have relied on eye-witnesses (Lk. 1:1-4), and was a companion of the Apostle Paul (Col. 4:14), and may have been Cleopas' un-named companion on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13ff.). Mark relied heavily on Peter, who claimed that he "did not follow cleverly devised tales" (2 Pet. 1:16). Matthew, according to early church tradition, was written by the disciple and ex-tax-collector of that name. The Gospels have also been supported by archaeology. The archaeologist Sir William Ramsay stated:

Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy ... this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.²⁹

2.4 Midrash or mere trash?

Spong claims that the Gospels are examples of the literary genre of midrash (BW pp. 18, 20, 184). He understands midrash as follows:

“Midrash represented efforts on the part of the rabbis to probe, tease, and dissect the sacred story [Old Testament] looking for hidden meanings, filling in blanks, and seeking clues to yet-to-be-revealed truth....

The Gospels, far more than we have thought before, are examples of Christian midrash. In the Gospels, the ancient Jewish story would be shaped, retold, interpreted, and even changed so as to throw proper light on the person of Jesus. There was nothing objective about the Gospel tradition. These were not biographies. They were books to inspire faith. To force these narratives into the straitjacket of literal historicity is to violate their intention, their method, and their truth..... once you enter the midrash tradition, the imagination is free to roam and speculate.”

However, N. T. (Tom) Wright³⁰ points out that Spong does not know what midrash is. Wright shows that Spong ignores the leading current experts on midrash, such as Geza Vermes³¹ and Jacob Neusner³², since they leave no room for Spong’s distorted view. Spong also ignores Philip Alexander’s³³ rebuttal of Michael Goulder’s use of the word “midrash” which Spong relies on. Real midrash consisted of a commentary precisely on an actual Biblical text, was tightly controlled and argued, and never included the invention of stories which were clearly seen as non-literal in intent.

2.5 Alleged errors in the Bible

Spong’s specific charges against Scripture can be easily rebutted, but even if there was some difficulty, one should remember the advice of Coleridge:

When we meet an apparent error in a good author, we are to presume ourselves ignorant of his understanding, until we are certain that we understand his ignorance.³⁴

Aristotle also advised:

the benefit of the doubt is to be given to the document itself, not arrogated by the critic to himself.

However, Spong refuses this good advice, e.g.:

Yet in the Torah there are two creation stories that vary in detail and contradict each other in order (Gen. 1:1-2:4 and Gen 2:5ff). These stories cannot be harmonised. (RBF p. 23)

Is it correct to claim that the stories “cannot be harmonised.”? Has he even tried? Kenneth Kitchen, a scholar of the ancient Near East, has successfully tried:

The strictly complementary nature of the “two accounts” is plain enough: Genesis 1 mentions the creation of man as the last of a series, and without any details, whereas in Genesis 2 man is the centre of interest and more specific details are given about him and his setting.

There is not incompatible duplication here at all. Failure to recognize the complementary nature of the subject-distinction between a skeleton outline of all

creation on the one hand, and the concentration in detail of man and his immediate environment on the other, borders on obscurantism.³⁵

Spong also alleges that Moses:

... seemed not to know the nationality of the people to whom Joseph’s brothers sold Joseph, who took him down to Egypt. In one version it was the Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:25), and in another version it was the Midianites (Gen. 37:28). They are not the same. Moses, as a single author, seems to have been quite confused. (RBF p. 23)

However, it is Spong who is quite confused. Over a century ago, Haley cited Keil’s suggestion that the caravan consisted of two tribes allied because of their common descent from Abraham (Gen 16:16, 25:2) and similar lifestyle. Haley also cited Lange’s suggestion that the Ishmaelites may have been the proprietors of the caravan, which comprised mostly Midianites.³⁶ Both explanations are perfectly adequate. They are analogous to a hypothetical situation in World War 2 where an Allied soldier is captured by an Axis patrol comprising mainly Germans, but with some Italians. It would be correct to report that the soldier was captured by a patrol of Germans, but equally correct to report that he was captured by Italians, especially if the minority Italians distinguished themselves.

Spong shows lack of imagination and poor scholarship, as he is unfamiliar with Bible-believing scholars who long ago answered all his “points”. One of the most thorough is Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties by the biblical scholar, linguist and lawyer trained in legal evidence, Gleason Archer.

3. Spong, science and Scripture

Spong asserts that the Bible is wrong about the age and shape of the earth, the origin of mankind, the cause of diseases, and many other points. He uncritically accepts the dogmatic pronouncements of atheistic geologists and evolutionary biologists and judges the Bible accordingly.

3.1 The flat earth, geocentric myth

Spong asserts that the Bible teaches that the earth is flat (RBF pp. 26-31). However, the Bible refers to the circle of the earth (Isaiah 40:22). The spherical earth appears like a circle when viewed from any direction in space. In fact, Hebrew word khug (“circle”) used to describe the earth means sphericity or roundness. The Bible also states that the earth “hangs upon nothing” (Job 26:7), which is as good a description as any. Further, the historian J.B. Russell has documented that nearly all Christian scholars who have ever discussed the earth’s shape have assented to its roundness.³⁷

Spong declares that the Bible sometimes appears to refer to a moving sun and stationary earth (RBF p. 26). However, Spong, who has no scientific qualifications that we are aware of, is unaware that all motion must be described with respect to a reference frame. For earthbound people, the earth is a convenient reference frame.

So although Spong mocks Joshua for asking the sun to stand still (Jos. 10:12-13), Joshua was asking God to perform a miracle lengthening the day to give him time to conquer his foes. The Bible does not state how this enormous miracle took place: God may have miraculously extended the temporal condition, modified the trajectory of the rays light, or caused the relative motion of the sun across the sky to cease by stopping the earth's rotation. A Christian should find this miracle of the sun quite plausible, especially as the Amorites were sun-worshippers, and the miracle demonstrates the sovereignty of the true God over the false "god" of the Amorites. Spong makes the undocumented and faulty claim that if "Joshua really caused the earth to cease turning, the gravitational effects would have destroyed this planet forever" (RBF p. 30). Spong ignores the fact that the deity could by a further chain of miraculous interventions deal with the alleged physical consequences. Also, the earth may not have stopped too suddenly, as v. 13 states that the sun "did not hasten to go for about a day". Also, independent evidence for the historicity of Jos. 10 is that many ancient cultures have myths that seem to be based on this event. For example, there is the Greek myth of Apollo's son Phaethon, who disrupted the sun's course for a day. As would be expected if Josh. 10 was historical, cultures in the opposite hemisphere would have legends of a long night, e.g. the Maori myth of Maui slowing the sun before it rose.

Spong is also unaware that engineering and nautical astronomers, even now, for some applications, use earth as a reference frame, at the centre of a great celestial sphere. The Biblical writers were merely using convenient phenomenological language (language of appearances), just like modern people who refer to "sunset" and "sunrise" (to Spong's disgust - RBF p. 26).

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself knew about the earth's rotation on its axis, as shown by His prophecy about His second coming (Luke 17:34-36) which would be instantaneous ("in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:52, cf. 1 Thess. 4:13ff.)) and seen by all. It would come at night, while people sleep, but also in the morning when women are grinding corn, and yet in midday when men are out in the field. This is possible because the spheroidal earth is rotating on its axis, which allows the sun to shine on different areas at different times. But it would be an inconceivable prophecy if Christ believed in a flat earth.

Psalm 19:6 speaks of the sun's circuit unto the ends of the heaven, which amuses many humanists. Actually, we now know that the sun is moving through space, towing the solar system at a speed of 1150,000 km/h in an orbit around our galaxy which takes 200 million years to complete. Our galaxy is also moving with respect to other galaxies. So the sun's circuit is in fact from one end of the heavens to the other.

3.2 Vastness of space

Spong also uses the earth's tininess relative to the known universe to attack the Bible (RBF p. 31ff.). C.S. Lewis, the famous 20th century literary scholar and Christian apologist, summed up this "red herring" argument nearly 50 years ago:

Many people say, "They could believe in miracles in olden times because they had a false conception of the universe. They thought the Earth is the largest thing in it and Man was the most important creature. It therefore seemed reasonable to suppose that the Creator was specially interested in Man and might even interrupt the course of Nature for his benefit. But now we know the real immensity of the universe - now that we perceive our own planet and even the whole solar system to be only a speck - it becomes ludicrous to believe in them any longer. We have discovered our insignificance and can no longer suppose that God is so drastically concerned in our petty affairs."³⁸

Lewis refutes this argument:

The immensity of the universe is not a recent discovery. More than 1700 years ago Ptolemy taught that in relation to the fixed stars the whole Earth must be regarded as a point with no magnitude. His astronomical system was universally accepted in the Dark and Middle Ages....

The real question is why the spatial insignificance of Earth, after being asserted by Christian philosophers, sung by Christian poets, and commented on by Christian moralists for some fifteen centuries, without the slightest suspicion that it conflicted with their theology, should suddenly in quite modern times have been set up as a stock argument against Christianity and enjoyed, in that capacity, a brilliant career.

In fact, the Bible was well aware of the vastness of space, e.g. Ps. 8:4, Is. 40:22. Also, before the telescope was invented in the 17th century, the number of stars was thought to be more or less known. Ptolemy counted 1056, Tycho Brahe 777 and Johannes Kepler 1005. But now astronomers know that there are billions of stars, far too many for humans to count. So the Bible was once again proven right, as it states, "... the host of heaven cannot be numbered." (Jer. 33:22, cf. Gen. 15:5, 22:17).

Lewis also points out a missing premise needed to make the argument valid: the absurd notion that importance is always proportional to size. If great differences in size mean great differences in importance (e.g. the Earth and the Andromeda Galaxy), do small differences in size mean small differences in importance? Surely only a lunatic would think that a horse is more important than a man, a man's leg more important than his brain, a six-foot man more important than a five-foot man, or dare we add, the average man more important than the average woman.

3.3 Creation vs. Evolution

Spong says he regards the creation vs. evolution debate as an "irrelevant issue". But the issue is relevant enough for him to use evolutionary theories to dismiss Genesis as "myth". He does not acknowledge the criticisms of evolutionary theory even by secular scientists like Dr Michael Denton, Sir Fred Hoyle, Dr

Chandra Wickramasinghe, H.S. Lipson, D. Heribert-Nilsson;³⁹ secular science writers like Richard Milton, or the thousand-plus members of the Creation Research Society, all with advanced degrees in science (See Bibliography).

4. Spong's View of God

Spong rejects the Christian view of God as the Creator of the universe, which is distinct from Him and utterly dependent on Him for its existence. Instead, he plays a game of word magic:

We have come to the dawning realisation that God might not be separate from us but rather deep within us. (RBF p. 33)

This redefinition of God is a form of panentheism: the view that God is in the world as a soul is in the body. But "the God within" is no God at all. It is merely another name for one's own desires and lusts. This is probably the reason that such views are appealing to the unregenerate man: such a "god" makes no ethical demands, and sends no-one into final judgement. However, it is also impossible to derive Spong's ethics from such a view. If God is within all people, then he is in fundamentalists and all the other people Spong despises. Spong provides no criterion to decide which "God within" is the right one.

5. Spong and the Resurrection

The bodily resurrection of Christ is one of the key doctrines of Christianity, as it demonstrates His claims to deity (Rom. 1:4), confirmed the truth of all He said (Mt. 28:6), and shows that He conquered death thus guaranteeing the resurrection of believers (2 Cor. 4:14). The apostle Paul wrote:

... if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still dead in your sins.... If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.... If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. (1 Cor. 15:17,19,32b)

5.1 Reinterpretation of resurrection

Spong, as we have shown, dogmatically rejects miracles. Therefore he must "demythologise" then "remythologise" the resurrection narratives (RBF p. 237). His substitute is a rhetorical question:

Is not the primary message of the Easter narratives that even the barrier of death must not deter us in our quest for life and love? (RBF p. 146)

This is hardly a message for which the apostles, and countless martyrs since, were prepared to be tortured and killed. Spong's view presents a Christ who is a failure; the truly good man who was defeated by a cruel death. Bishop Richard Holloway of Edinburgh rightly comments:

Spong leaves us with a God who cannot save because he has no control of nature or history. He offers us a dead Messiah who only 'lives'

because of the wishful thinking of his first disciples.⁴⁰

It is no wonder that liberal churches which deny the resurrection are shrinking, while conservative (including "fundamentalist") churches which accept the resurrection are the only ones growing. Spong laments this fact (RBF p. 3, RMR p. 13), but he fails to see what most unbelievers can: that going to church is a waste of time if the resurrection is a hoax. They can find better sources of platitudes without the semantic gymnastics.

Spong denies a physical resurrection, and denies that Paul taught it. He fails to realise that the Jews regarded the body as an integral part of Man, so the resurrection must include the body:

The notion that Jesus was resurrected in a totally spiritual sense, while his old body lay in the grave, is a purely modern conception. First-century Jewish thinking would never have accepted such a view and that is not how Jesus' resurrection was proclaimed in the earliest accounts. It would have been impossible for resurrection claims to survive in the face of a tomb containing the corpse of Jesus.⁴¹

5.2 Empty tomb or empty faith?

One major difficulty for non-Christian scholars has been to explain what happened to Christ's body, as a plausible alternative to the resurrection. Christ's enemies would not want to steal it, since that would promote the resurrection stories they wanted to quash - and they would have quashed them by simply producing the body. The disciples had no motive to confront a heavily armed Roman cohort and steal the body to promote resurrection stories. The disciples were tortured and killed, and no-one would die for what he knows is a lie. However, one of the earliest arguments against the resurrection was the story the cohort was told to say: "His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep" (Mt. 28:13). This is absurd: how could they know what happened if they were asleep? Also, any Roman soldier who slept on duty was executed.

Spong explains away the empty tomb by claiming that there was no tomb, and that Jesus was buried in a common grave. He claims that Paul mentioned no tomb at all. However, Paul stated that Jesus was buried, which in Greek is *etaphè*, which literally means entombed (from *en*, "in"; *taphos*, "tomb").⁴² Peter also contrasted Jesus, whose body did not "see decay" (NIV), with David, whose body still lay in his tomb (Acts 2:22-35).

Paul's statement of the Gospel in 1 Cor. 15ff. cites an ancient tradition dating back to only a few years after the event. Mark's account of the empty tomb reflects the Aramaic, pointing to a very early source. Dr W.L. Craig gives much evidence for the reliability of the burial and empty tomb accounts, and lists 37 prominent scholars who agree.⁴³

5.3 "On the third day"

Spong has a few problems with the time between Christ's burial and resurrection (RMR Ch. 17). Christ

was buried at about 6pm Good Friday (Lk. 23:54) and rose on the 'first day of the week' (Mk. 16:9) or 'on the third day' (1 Cor. 15:4). Spong claims that this contradicts Mt. 12:40: 'three days and three nights'. But he overlooks the fact that Jews distinguished the word 'day' in the sense of daylight hours from 'day' as 24 hour cycle, by referring to the latter as 'night and a day'. Further, in Jewish counting, a part of a day was counted as a whole day (a figure of speech known as *synecdoche*), e.g. 1 Sam. 30:12, where 'he had not eaten bread or drunk water for three days and nights' is equated in v. 13 with *hayyom sh'elosha* ('three days ago') which could only mean 'day before yesterday'. Another example is 1 Kings 20:29 (NIV):

For seven days they camped opposite each other, and on the seventh day the battle was joined.

In English counting, if they started fighting on the 7th day, it means they were only camping for six whole days. But in Jewish reckoning, the partial days counted as wholes, so the text says they were camping for seven days. See also Gen. 42:17–18.

Another proof is Matthew 27:63–64: 'Sir,' they said, 'we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, **'After three days I will rise again.'** So give the order for the tomb to be made secure **until the third day**. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.' (NIV)

Note that even His enemies understood that 'after three days' meant that they only had to secure the tomb 'until the third day'. If three full 24 hour periods were meant, then they would want to secure the tomb until the fourth day to make sure.

Spong becomes more confused when he argues that for Paul, the resurrection 'occurred not on the literal third day but on the eschatological third day, for it was beyond time and history.' (RBF p. 124) But for Paul, the whole point was that the resurrection was in time and history, with Jesus as its 'first fruits' (1 Cor. 15:12–28). Also, Jesus distinguished Lazarus' (and His own) resurrection from the general resurrection on the last day (John 11). Finally, Mt. 12:40 equates the length of Christ's entombment with the time Jonah spent inside the sea creature. Jonah preached to the Ninevites in history and time, not at the end of time. This shows that Jesus' resurrection was also regarded as historical.

5.4 Do the resurrection narratives contradict?

Spong claims that the resurrection narratives disagree on the number of women who went to the tomb, the number of angels, number and place of resurrection appearances (RMR pp. 101–5). Spong of course ignores the many scholars who have dealt with the problems he raised. One of the most thorough

treatments is John Wenham's *Easter Enigma*,⁴⁴ which makes a plausible reconstruction of the order of events.

The fact that women were mentioned by the Gospel writers at all gives them the ring of truth. This is because women were usually disqualified from giving evidence in that culture, so their mention detracts from the persuasiveness of the Gospels to their culture. The only motive, therefore, was one of historical accuracy. Paul does not mention the women because he was listing the resurrection appearances which could be verified. Some of the Gospels omit the name of one or more of the women, but this does not mean that they were not present.

As for the angels, Mark mentioned a man in a white robe; but there is something supernatural about him. Angels often appeared like men in the Bible (Gen. 18–19). Matthew mentions an angel, but does not say only one. Therefore there is no contradiction with Luke's two angels. The translation of "stood by" in Luke does not contradict Mark's "sitting", as the word can mean "to appear to", implying suddenness.⁴⁵

All these explanations, although not mentioned by Spong, are well known and testify that the "contradictions" mentioned are more imaginary than real.

6. The Birth and the Bishop

The real reason that Spong rejects the Virginal Conception of Christ is his anti-supernaturalistic world view (see section 1). However, he also tries to discredit this doctrine by rehashing old arguments against the reliability of the biblical accounts. Most of these have been rebutted by Tom Wright (see endnote 30), many had already been addressed by another New Testament scholar C. E. B. Cranfield,⁴⁶ and an article in an earlier issue of *Apologia* (see endnote 1) but we will answer some of Spong's criticisms here.

6.1 Isaiah 7:14: Virgin?

Spong claims that Matthew's belief in the virginal conception was derived from a mistranslation of Is. 7:14 'a virgin (*'almāh*) shall conceive...'. He claims that '*'almāh* really means 'young woman' and adds: 'The Hebrew word for virgin is *betulah*. '*Almah* never means "virgin" in Hebrew' (RBF p. 16). Liberal 'Christians' like Spong and Orthodox Jews often make this claim, and this is reflected in Bible translations such as the NEB, RSV, NRSV and GNB. Such people fail to explain why a young woman's bearing a son should be a sign — it happens all the time!

The Septuagint (ca. 250 BC) translates '*'almāh* as *parthenos*, the normal word for virgin.⁴⁷ Later Jews, such as Trypho,⁴⁸ Justin Martyr's (AD ca. 160) dialogue opponent, and Rashi⁴⁹ (AD 1040–1105) have claimed that the Septuagint was wrong. Trypho claimed



that *'almàh* should have been translated *neanis* (young girl) rather than *parthenos* (see endnote 1).

However, even Rashi admitted that the word could mean 'virgin' in Song of Sol. 1:3 and 6:8. In the KJV, the word is translated 'virgin' in Gen. 24:43 (Rebekah before her marriage), 'maid' in Ex. 2:8 (Miriam as a girl) and Prov. 30:19, and 'damsels' in Ps. 68:25. These verses contain all the occurrences of *'almàh* in the OT, and in none can it be shown that a non-virgin is meant. In English, 'maid' and 'maiden' are often treated as synonyms for virgin (e.g. maiden voyage).

Vine *et al.* note that the other word for virgin, *b^etûlâh*, 'emphasizes virility more than virginity (although it is used with both emphases, too).⁵⁰ It is qualified by a statement 'neither had any man known her' in Gn. 24:16, and is used of a widow in Joel 1:8. Further evidence comes from clay tablets found in 1929 in Ugarit in Syria. Here, in Aramaic, a word similar to *'almàh* is used of an unmarried woman, while on certain Aramaic incantation bowls, the Aramaic counterpart of *b^etûlâh* is used of a married woman.⁵¹ The *Encyclopedia Judaica*, while criticizing the translation of *'almàh* in Is. 7:14 as 'virgin', also points out that a Semitic root related to *b^etûlâh* (*btl*) was used of the goddess Anath who had frenzied sex with Baal.⁵²

6.2 Do the genealogies contradict?

Spong alleges:

... the genealogies [of Christ] in Matthew (chap. 1) and Luke (chap. 3) are not capable of being reconciled. They disagree in many details, not the least of which is the number of generations (Luke said it was seventy-six; Matthew said forty-two), the son of David who carried the Messianic line (Solomon, said Matthew; Nathan, said Luke), or even the name of Jesus' grandfather (Jacob, said Matthew; Heli or Eli, said Luke).

Despite Spong's claim that the 'genealogies are not capable of being reconciled', many scholars *have* plausibly reconciled them. The different numbers of generations are due to the fact that Matthew traces Jesus' ancestry up to Abraham, which is all Matthew's intended Jewish readers would need; while Luke traces it back to Adam, for the benefit of his Gentile reader Theophilus.

The other two points are explained by the fact that Matthew is giving the genealogy of Joseph, whereas Luke gives Mary's line.⁵³ The reason Luke omitted Mary's name was that the rules for listing Jewish ancestry generally left out the mothers' names, which explains why Mary's name is omitted. But a clear pointer to the fact that the genealogy in Luke is Mary's is that the Greek text has a definite article before all the names except Joseph's. This indicated that to any Greek-speaker that the genealogy was not Joseph's, therefore Heli must have been the father of Joseph's wife. Indeed, the Jewish Talmud, no friend of Christianity, calls Mary the 'daughter of Heli'.

6.3 The Census and Quirinius

One of the many objections to Luke's account is an alleged mistake concerning the census in Quirinius' day (Lk. 2:2). The alleged problem is that Quirinius did not become governor until c. AD 7 according to Josephus, while Christ was born before Herod the Great died in 4 BC. However, N.T. Wright (see endnote 30) points out that *prôtos* not only means 'first', but when followed by the genitive can mean 'before' (cf. Jn. 1:15, 15:38). Therefore the census around the time of Christ's birth was one which took place *before* Quirinius was governing Syria (Acts 5:37 proves that Luke was aware of the latter). Another possible solution is that Quirinius *twice* governed Syria, once around 7 BC and again around AD 7, which is supported by certain inscriptions.⁵⁴ Under this scenario, Luke's use of *prôtos* refers to the first census in 7 BC, rather than the well-known one in AD 7.

6.4 Alleged silence of Mark, John and Paul on the Virginal Conception

Spong makes much of Paul's alleged silence to claim that he 'stood as a witness to a normal human birth process for Jesus' (BW). However, arguments from silence are nearly always inconclusive, and this is no exception. His alleged silence could mean that he saw no reason to correct the Virginal Conception stories circulating. Paul would certainly have been aware of such stories, as he was Luke's companion (Acts 16:10–17, 20:5–21:18, 21:1–28:16), and cited Luke 10:7 in 1 Tim. 5:18. Paul does not directly discuss the birth process at all, so by Spong's logic, Paul did not believe Jesus went through any birth process!

In fact, Paul does use language which implies acceptance of the Virginal Conception. He uses the general Greek verb *ginomai*, not *gennaô*, which tends to associate the husband in Rom. 1:3, Phil. 2:7, and especially Gal. 4:4, 'God sent forth His Son, coming (*genomenon*, from *ginomai*) from a woman.' By contrast, in 4:23 Ishmael 'was born' (*gegennêtai*, from *gennaô*).

Mark has no birth narrative, but he alone of the synoptists quotes objectors saying, 'Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary' (Mk. 6:3, cf. Mt. 13:55 and Lk. 4:22).⁵⁵ Addressing a Jew as his mother's son was a great insult, implying fornication, so the objectors had probably heard the account of Christ's conception, and were sceptical. It is also likely from this that Mark was also aware of the account.

John also has no birth narrative, but he is aware of rumours of Christ's illegitimacy when he reports in 8:41 that the Jews declared: 'We (emphatic pronoun and emphatic position) were not born of fornication.'⁵⁶ This passage as well as Jn. 1:13 and 6:41f. probably indicate that the evangelist believed in the Virginal Conception.⁵⁷

6.5 Alleged Pagan Derivation of the Virginal Conception

Spong raises a common objection to the Virginal Conception: that there are supposed parallels in pagan mythology, e.g. the Medusa-slayer Perseus, born of the

woman Danaë and sired by Zeus, the chief god of the Greek pantheon. Zeus also fathered Herakles from Alkmene and Dionysus from Semele.⁵⁸ Opponents of Christianity from Trypho and Celsus,⁵⁹ who was refuted by Origen's *Contra Celsum* (*Against Celsus*), till the present, have used this objection, but it has many flaws:

- First, this objection commits the *genetic fallacy*, the error of trying to disprove a belief by tracing it to its source. For example, Kekulé thought up the (correct) ring structure of the benzene molecule after a dream of a snake grasping its tail; chemists don't need to worry about correct ophiology to analyse benzene! Similarly, the truth or falsity of Christianity is independent of the truth or falsity of its alleged parallels.
- Second, the so-called parallels are not. Perseus was not really virginally conceived at all, but was the result of sexual intercourse between the lecherous god Zeus and Danaë. Zeus had previously turned himself into a shower of gold to reach the imprisoned damsel. Other alleged parallels are just as worthless, so it is pointless for sceptics to multiply examples — zero times hundreds is still zero.
- Third, Christ was a historical figure written about by people who knew him — quite different from the mythological 'parallels'.
- Fourth, the earliest Christians were Jews who abhorred paganism (see Acts 14:8-18), so would be the last people to derive Christianity from paganism.

6.6 Other alleged contradictions in the Birth Narratives

Spong correctly states that there are a number of differences between Matthew and Luke, but wrongly infers incompatibility. One example of his claim is:

These [virgin birth] narratives involve, I believe, simple facts that are contradictory and irreconcilable. Joseph and Mary either lived in Nazareth, as Luke asserted, or lived in Bethlehem, as Matthew believed. They either returned to their home in Nazareth, as Luke informs us, or they by chance happened upon Nazareth in fulfilment of divine prophecy, as Matthew related. Both evangelists may be wrong on these facts, but both Evangelists cannot be right. (RBF pp. 212-213)

He fails once again to realise that incomplete reports are not necessarily incorrect reports. Dr A.T. Robertson long ago harmonised the birth narratives. Some of his section headings follow:

- §5. Lk. 1:26–38: Annunciation to the Virgin Mary of the birth of Jesus (Nazareth)
- §9. Mt. 1:18–25: Annunciation to Joseph of birth of Jesus (no place mentioned, so does not contradict §5)
- §10. Lk. 2:1–7: The birth of Jesus (and journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where Jesus is born agreeing with Mt. 2:1)

- §11. Lk. 2:8–20: The praise of the angels and the homage of the shepherds (Matthew does not mention this, but he never contradicted it either)
- §13. Lk. 2:2–38: The presentation in the temple (Jerusalem, 40 days after His birth)
- §14. Mt. 2:1–12: Magi visit the new-born King of the Jews (Bethlehem)
- §15. Mt. 2:13–18: The child carried to Egypt, and the children at Bethlehem slain
- §16. Mt. 2:19–23: The child brought from Egypt to Nazareth (Lk. 2:39 does not contradict this, as it does not say that the family travelled directly and immediately from Jerusalem to Nazareth)

Much information can be gained by studying the Gospels together, if one refrains from jumping to the conclusion that they are hopelessly contradictory.

7. Spong and Morality

7.1 Biblical vs. secular morality

Spong frequently criticises biblical morality. However, as we have shown, he really has no real foundation for his own morality. Without a transcendent source of morality, he is reduced to following the changing fashions of the times. Spong may deny the infallibility of Scripture, but the concept of infallibility as such is inescapable. If we refuse to ascribe infallibility to Scripture, it is because we have ascribed it to something else. Infallibility will be applied implicitly to ideologies, e.g. Nazism; things, e.g. nature; men, e.g. Hitler; institutions, e.g. "the party knows best".

This is the danger of Spong's position. By jettisoning belief in the infallible Scriptures, he has not rejected infallibility; he just transfers it to modern opinion.

Donald Bloesch points out the danger of Spong's approach, using the example of the confessing orthodox church in Germany that rose up in resistance to Hitler while:

... the church most infiltrated by the liberal ideology, the Enlightenment, was quickest to succumb to the beguilement of national societies.⁶⁰

Spong claims that a literal interpretation of the Bible supports slavery. This accusation is not supported by history. Often the most effective campaigners against slavery have been those who believed the Bible regardless of how unpalatable it was to society. For example, William Wilberforce, fought persistently and almost single-handedly against the slave trade with all its economic and political might.⁶¹ He also had to battle prevailing attitudes like, "Humanity is a private feeling, not a public principle to act upon" (Earl of Abingdon) and "Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life" (Lord Melbourne).⁶²

Conversely, when one tries to ground morality on science, supported by the “fact” of evolution, one will have a very hard taskmaster. In the “struggle for the survival of the fittest”, there is no place for compassion for the weak. The actions of a State are always reflective of its undergirding world view. The death camps of Nazi Germany were the outworkings of Hitler’s belief that the Aryan race would win the battle for “the preservation of the favoured races in the struggle for life.”⁶³ Dr A.J. Pennings wrote that Nazism grew out of:

... a deeply held mystical paganism ... strengthened by the teachings of Darwinism and the pseudo-science of eugenics.⁶⁴

The atheistic evolutionist Sir Arthur Keith wrote:

The German Führer ... has consistently sought to make the practice of Germany conform to the theory of evolution.⁶⁵

In other words, by rejecting Scripture men do not gain their freedom; they usually place themselves under a far greater tyranny.

7.2 Spong objects to God’s sovereignty

Spong also criticises the Divine command sometimes given to Israel to exterminate some pagan nations (RBF p. 19) as contradicting the command “Do not murder”. Spong fails to realise that not all killing is murder, nor does he accept the sovereignty of the Creator of life to take life, just as a potter may do as he pleases with the clay (Rom. 9). God did have his reasons: the exterminated nations were so corrupt and idolatrous that they were a threat to the spiritual survival of the race through which the Messiah was prophesied to come. The rare examples of total extermination were analogous an amputation of a diseased limb to save the body. Christians, whose bodies are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19) today fight with spiritual weapons (Rom. 6:13, 2 Cor. 10:4-5) unavailable to the Israelites. Therefore physical weapons have no place in fighting for our faith today.

Spong claims that Lot’s offering his virgin daughters (Gen. 19:8) was an example of Biblical morality (RBF p. 7). He should realise that not everything recorded in the Bible is approved by the Bible. Although Lot is called a righteous man in the NT (2 Pet. 2:7-8), the word for “righteous” is *dikaion* meaning “justified”, i.e. declared legally acquitted and therefore righteous in God’s sight. This is the righteousness of Christ imputed to believers, not personal righteousness, which is “like filthy rags” (Is. 64:6) when presented as a basis for justification (Rom. 3:20-4:15). Almost nothing good is said about Lot in the OT. He is the classic OT counterpart of the carnal Christian (1 Cor. 3, esp. 1-3) who will nevertheless be saved (1 Cor. 3:13-15).

7.3 Spong and sexual morality

Spong, the liberal bishop who “loves the Bible”, in his defense of fornication, homosexuality and abortion, typically ignores the Bible on the subject.⁶⁶ Instead, he

derives his norms from contemporary Western society. This section concentrates on Spong’s much-publicised support of homosexuality.

7.3.1 Spong, science and homosexuality

In *Living in Sin* (LS), Spong appeals to some hotly contended common “knowledge” that sexual orientation is a part of life over which we have no control.:

We now know that homosexuality is part of the essential nature of approximately 10% of the population. (LS p. 67)

Spong draws this figure from Alfred Kinsey’s controversial study. In 1948, Kinsey published the results of a large-scale survey of American males.⁶⁷ Supposedly Kinsey found that 37% of males had at least one orgasmic experience with at least one other male. Further, 10% of males between 11 and 55 years old were reported to have remained “largely” homosexual for at least three years. Only 4% of males were found to be exclusively homosexual.

The homosexual movement (and Spong) often cites the Kinsey report to maintain that 10% of the population is exclusively homosexual. But even if this report was accurate, the gay lobby’s conclusion clearly shows misunderstanding of the report, as shown in the previous paragraph. Once again we see ideology masquerading as science.

However, Kinsey’s reliability has recently been questioned. According to a recent critique⁶⁸, Kinsey’s statistics were derived by interviewing a sample of the male populace, some 25% of which were ex-prisoners, prison inmates and sex offenders. Kinsey stacked his results by distorting his sample, thereby effecting the findings he wanted. Further, his researchers were also chosen for their bias. One applicant was personally blackballed by Kinsey after confessing that he believed homosexuality to be abnormal, bestiality ludicrous and adultery harmful to marriage. Kinsey also claimed that children from infancy are sexual and benefit from sexual encounters with adults. In the name of Kinsey’s “science”, children from as young as two months were subjected to masturbation by Kinsey’s “technically trained” sex offenders.⁶⁹

Even if we accept that some people are born homosexual, does this make homosexual acts morally right? Not automatically. Some violent male criminals are born with an XYY chromosome configuration, rather than the normal XY. Their predisposition towards violence does not excuse their violent behaviour. Some people are born with a genetic predisposition toward cancer. Do we embrace and rejoice in their condition, and encourage them to enjoy the experience of living in a cancer-ridden lifestyle? No! We see it as a disease for which we strive to find a cure. It does not automatically follow that just because someone is born with a condition that this makes it normal.

Furthermore, not all homosexuals are happy with Spong’s (pseudo-)scientific defence of their lifestyle.

Judith Dale, a self-confessed lesbian, in moving a vote of thanks for Spong after an address in Wellington last year,⁷⁰ stated that she felt uncomfortable about Spong's scientific argument for homosexuality because it "implies a naturalness to heterosexuality and an aberrance to homosexuality". Dale said this was dangerous "... because the underlying assertion is that if we weren't born that way, we wouldn't want to be like this." She said that the scientific argument was a kind of oppression as it points to homosexuality as a mutation. Spong, in responding to the vote of thanks, apologised for any imagined offense, and said that he endorsed Dale's comments, and claimed that he only used these arguments to win over heterosexuals to the gay rights cause.

In the same lecture, Spong defended homosexuality in humans by saying that homosexual behaviour had been observed in white mice in laboratories. Two things can be said about this reasoning:

(i) It is dangerous to derive morality from animal behaviour. Stronger animals will take food from weaker animals; does this justify theft? Tom cats will often mount unwilling female cats; does this justify rape?

(ii) Spong endorsed Judith Dale's comments that the scientific arguments for homosexuality amounted to a form of oppression and were therefore unwanted by a large section of the homosexual community. Surely this retraction must negate a large part of his argumentation, so will Spong withdraw his books which contain arguments he has publicly admitted are faulty?

7.3.2 Pseudo-history and homosexuality

Because Spong derives his morality from human experience and practice rather than Scripture, he attempts to legitimise homosexuality in church life by an appeal to historical practice. He acknowledges that his case leans heavily on the research of Professor John Boswell (ITW p. 107).

How weighty are the conclusions of the openly homosexual academic, the late Prof. Boswell? Boswell's thesis in his two books⁷¹ is that from classical antiquity through to medieval church practice, homosexual marriages of some kind were recognised practice.

The feminist pro-homosexual scholar Camille Paglia, professor of humanities at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, despite having everything to gain by agreeing with Boswell, could not, unlike Boswell and Spong, sacrifice scholarship to ideology. Paglia concluded, after extensively reading Boswell's work:

Despite sporadic qualifications, Boswell repeatedly implies a genital subtext to intense spiritual alliances, even when his supporting manuscripts make clearly uncarnal invocations to martyred paired saints, who died in the service of Christ....

Whatever medieval ceremonies of union may have been found, Boswell has not remotely established that they were originally homosexual in our romantic sense. Their real meaning has yet to be determined. Sacrilegious misuse of such ceremonies may indeed have occurred, leading to their banning, but historians are unjustified in extrapolating backwards and reducing fragmentary evidence to its lowest common denominator. The cause of gay rights, which I support, is not helped by this kind of slippery, self-interested scholarship, where propaganda and casuistry impede the objective search for truth.⁷²

In closing this section we note that we have not debunked all Spong's arguments for homosexuality. This would require an entire book. However, the task would not be mentally exhausting. Spong repeatedly argues by assertion and pins his arguments on the bizarre theories of the black sheep of the academic world. It is a shame that this Bible sceptic does not treat the work of these modern scholars with the same degree of scepticism that he reserves for the Bible.

8. Alleged Antisemitism in the New Testament

8.1 Supposedly antisemitic NT texts

Spong claims that Jesus (as depicted in John) and Paul are guilty of anti-Jewish prejudice, and blames them for "pogroms, ghettos, ... Kristallnacht and Dachau." (RBF p. 22). Spong should be more concerned that the Holocaust occurred in the country where his beloved theological liberalism first crippled the churches (See section 7.1).

Spong here, and in many other place, confuses legitimate use of biblical passages with their abuse (cf. RBF p. 20). It is not the Bible's fault that antisemites, as well as slavers, wife-beaters, crusaders and inquisitors have read their own prejudices into the texts (an example of eisegesis).

It is hardly a new charge that the NT contains remarks that antisemites have misused. However, a book which contains scathing remarks about some Jews is not necessarily antisemitic. For example, a certain book calls Israelites: "stiffnecked people ... rebellious from the day I knew you", another thunders: "Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity ...", yet another despairs: "Refuse silver shall men call them, because the Lord has rejected them." Yet these examples all come from the Old Testament (Deut. 9:6, 24; Is. 1:4; Jer. 6:30)! Not even Spong would accuse the OT of antisemitism, although it is often brutally honest about the faults of God's chosen people.

Critics of the NT also fail to realise that the word Ioudaios, usually translated "Jew", probably only means Jew in the widest sense (descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) when used by gentiles. When used by Jews, it is probably a sectional term meaning "Judean".⁷³ This reflected the mutual dislike between Judeans and Galileans. The latter included Christ and his disciples who were most strongly opposed by Judeans. To illustrate the difference, the Roman Pontius

Pilate had Jesus labelled: "King of the Jews" (Mt. 27:37) while the Jewish leaders said: "If He be the King of Israel ..." [including Galilee and the Diaspora] (Mt. 27:42).

The NT was written by Jews, and its pro-semitism is evident. Jesus' first priority was to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:6, 15:24), and says, "... for salvation is from the Jews." (John 4:22, a book Spong singles out for his charge of antisemitism!). Paul always evangelised Jews first in every city he visited (Acts 13:4-5, 14, 14:1, 16:11-13, 17:1-2, 10, 16-17, 18:1-4, 19, 19:1,8). Paul wrote to the church at Rome:

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Rom. 1:16)

I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. (Rom. 11:1)

8.2 Antisemitism and the 'myth' of Judas Iscariot

In a public lecture in Wellington,⁷⁴ Spong criticised the Gospel writers for allegedly inventing the character of Judas Iscariot the betrayer as an excuse to persecute the Jews. Spong pointed out that Judas is the Greek form of Judah or Yehudah, the son of Jacob/Israel from whom Jews derive their name. But the absurd conclusion was drawn that Judas was made up by the Gospel authors and early church to stand for the evil, treacherous Jew. Spong did not explain why the supposedly antisemitic church would then recognise as canonical the penultimate book of the NT, written by another Judas (who is called "Jude" in English translations). Nor did Spong explain why the allegedly antisemitic Luke mentioned another disciple called Judas (Lk. 6:16).

Most of Spong's talk tried to discredit the Gospel accounts of Judas by dredging up tired old examples of alleged contradictions, e.g. Mt. 27:5 says that Judas "hanged himself", while Acts 1:18 says: "... and falling headlong, [Judas] burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out". Spong fails to see that neither of these statements exclude the other. A plausible scenario is that Judas hanged himself on a dead and dry branch (even today, there are many trees like that) on the brink of the precipice overhanging the valley of Hinnom; a strong gust was strong enough to break the branch; the body hurtled down the chasm onto one of the many jagged rocks and burst open.

9. Spong the Scholar

Spong is hailed as an intellectual and a "convincing scholar"⁷⁵ in almost every liberal pulpit and in all branches of the secular media. But after reading Spong's works and hearing him speak on several occasions, we can understand at least one of the real reasons for Spong's popularity today. He is one of our few green theologians, for he constantly recycles his material but presents it in new wrapping (which is itself recycled - it nearly always says: "A Bishop rethinks

..."). His writings are littered with the words: "I know of no biblical scholar [who disagrees with me]", e.g. "No biblical scholar" thinks that Adam was a historical figure" (RBF p. 104), "I know of no one in the ranks of biblical scholarship" who thinks that John wrote the Fourth Gospel (RBF p. 193), "I know of no reputable biblical scholar who takes these [Virgin] birth narratives literally" (RBF p. 215).

Spong's professed ignorance is not surprising if one chooses to remain ignorant and only ever reads one side of the case. One will only know works by liberals if all one ever reads are works by liberals. Such pronouncements, rather than being a sign of great learning are really a sign of self-willed great ignorance.

Spong has visited New Zealand twice in the last three or four years. He has been fêted by the secular media. In fact, the religious radio programme *Connexions*,⁷⁶ featuring Lloyd Geering, Don Cupitt and John Spong, won an award (critiques of Geering and Cupitt will appear in forthcoming issues of *Apologia*). The only dissenting voice in the Wellington secular media was an article by Anglican Archbishop Brian Davis published in *The Dominion*.⁷⁷ He cited some effective criticisms of Spong, even from Spong's fellow liberals, and pointed out that he was out of step with modern scholarship.

9.1 Spong and his critics

Spong has had his critics, which he typically ignores. RBF was the object of an excellent summary critique by Robert Bowman.⁷⁸ The NT scholar Tom Wright has effectively rebutted Spong's attacks on the Virginal Conception of Christ which are especially elaborated in Spong's *Born of a Woman* (BW). Three Australian scholars have usefully responded to Spong's *Resurrection: Myth or Reality* (RMR) with *Resurrection: Truth and Reality*. The Roman Catholic scholar Gerald O'Collins stated that Spong's "work simply does not belong to the world of international scholarship. No genuine scholar will be taken in by this book."⁷⁹

We shall now examine the potency of a few typical examples of this "intellectual giant's" scholarship. O'Collins writes scathingly about RMR:

The bibliography contains at least seven mistakes. In the book itself, numerous false references abound.

O'Collins also points out that Spong lists 17 NT scholars who allegedly agree with him, and strangely writes about them in the present tense: "We who reject", "we who are convinced", "These are scholars of great personal integrity", "They do not literalize the Easter narratives" etc. (RMR p. 238). Half of them are long dead, some of them are not really NT scholars (e.g. Rahner, Küng, Schillebeeckx), while Raymond Brown and Joseph Fitzmeyer have repeatedly gone on record as accepting the historicity of the burial by Joseph of Arimathea, the empty tomb and the post-resurrection appearances. Brown also accepts the bodily resurrection of Christ. The late W.F. Albright accepted an early (50-75 AD) dating of the Gospels.⁸⁰

9.2 Spong the Greek scholar

Spong boasts that he spends hours studying the Bible and professes an acquaintance with Koine Greek, the language the NT was first written in. Therefore it is not surprising that in RMR, where he denies Jesus' bodily resurrection, that he turns to an analysis of the Greek text to see what the Bible really means.

In RMR p. 53-55, Spong draws our attention to Gal. 1:15-16a which says:

¹⁵But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, called me through His grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal His son in me ...

From v. 16, "to reveal His son in me", Spong claims:

This was not a physical body recalled from the grave. The word for "reveal" in this text is *ophthe*, the same word used in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures to describe the appearances of God (theophanies) or angels of God (angelophanies).... What was the nature of a theophany? Was it really "physical"? What was the means of hearing God's voice speak? Was it audible to any ear? Was it capable of being recorded or objectified?

At first, we were impressed by this depth. But on checking a computerised concordance,⁸¹ we found that *ophthe* is sometimes used of ordinary physical "seeing" (Acts 7:26, 1 Tim. 3:16). A logician would also note that Spong commits the fallacy of false alternatives, because he overlooks the possibility that seeing could be both physical and supra-physical, rather than either/or. We thought that it was strange that Spong should ignore this point. However, we decided to check a Greek NT⁸² to see if Spong had at least analysed the word correctly in this passage. But we could not find *ophthe* in the passage. To give Spong a second shot, we checked a NT Greek Interlinear. The word was not there either. Instead, the Greek word for "reveal" in Gal. 1:16 is actually *apokalupsai*, not *ophthe*! *Apokalupsai* is often used in the NT in an objective sense.⁸³

It is shocking to see that Spong was trying to attack traditional Christian belief by appealing to a mis-translation of a Greek word which is not even in the passage he is explaining. Prof. O'Collins is undoubtedly referring to this blunder when he wrote: "What is said about a key verb St. Paul uses in Gal. 1:15f. shows that the bishop [Spong] has forgotten any Greek that he knew." Spong should heed O'Collins' kindly "advice for his next book [which] is to let some real experts check it before publication."

9.3 Spong the Bible expert

We thought that Spong may not know his Greek but he must know the Bible. He is always telling us how it is his favourite book and that he spends hours studying it. He is a bishop and well read in liberal scholarship. So we expected that he would know the Bible like the back of his hand. Therefore we were very surprised when we found Spong claiming that "it was only in Luke's Gospel that we are told to render unto Caesar the

things that are Caesar's" (RBF p. 176). We don't know which translation he derives from; maybe it is his own translation from the Greek. For the same passage is also found in Mt. 22:21 and Mk. 12:17.

The most probable reason for this blunder is that he is obsessed with proving that Luke had a pro-Roman bias.⁸⁴ But what sort of scholar falsifies data to win a point?

9.4 Spong the Wedding Expert

One of the most telling example of Spong's "scholarship" is his "razor-sharp" reasoning about the possibility that Jesus was married. Spong commences his musings with John's recounting the wedding feast at Cana:

So Jesus, his four associates, and his mother are all at this wedding in Galilee near the village of Nazareth. When two generations are present at a wedding it is almost always a family affair. I have never attended a wedding with my mother except when it was the wedding of a relative. The only time my mother and my closest friends were at a wedding together was my own wedding!

... Whose wedding was it? The narrative does not say, but the narrative does say that the mother of Jesus was quite concerned that the wine supply was exhausted.... Do guests at a wedding become upset about such details? No, but the mother of the bridegroom, who would be the hostess at the wedding reception, certainly would be upset. Indeed, Mary's behavior in this vignette would be totally inappropriate had she not been in that role. Is this an echo not fully suppressed of the tradition of Jesus' marriage (BW p. 192).

Strange as it may seem, we find this reasoning unconvincing. Spong tries to make his case from his experience, so we are entitled to do the same. As the first author (MRB) recounts from his own experience:

To my own wedding, I invited my friend Andrew. I also invited Andrew's parents as they were separate friends of mine. The fact that Andrew was at a wedding with his parents would lead Spong to suspect that it was Andrew who was getting married. I am relieved that Spong is wrong: there was no way I was marrying Andrew! Further, I was recently at a wedding where my mother panicked over the catering. According to Spong, this could be a not fully suppressed echo of the lost tradition of my marriage. Spong was wrong again: it was my sister's wedding.

Further, it is bizarre that such a great scholar like Spong should be so ignorant of the culture in which the wedding took place. As Tom Wright says:

... Spong has not thought what it was like to live in peasant society in first century Galilee. There, in a small community, a wedding was a whole village affair, and quite probably a several-villages affair. Nazareth and Cana were close neighbours. It is highly likely that whole

families in one village would go to a whole-family wedding in the next one. Not to see this is to betray a total lack of historical perspective. Upon such slender and anachronistic threads hang Spong's entire argument.⁸⁵

In the introduction, we quoted a review which said that Spong "has the guts to tell it like it is." It would be more accurate to say that he is the populist who "has the cheek to tell it like it isn't."

Conclusion:

Spong does not believe in a God who intervenes in history; rather he believes that we become "[Gods] ... by having the courage to be the self God created each of us to be. (RBF p. 206-7)" Jesus wasn't virgin-born; he was the product of rape. He was not divine, but a fallible human, a good social teacher, was married, suffered the criminal's death of crucifixion. His body was not buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, but thrown in a common criminal's grave. He was not resurrected bodily, but his body rotted along with the other corpses.

Spong presents himself as a man with a mission. He is concerned that the liberal churches are dying whereas the traditional or conservative churches are growing. He is concerned because he sees this trend as a temporary glitch. Spong backs this view because he believes that conservative Christians or "fundamentalists" will find themselves more and more behind the times. They will thus find themselves unable to cope with facing and adapting to the new facts continually being discovered by science.

Spong portrays "fundamentalists" as bigoted ignoramuses, whereas those who agree with him are highly learned and intellectual. However, how solid and credible are Spong's arguments? Is the Bible really littered with the problems and contradictions that Spong claims it is? How reliable are the arguments Spong draws from history or science?

We have shown that Spong views the world through the eyes of 19th century rationalism. He does not believe in miracles because science, which is allegedly rational and objective, has never observed them to happen. Yet we have seen that some of the top scientists are often as prejudiced and bigoted as anyone else.

Also, we must not base morality on science because science only explains what happens, not what ought to happen. Spong tries to ground his support for homosexuality in the statistical data of Alfred Kinsey and the historical study of John Boswell. As we have seen, Kinsey stacked his data from the outset to manufacture the conclusions he desired. Furthermore, we should always be suspicious of the moral pronouncements of a man who in the name of science supported the sexual molestation of children. Boswell's study has been aptly described as "self-interested scholarship, where propaganda and casuistry impede the objective search for truth."

As for the "contradictions" Spong claims to find in the Bible, we have shown that these problems have been credibly answered by successive generations of

evangelical scholars. It is a shame that Spong is not more widely read. The reason that Spong has not found answers to the problems with Scripture is that he simply has not bothered to look for answers. Perhaps like the late scientist D.M.S. Watson, he prefers his view not because it is logically coherent, but because the alternative is clearly unacceptable.

Spong prides himself on being scholarly and on spending hours studying the Bible. Yet, as we have seen in his study of Gal. 1:15f., he makes basic mistakes about the content and meaning of the Greek text. Also, he erroneously asserts that "render unto Caesar" is found only in the Gospel according to Luke; whereas it is also found in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Such basic mistakes do not enhance the credibility of a professed scholar.

Also, as Tom Wright has pointed out, Spong's "insights" into the wedding feast at Cana, far from pointing to new "truths" about Jesus, rather point to Spong's "total lack of historical perspective." Instead, Spong is ignorant of the cultural context of NT times.

Sadly we must conclude that while Spong's teachings are revolutionary, they are more bizarre than credible. In an age where people desperately need the Living Bread, all they will find in Spong are stones.

We are motivated to write this article not out of a sense of spite but one of concern. Spong, in *This Hebrew Lord* (THL), gives us a brief account of his childhood dominated largely by his fundamentalist mother. Spong accepted unquestioningly the truth of the Bible. In his last year of college, he was influenced by his Bible teacher, a "lovely ... religious ... woman" who was rabidly fundamentalist. Entranced by her story-telling ability and sincerity, Spong sincerely believed that:

If God wanted Jonah to be in the belly of the whale for three days, that certainly was not any great problem for God. (THL p. 8)

This simple faith, however, lacked the necessary rigour and reason to answer the criticisms and questions of worldly scepticism.

When the power of a great modern secular university ... challenged my life, I experienced my first faith crisis. My philosophy teacher was an atheist. Another professor ... had once been a Congregationalist minister but had ... repudiated his faith, and upon receiving his doctorate, entered the academic world dedicated to destroying "superstitious religion".... It was under such experiences as these that a literal reading of the Bible disintegrated.... I met this crisis by abandoning the authority of the literal scriptures. (THL p. 8)

Spong was not prepared by the church of his youth to answer the questions thrown at him by modern society. When he went to university, he was challenged to defend a faith he was never taught to defend. Naturally, like the raw recruit ordered to defend a hill against a well trained and heavily armed enemy with a weapon he was never taught how to use, Spong

capitulated. Having done so, he feels cheated by his church and disappointed by his literal faith, and now seeks to challenge and destroy both.

In this sense, a study of Spong's life and work should be mandatory reading for Christian pastors and parents. It is a testimony to the failure of our churches to instruct their children and young people in the defence of the faith and the Bible. If we fail in our duty to enable our young people always to be ready to give an adequate explanation for the faith that is in them (1 Peter 3:15) we may well be responsible for raising up a future generation of Spongs.

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Endnotes

- ¹ We prefer the term Virginal Conception to Virgin Birth. The former (or *Virginitas ante partum*) means that Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity Incarnate, had no human biological father. The latter, in some circles, means the unscriptural idea that Mary gave birth in such a way as to avoid labour pains and leave her hymen intact (*Virginitas in partu*). See Jonathan D. Sarfati, "The Virginal Conception of Christ", *Apologia* 3(2) (1994) 7-11.
- ² Stanley Jaki of Seton Hall University defines scientism as "the systematic definition of science", and adds that "Scientism is a cultural blindfold which prevents its wearers from appraising its true weight...." "The Case for Galileo's Rehabilitation" *Fidelity* (March 1986) pp. 37, 40-41.
- ³ Spong typically sets up a straw man here in arguing that evangelicals believe that all Scripture was divinely dictated, with the human authors functioning as secretaries. Although some passages were indeed dictated, e.g. Ex. 20:1, most were not. Rather, as Ryrie states: "... inspiration is ... God's superintendence of the human authors so that, using their own individual personalities, they composed and recorded without error His revelation to man in the words of the original autographs." Charles C. Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), p. 38..
- ⁴ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2nd ed. enl. 1970). See also Del Ratsch, *The Philosophy of Science: The Natural Sciences in Christian Perspective* (Downers Gr., Ill.: IVP, 1986).
- ⁵ Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge, "Punctuated Equilibria: an Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism" in J. Schopf, ed., *Models in Paleobiology* (1972), pp. 82-83.
- ⁶ Richard Milton, *The Facts of Life: Shattering the Myths of Darwinism* (London: Fourth Estate, 1992).
- ⁷ Richard Dawkins, *New Statesman* (28 August 1992).
- ⁸ "Science's Litmus Test" (telephone transcript of conversation between F. Mims and Jonathan Piel, the Editor of *Scientific American*), *Harper's Magazine* (March 1991). The transcript makes it clear that an outstanding writer was fired solely for disbelieving in the sacred cow of evolution.
- ⁹ For a summary, see David H. Lane, "Opening address to staff and students at Creation/Evolution Conference at Melbourne University" *Apologia* 2(3) (1994).
- ¹⁰ D. M. S. Watson: "Adaptation", *Nature* 124 (1929) 233.
- ¹¹ Cf. Rev. 1:4,8, where the Lord God describes Himself as He "who is, and who was, and who is to come".
- ¹² Sagan lives up to his name, which *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines as the deputy of the Jewish High Priest; the second highest functionary of the Temple.
- ¹³ Marjory Grene, *Encounter* (Nov. 1959) p. 48.
- ¹⁴ Norman L. Geisler, *Miracles and the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992) p. 111.
- ¹⁵ G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948) Ch's I, II *passim*.
- ¹⁶ Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), p. 613.
- ¹⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *Does Inerrancy Matter?* (Oakland: International Council of Biblical Inerrancy, 1979) p. 13.
- ¹⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *What You Should Know About Inerrancy* (Chicago: Moody, 1981) p. 30. See also the useful illustrations Ryrie employs, pp. 31-32.
- ¹⁹ See Jonathan D. Sarfati, "The Authority of Scripture", *Apologia* 3#2 (1994) 12-16, and the bibliography cited therein.
- ²⁰ Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), pp. 43-45..
- ²¹ Further, it is not circular to use Matthew to prove Genesis (Mt. 19:3-6, cf. Gn. 1:27, 2:4), Paul to prove Luke (1 Tim 5:18, cf. Lk. 10:7) or Peter to prove Paul (2 Pet. 3:15-16). Finally, allegedly circular reasoning at least demonstrates the internal consistency of the Bible's claims it makes about itself. If the Bible had actually disclaimed divine inspiration, it would indeed be illogical to defend it. This is one argument against the canonicity of the Apocrypha: 1 Macc. 9:27 recognises that prophecy had disappeared in Israel, while 2 Macc. 15:37-39 admits that it was a human composition with possible flaws.
- ²² Kirsopp Lake, *The Religion of Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Boston: Houghton, 1926) p. 61, cited in Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), p. 19. The latter book has much additional documentation in chapter 3.
- ²³ Francis Schaeffer to L'Abri conferees, cited in Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), p. 142. Chapter 8 documents how right Schaeffer was.
- ²⁴ Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), p. 159. Ch. 18 has an excellent treatment of inspiration and inerrancy.
- ²⁵ J.A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976).
- ²⁶ NB: This is not an argument from silence, one of Spong's favourite ploys. This form of argument is an example of the *fallacy of denying the antecedent*. Instead, we are using arguments from conspicuous absence, which is a form of valid argument known as the *destructive hypothetical syllogism* or *denying the consequent*. See Gordon H. Clark, *Logic* (Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1985, 2nd ed. 1988).

- ²⁷ Julius Müller, *The Theory of Myths, in Its Application to the Gospel History Examined and Confuted* (London: John Chapman, 1844), p. 26.
- ²⁸ A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963) pp. 188-91.
- ²⁹ W. Ramsay, *Bearing of Recent Discoveries on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker 1953), p. 222.
- ³⁰ N.T. Wright, *Who was Jesus* (Great Britain: SPCK, 1992).
- ³¹ G. Vermes, *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975).
- ³² J. Neusner, *Midrash in Context: Essays in Formative Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars' Press, 1988).
- ³³ P. S. Alexander, "Midrash and the Gospels" in C. M. Tuckett (ed.) *Synoptic Studies* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), and "Midrash" in R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (eds.) *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1990). Alexander deals directly with alleged midrash in Lk. 1-2 on p. 10.
- ³⁴ Cited in Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Answers to Tough Questions Skeptics Ask About the Christian Faith* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1980), p. 192.
- ³⁵ K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and the Old Testament* (Chicago: IVP, 1966), pp. 116-7.
- ³⁶ John W. Haley, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* (Springdale, Pennsylvania: Whitaker House, n.d. (c. 1870)), p. 339.
- ³⁷ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth* (Praeger, 1991). Prof. Russell can find only five obscure writers in the first 1500 years of the Christian era who denied that the earth was a globe. But he documents a large number of writers, including Thomas Aquinas, who affirmed the earth's sphericity.
- ³⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (London: Fontana, 1960; first published 1947), p. 53, Ch. 7.
- ³⁹ Wendell R. Bird, *The Origin of the Species - Revisited* (NY: Philosophical Library 1989) Vol. II, Section 13.1.
- ⁴⁰ Richard Holloway, *Church Times* (18 March 1994).
- ⁴¹ Paul Barnett, Peter Jensen and David Peterson, *Resurrection: Truth and Reality* (Sydney South: Aquila, 1994), p. 14 (italics in original).
- ⁴² W. E. Vine, M. F. Unger and W. White Jr., *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (NY: Thomas Nelson, 1985), pp. 84.
- ⁴³ William Lane Craig, *Apologetics: An Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1984) Ch. 5.2.
- ⁴⁴ John W. Wenham, *Easter Enigma* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1984).
- ⁴⁵ See Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich: ephistèmi: "often with the connotation of suddenness". Cited in Ref. , pp. 85-6, 155.
- ⁴⁶ C. E. B. Cranfield, 'Some Reflections on the Subject of the Virgin Birth', *Scot. J. Theol.* 41:177-89, 1988.
- ⁴⁷ H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1869); W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed. 1971) p. 627.
- ⁴⁸ *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), article 'Disputations and Polemics', Vol. 6:79-103.
- ⁴⁹ G. Fruchtenbaum, *Jesus was a Jew* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1981), p. 32.
- ⁵⁰ W. E. Vine, M. F. Unger and W. White, Jr., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (NY: Thomas Nelson, 1985).
- ⁵¹ H. Gordon, *J. Bible & Religion* 21:106, April, 1953; E. J. Young, 'The Old Testament', in C. F. H. Henry (ed.), *Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (NY: Channel Press, 1957); both cited in W. Jackson, *Biblical Studies in the Light of Archaeology* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press, 1982).
- ⁵² *Encyclopedia Judaica*, article 'Virgin, Virginity', Vol. 16:159-160.
- ⁵³ This explanation was suggested one and a half millennia ago by the great church historian Eusebius (ca. 260 - ca. 430 AD), *Hist. Eccl.* 1, 7, but Spong, as usual, displays his ignorance.
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- ⁵⁶ *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, articles on 'Virgin' and 'Virgin Birth', Part 3, pp. 1625-6 (IVP 1982).
- ⁵⁷ C.E.B. Cranfield, 'Some Reflections on the Subject of the Virgin Birth', *Scot. J. Theol.* 41: 177-89, 1988; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John* (London, 2nd ed. 1978), pp. 164 and 348.
- ⁵⁸ C.E.B. Cranfield, 'Some Reflections on the Subject of the Virgin Birth', *Scot. J. Theol.* 41: 177-89, 1988.
- ⁵⁹ J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (NY: Harper & brothers, 2nd ed. 1932) Ch. 14. This book by the great Princeton scholar is probably the most comprehensive on the subject.
- ⁶⁰ Donald Bloesch, *Crumbling Foundations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), p. 38.
- ⁶¹ Wilberforce realised that 1 Tim. 10 lists "menstealers" (KJV. Gk. *andrapodistès* = *slave-dealer*. Ref. , p. 403) with murders, whoremongers, liars and other evil people. Paul also encouraged Philemon to free his escaped slave Onesimus (Phil. 16), and ordered masters to treat their slaves in the "same way" as they were treated, and not to threaten them (Eph. 6:9). Spong, like most liberals, accuses the Bible of supporting slavery (RBF pp. 101-2).
- ⁶² Charles Colson with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987), Ch. 8.
- ⁶³ The subtitle of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859).
- ⁶⁴ A.J. Pennings, *Evening Post* (8 March 1994), feature article. Dr Pennings lectures in Communications at Victoria University of Wellington.
- ⁶⁵ Sir Arthur Keith, *Evolution and Ethics* (NY: Putnam, 1947), p. 230.
- ⁶⁶ More moderate liberals try to explain away the clear Scriptural prohibitions against homosexual acts. Such arguments are well answered by David F. Wright, *Evangelical Quarterly* 61:4 (1989) 291-300.
- ⁶⁷ Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1948).
- ⁶⁸ Judith Reisman and Edward W. Eichel, Kinsey, *Sex and Fraud: The Indoctrination of a People* (USA: Huntington House, 1990).
- ⁶⁹ *News Weekly* Feb 16 1991, p. 20; June 8 1991, pp. 12-14.
- ⁷⁰ J.S. Spong: *Homosexuality and the Church*, public address at St. Peter's Anglican Church (Wellington), 21 July 1994.
- ⁷¹ *Same-sex Unions in Pre-modern Europe* (Villard, 1994).
- ⁷² Camille Paglia, "Plighting Their Troth", *The Guardian Weekly* (11 Sept. 1994) p. 18. See also Robert L. Wilken, "Procrustean Marriage Beds" *Commonweal* (9 Sept. 1994) pp. 24-25 (emphasis added).

- ⁷³ Malcolm Lowe, *Novum Testamentum XVIII* (April 1976), cited by the Jewish Christian Menachem Benhayim, *Jews, Gentiles and the New Testament* Ch. 5.
- ⁷⁴ J.S. Spong, *Judas Iscariot and the Roots of Antisemitism*, public lecture at St. Andrew's on the Terrace (21 July 1994).
- ⁷⁵ Liz Robinson, *The Dominion* July 19, 1994, p. 9.
- ⁷⁶ National Radio: *Connexions* (18 Aug 1991), with Neville Glasgow chairing the discussion.
- ⁷⁷ Brian Davis, *The Dominion*, July 19, 1994, p. 9.
- ⁷⁸ Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Christian Research Journal* (Fall 1991) pp. 36-38.
- ⁷⁹ Gerald O'Collins, "Review of *Resurrection: Myth or Reality*", *London Tablet* (30 April 1994), reprinted in *Wel-Com* (Sept. 1994) p. 6. O'Collins is Professor of Fundamental Theology, Gregorian University, Rome.
- ⁸⁰ Interview in *Christianity Today* (18 Jan 1963).
- ⁸¹ *Logos Bible Software* Version 1.6d (©1991-93 Logos Bible Research Systems, Inc.).
- ⁸² K. Aland et al., ed., *The Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies, 3rd ed. 1975).
- ⁸³ Ref., pp. 531-532.
- ⁸⁴ E.g. the supposedly gentile Luke is commonly accused of whitewashing the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate's guilt for the crucifixion. But Luke quotes Pilate as saying, "I ... have found no fault in this man ... I will ... scourge him" (Luke 23:14,16). So, like all the Gospels, Luke clearly portray Pilate as not only agreeing to the crucifixion of an innocent man, but on his own initiative adding the cruelty of scourging.
- ⁸⁵ N.T. Wright, *Who was Jesus* (Great Britain: SPCK, 1992) p. 91.



Bill Turkington

Thus far, no further says Naenae church

By BRYAN KIRK

A claim by a Presbyterian minister and senior lecturer in religious studies at Victoria University, Dr Jim Veitch, that more than 80 per cent of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life are not based on fact has drawn fire from a Naenae church.

Dr Veitch recently made these claims in a lecture series on the historical Jesus at Wellington's St Andrew's-on-the-Terrace Presbyterian Church. The three lunchtime lectures were held on successive Tuesdays.

Dr Veitch said only around 11 per cent of the sayings and 16 per cent of the actions of Jesus mentioned in the Gospels derived from the historical person. Some 250 people attended the first lecture.

The Naenae Gospel Hall then paid for an advertisement published on page three of *The Evening Post*. Entitled *Disclaimer* it said the hall's elders and members disassociated themselves from Dr Veitch's comments. "This is intellectual snobbery fantasy," read the advertisement.

"Many Bible scholars today and countless books of past theologians, even of his own church, refute Dr Veitch's false claims."

"Amazingly, Dr Veitch, his associate Dr L. Geering and others of the New Age heresy claim better knowledgeability 2000 years later than the New Testament writers who personally associated with Christ, and so by Dr Veitch's inference, were really charlatans and literary phoneyes.

"How honourable if Dr Veitch and associates were to resign their church and join the agnostic Skeptic Society, whose views they espouse and expound. Do read Jude verses 3-4, second last Bible book." Jude 3-4 speaks of contending for the faith.

Dr Veitch told *The Evening Post* he welcomed the contribution to the debate. "People have a right to state their viewpoint and have that heard," he said. "I never say that my view is the only one because patently that's not true."

His views were also criticised by the Wellington Christian Apologetics Society, which distributed

leaflets outside Dr Veitch's second lecture venue naming New Testament scholars who supported traditional teaching on the life and work of Jesus.

Dr Veitch's views have drawn fire before. In 1996 he said Jesus was not the Son of God, but created to be divine by the church.

Naenae Gospel Hall's secretary and elder, Mr W.R.G. (Bill) Turkington, says his church received many calls from people supporting its stand. He says many expressed disappointment at the silence from church leaders about Dr Veitch's comments.

Mr Turkington told *Challenge Weekly* that, during the lead-up to Easter, there had been a controversial exhibition at Te Papa and Dr Veitch's lectures.

He said the exhibition's "Maddness in a condom" attacked Jesus' virgin birth, the Last Supper painting attacked Jesus' atoning death and resurrection and Dr Veitch's lectures attacked Jesus' life and work.

"We felt we had to stand up and be counted," says Mr Turkington. "The New Age heresy is gaining ground in Protestant churches. The time has come to say, 'Thus far and no further'. At least we shall do what Jude says and contend earnestly for the faith."

Mr Turkington has said he would be prepared to debate with Dr Veitch. He would prefer the debate were held at St Andrew's, where Dr Veitch's claims were made. To this end, Mr Turkington wrote to the minister of St Andrew's, the Rev Dr Jim Stuart.

In his reply, Dr Stuart suggested Mr Turkington write to the St Andrew's Trust Board of which Dr Stuart is chairman. At the time of writing this article, Mr Turkington was awaiting a reply from the trust board to his letter.

Mr Turkington is 83 years old and has been involved in church youth work for 63 years. In 1938, he was commended by the police for his work with youth in Petone. He was the youngest advertising manager of Self-Help Co-op, which at the time was New Zealand's largest retail chain.

He later became a footwear manufacturer and retired in the 1980s.

• **Update:** Mr Turkington says he has heard back from Dr Stuart and the invitation to a debate with Dr Veitch at St Andrew's has been declined.

Instead Dr Stuart has suggested Mr Turkington meet Dr Stuart, Professor Lloyd Geering and one other member of the St Andrew's Trust Board.

Mr Turkington has written back seeking clarification of their reasons for declining the debate.

Challenge Weekly, June 16, 1988

John Spong & the Christian Tradition

The Introduction to Can a Bishop Be Wrong?

by The Very Rev. Dr Peter C. Moore

Dean and president of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, Ambridge, Pennsylvania



Dr Peter C. Moore

“THE Christian church doesn’t really believe what it claims to believe” says the smiling Muslim evangelist to the bewildered Nigerian. “One of their bishops even admits so! Here’s a book that proves it. It’s called *The Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* by someone named Spong. He’s a Christian bishop.”

I am told that conversations like this are not infrequent in the two thirds world where zealous Muslims seek advantage in evangelizing over their unsuspecting Christian competitors. A far greater number of uninstructed people in the West encounter his writings. Some have heard that traditionalist believers consider him to be a bitter scourge of orthodoxy and the chief heresiarch of the age. Others, especially many ordinary people who are searching for spiritual meaning in their lives, hear that he is a bold and visionary architect of a Christianity suited to the modern age.

Can a Bishop Be Wrong? is not an attempt to give a balanced assessment of the views of John Shelby Spong, if by “balance” you mean that equal time must be given to both sides. Rather this book is an attempt to correct an imbalance. John Spong has had virtually an open field. Despite the protests of a few scholars in other parts of the English-speaking world, notably England and Australia, few if any North American voices have been raised to critique his views. The works of the Episcopal Bishop of Newark are thus a concern to anyone who cares for the life and mission of the church in the modern world. Now ten scholars, all of whom are Anglican, several of whom are young and represent a rising voice within the church, have risen to challenge him on his own preferred turf — the printed page.

Each chapter stands on its own, although together they amount to a remarkably unified and weighty challenge to the bishop’s thought and an effective rebuttal of his conclusions. Written for the educated layman rather than scholars, these essays analyze Bishop Spong’s writings from several different angles. However, the authors have a united confessional stance: basic credal faith.

We have made every effort to avoid *ad hominem* arguments, but wish to question many of his cherished assumptions and most of his conclusions. We lay this challenge at his feet, and the feet of those who are

inclined to agree with him, in the hope of persuading them at least to re-examine their assertions and give historic Christianity another look.

Seeing the positive

Each writer sees something positive in the effort of John Spong to relate the Christian faith to the modern world. However, they are united in the conviction that he has essentially placed himself outside of the Christian tradition, and is using his privileged position as a bishop to attack it.

We have, of course, seen this before. The Christian heritage is full of examples of leading churchmen and theologians who argued forcefully for positions which at the time were and, in the light of history, have been seen to be heterodox. Though some of these were far more popular than the bishop, eventually the church closed ranks behind individual champions of orthodoxy who brought back sanity and faithfulness and enabled the church to move on.

What is striking about the case of John Spong is that so few people have risen to challenge him. It may be that as the culture has become less able to provide answers to a searching generation, the church has focused more on mission and evangelism and has viewed his mounting denials of its major doctrines as the rants of an eccentric, and therefore felt that debate with him is a distraction from its mission. More likely, I think, the mainline denominations, facing shrinking memberships and budgets, have been consumed with issues of institutional survival, and have lost their taste (and courage) for theological debate — especially as serious, substantive debate may threaten their unity and survival. Further, in a world of shrinking borders, multiculturalism, and religious wars, theologians have elevated tolerance of other points of view to such a level that religious controversy is not to be tolerated no matter what the provocation.

For whatever reasons, we are faced with a spokesman of the church — and not just the Episcopal Church — who has captured the attention of the media for a deconstructed vision of Christianity, in which old truths are demolished to make way for a radically new creed. With a corpus of thirteen books and many shorter works to date, some of which have sold quite well, it is time for an assessment of his thought by his intellectual peers. It is as an honest appraisal of “Spongism” that this volume is offered, in the hopes that others — perhaps even those more sympathetic to the bishop’s conclusions than we — will be prompted to do the same.

Begin at the beginning

To gain perspective on the developing thought of John Spong I reached back to two articles of his which

appeared in *The Christian Century* in 1979. Both indicated very clearly where the bishop was headed, and the fundamental assumptions and methods that have inevitably led him to his current opinions. They show that the bishop's controversial views are the logical expression of a theologically consistent attempt to fundamentally recast the Christian faith. With this attempt, and not just with selected conclusions, the authors are in profound disagreement.

In "The Emerging Church: a New Form for a New Era" (January 10, 1979) he argues that in order to remain relevant to its culture the church must always respond to the dominant forces which influence that culture, and reshape its expression of the Gospel to meet that challenge: "When the force an institution is organized to deal with disappears, it is inevitable that the new force will call out a new response. Not to change is to become a museum" (p. 11).

This is a clear statement of the old maxim that the "world sets the agenda for the church." The church is not the bearer of a divine revelation, but a human institution organized to deal with "forces." Throughout the article's brief overview of 2000 years of history, there is no sense that the church exists to critique the world, nor that it brings a transcendent perspective that judges every age. For Bishop Spong, the church's task is reactive rather than pro-active. There is barely a hint that the large cultural forces which have helped to shape modern western civilization may have been anything but positive. He does, however, see one profoundly negative influence: religious folk who tenaciously remain committed to the orthodox faith. These people deserve only his opprobrium, and in his mind are to be lumped together with all who in the name of God carry out inquisitions, pogroms, heresy trials, witch-hunts, holy wars and crusades. (See his second article from *The Christian Century* below, p. 920.)

The bishop sees the church's task in every age to reshape itself in such a way that it still has a place in the ever changing mosaic of society: "This cultural hunger is even at this moment calling the church to new frontiers, new shapes and forms, as we once again seek to respond structurally to the attitudes of our world" (p. 16). Note who is doing the calling.

How the church relates to the world is, of course, a matter of historic debate within all churches. To suggest, as Bishop Spong does, that the church exists primarily to respond to cultural forces gives the world altogether too much power. Commenting on the words of Eamon Duffy of the Cambridge University divinity faculty, who said that "the 'world' is the place where ordinary men and women live and must find their salvation," Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: "You know neither the church nor the world if you think that they could meet without conflict or that they could even coincide. [The task of the Christian] is to recover the capacity for nonconformism" (*The New York Times Magazine*, November 24, 1985).

Or as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a man who paid dearly for his conviction that the church is sometimes called to resist the forces which drive the world, put it: "The Church is always on the battlefield...struggling to prevent the world from becoming the Church and the Church from becoming the world. The world is the world and the Church the Church, and yet the Word of God must go forth from the Church into all the world, proclaiming that the earth is the Lord's and all that

therein is" (*The Cost of Discipleship* [Macmillan, 1960] p. 252).

Bishop Spong's vision of a church which engages the world and shapes its expression of the gospel to meet its challenge loses its intrinsic appeal because it fails to draw its inspiration from first listening to the Word of God. Cultural critic Theodore Roszak pointed out that God's ancient people the Jews were the most alert listeners of history because (in contrast to the other gods who were silent) the invisible God spoke to them from beyond their world (*Where the Wasteland Ends* [Doubleday, 1973] p. 103). When it responds first to God and not, as Spong would have it, first to the world, the church rediscovers the balance so well stated by John Stott: "The Christian calling is at one and the same time to worldliness (in the sense of living in the world), to holiness (in the sense of being kept from the world's evil), and to mission (in the sense of going into the world as servants and witnesses) (commenting on John 17 in *Christ the Liberator* [IVP, 1971] p. 81).

A major omission

In Bishop Spong's *Christian Century* article there is as yet no obvious indication of the far-reaching changes in church doctrines which he will soon demand. But even back in 1979 we are given a telling insight into his biblical hermeneutic which will allow and even require such changes. In order to promote his campaign for unfettered change in response to the world's commands and directions, he must overlook the biblical message of the Fall. Hence he argues that the key to understanding the Scriptures is the "forgotten" idea that all creation is good. (Scripture does not, of course, forget the idea creation is good. It amends it.) John Spong's premise is that all of life is good, and that the church's task is to bless and sanctify life as it is. From this assumption (one, as some of the following chapters will show, he applies selectively) flow inevitably all his moral and doctrinal innovations.

There is no sense in what he writes of the central concept of redemption, which has governed the church's reading of Scripture; namely, that an originally good creation was later corrupted by sin and in need of redemption, and therefore that the church cannot bless and sanctify life as it is. A proper Christian response to Spong's optimistic assumption is Duke theologian William H. Willimon's: "Too often Christians have treated the modern world as if it were a fact, a reality to which we were obligated to adjust, rather than a point of view with which we might argue. The Bible doesn't want to *speak* to the modern world; the Bible wants to *convert* it" (*Leadership*, Winter 1977, p. 30).

The second article from *The Christian Century*, entitled "The Continuing Christian Need for Judaism" (9/26/79), illustrates another theme we have come to recognize in his writings, namely his use of other religions to chastise those in the church who resist his revisionist program. In it we also recognize his consistent method, that of separating the Christian symbols (when he is not denying them outright) from their historic reality, and giving them a meaning better fitted (he thinks) to the modern mind.

First, he says that Hebrew faith is "the call to step boldly into tomorrow, to embrace the new, and to find no security in tradition for God is always in front of his people calling them to step boldly into the future" (p. 919). This he uses to criticize a Christianity that he thinks remains mired in the past and closed to the future.

But any Jew would, of course, recognize this description of Judaism as at best a half-truth — and as any logician will tell you, when a half-truth is turned into a whole-truth it becomes a whole error.

Judaism, as it has emerged over the centuries, is quintessentially a religion of tradition. “Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as — as a fiddler on the roof,” sings Tevye in *Fiddler*. Like its offspring Christianity, Judaism looks both backwards to its defining moments of revelation and deliverance, as well as forward towards the kingdom which is to come, whose life in no way contradicts the revelation, but rather completes it. The great festivals of Judaism all celebrate historical events which have ongoing relevance. (See Eugene B. Borowitz’s description of the development of rabbinic Judaism in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade [Macmillan, 1987] volume 8, pp. 129-148). Biblical faith is a combination of “already” and “not yet.” By erasing the already, and sanctifying the not yet, John Spong has uprooted both Judaism and Christianity from their historic foundations and reshaped them into variations on the 20th century myth of progress. He seems to have confused tradition with traditionalism, a distinction which Yale theologian Jaroslav Pelikan clarified when he said that “tradition is the living faith of the dead; but traditionalism is the dead faith of the living” (*The Christian Tradition* [University of Chicago, 1971] volume 1, p. 9).

Symbolism and fact

Second, in his treatment of the Ascension, he argues that Christianity, removed from the “prophetic correction of Judaism,” literalized a symbolic event by taking the Ascension of Christ as humankind’s first voyage into space. He thinks that Luke only intended the Ascension to be a “symbolic event lifted out of the Old Testament and told to open the eyes of faith to behold Jesus as he really is” (p. 921). No thoughtful Christian would deny the symbolic dimension of the Ascension. Christian interpreters through the ages have seen rich Old Testament symbolism in the Ascension — for example in Elijah’s ascension into the glory of heaven which happened at the time when he bestowed his spirit upon his follower Elisha.

But John Spong insists that a Jew like Luke would have been comfortable separating religious symbolism from history. However, a mainstay of Hebraic thought, as of Christian thought, is that God works through *real historical events* to disclose his purpose and plan. Therefore, by separating the abstract truth of the Ascension from the concrete historical event Luke records, John Spong reveals that his real debt is not to Hebraic but to Greek thought. He thereby guts the Christian story of any determinative meaning and any real transcendent objective authority. It becomes something into which he can place his own meaning, while continuing to claim some authority for it. If doctrines are only symbols, why should anyone care what meaning John Spong or any other individual gives to them?

What is not clear from these examples and his later work is whether John Spong himself realizes these

problems. The certainty with which he writes, the scorn with which he treats his detractors, the crusading zeal with which he embraces all that is new raise questions about how self-reflective he is able to be. Or, to put it another way, how genuinely open, flexible, and liberal he really is.

It would be misleading if my remarks above left the impression that the purpose of this book is to score theological points. Theological differences of the magnitude that are described in the following chapters are matters of life and death — for the church as well as for individuals. “The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning” said Swiss theologian Emil Brunner; and what John Spong has repeatedly made clear is that his program leads to the end of the Christian mission: “Can we with integrity continue to support and engage in a missionary enterprise designed to convert?... I will not make any further attempt to convert the Buddhist, the Jew, the Hindu or the Moslem. I am content to learn from them and to walk with them side by side toward the God who lives, I believe, beyond the images that bind and blind us all” (“Evangelism when Certainty is an Illusion,” *Christian Century*, January 13, 1982; and *The Voice*, January 1989).

I want to reply to this blanket rejection of the church’s historic missionary call with the words of Bishop Stephen Neill: “Tell that to the converts!” Millions of people, including a great many Anglicans, have found life in Jesus Christ which they did not find in other systems. To deny them the opportunity to hear and believe the Gospel is to cut them off from that life and invite the church to write its own epitaph.

It is with the hope both of alerting people to the real problems and dangers of Bishop Spong’s thought, and of challenging him to a deeper reflection and a new openness to the claims of historic Christianity that this volume is dedicated. It is a hopeful exercise in which we engage. We too believe in change, but in a different way from John Spong. We do not believe in change for change’s sake; but change for the Gospel’s sake. We do not seek to follow the world, but to serve the world by presenting to it a Gospel from outside it. None of us is beyond the Spirit’s reach. Our God is sovereign, and has a reputation for surprises.

We have in mind, of course, a much wider readership than the bishop himself in offering this book. We write for all those who, bewildered by the contemporary theological warfare, are willing to begin by uttering the simple prayer *Dominus illuminatio mea*.

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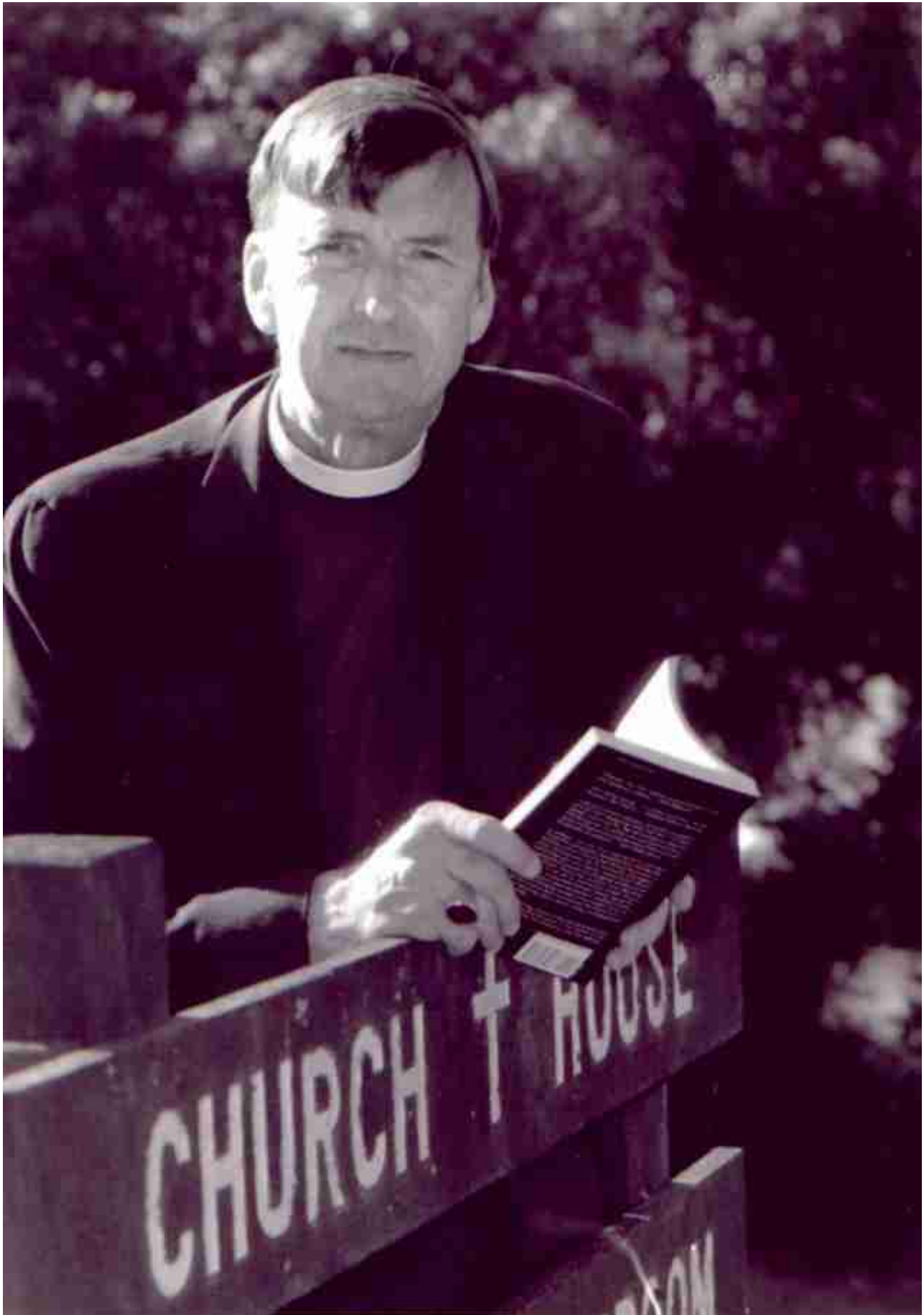


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Inside the Whirlwind: Christian Theism and the Monism of John Spong

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There is a “great gulf fixed” between religious monism in its Christian guise and classical, credal Christian orthodoxy. Their first principles are diametrically opposed and lead to opposite conclusions at many key points. This essay will attempt to achieve a measure of conceptual clarity. I would like to think that Bishop Spong would agree with my description even though his commitment is clearly to the other side of the gulf.

Monism asserts that reality is ultimately one, no matter how differentiated it is in appearance. Generally, this means that the cosmos is to be seen as a sort of emanation from Being (God) to the realm of beings, an eternal flow from a sort of *necessity* within the divine. Religious monism is the “discovery” and experience of this unity. All religions find their identity in the meanings they project onto this unity. Philosophical monism says “All is one”; religious monism says “All is one — praise to the divine.”

Classical theism needs no definition except to note the importance to it of the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*. Langdon Gilkey, not one to describe himself as a conservative theologian, nevertheless considers this doctrine as “the indispensable foundation on which the other beliefs of the Christian faith are based.”¹ This doctrine is a defining principle of theism. It, at least partially, answers the question: what sort of God would send his Son for our salvation? This doctrine denies ultimacy to anything else but God. It roots creation *not* in the mystery of the divine *nature* (monism’s *necessity*) but in the divine *will*. Worshipers in heaven exclaim, “By thy will they [all things] existed and were created” (*Revelation* 4:11). Theism establishes the fundamental distance between the Triune Creator and the creation.

But note, this is not a distance of space, for God created space. It is a distance in being, no matter how hard this is to conceive. The God of the Bible “inhabits eternity” (*Isaiah* 57:15), but deals with us in space and time. Karl Barth has said that “we must be astonished at the fact that there are ourselves and the world alongside and outside Him. God has no need of us . . . He is rich in Himself.”²

This essay will attempt to show that Bishop Spong is a committed religious monist, though he rarely uses the term. His proposal and all its ramifications call to us from the other side of the great theological “gulf” that is creating so much tension in western Christianity at this time. In this essay I will attempt to show how the bishop describes his theological foundations and how this radically shapes his theology and ethics. My hope is to

¹ Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (University Press of America, 1959) p. 4
² Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (Harper & Row, 1959) p. 53.

show that his conclusions are as compatible with authentic Christianity as night is to day.

The Bishop's Project

Bishop Spong has a rather remarkable media persona. He may well have been on more talk shows than any other religious figure in the last decade. His rhetorical skill is remarkable and both respected and feared in the Church. He is a man with a mission — to deliver the Church from its so-called biblical and credal “literalism” and bring it into the 21st century, ready or not.

The Bishop is very helpful in aiding the alert reader who is trying to locate him theologically. In the preface to the second edition of *This Hebrew Lord*, he describes himself as standing “in a place very similar to that occupied by John A. T. Robinson . . . whose works the reader will soon discover were powerfully influential on my own development as a priest and as a scholar. I am a bishop who dares to be a scholar, [and] who welcomes theological controversy” (*THL*, p. x). Bishop Robinson’s *Honest to God* created an enormous furor when it was published in 1963. Its task was to both declare that the theistic Christian worldview had lost its plausibility and to propose a monist alternative. God must no longer be seen as the transcendent creator *ex nihilo*, but rather as the ground and source of all being to be encountered *only* in and through creation, especially humanity. In his first two chapters Robinson attempted to replace Christian theism with an alternative worldview and show why it still should be called Christian. This book was a bestseller in the sixties and still important to read.

At first Spong did not consider Robinson’s book terribly significant. But as he reread it, it “put together many of my own doubts and questions. . . . It was no longer possible for me to play the role of the believing person with the same certainty” (*THL*, p. 10). He poured over the book three times. “I have never been the same since. I was driven to my roots and forced to think again about everything I believed” (*THL*, p. 11).

To grasp the significance of this revelation we must proceed to analyze the particular shape of Spong’s religious monism as it plays itself out in several of his works. As we process, we will note how it applies to the various issues he addresses. We will also be interested in the way he understands and articulates the irreconcilability between his position and traditional Judaeo-Christian theism.

Facing the Wind

Consider one of the least read, and yet in my opinion one of the most substantive books the bishop has written: *Into the Whirlwind*, published in 1983. Talking about prayer, the bishop clearly explains his concept of God and the influences that brought him to his present conviction.

Spong sees a problem in the traditional concept of a God assumed to be there when we pray. He is quite clear in what he rejects. “[A] divine king on a heavenly throne who must be praised by his subjects . . . [who are] begging for mercy, asking for a boon. . . . [This is] a God

I cannot worship, a God in whom I cannot believe” (*ITW*, p. 49). Further, he says that Charles Darwin radically reshaped our perception of God so that “the deity we [now] perceive at work in this continuing creation is not the traditional deity” (*ITW*, p. 51). Moreover, Freud’s understanding of religion and psychic projection “challenges traditional religious thinking at its very core” (*ITW*, p. 51). In other words, the discoveries of science have shown the very idea of a transcendent deity, who can intervene in this world, to be essentially implausible.

The bishop’s deep sense that contemporary culture determines what can be believed is reflected in the following litany of theological collapse: “Gone is the God up there or out there. Gone is the sense of human depravity, the literal fall from grace. Gone is . . . the substitutionary atonement of Christ, that strange vision of a God whose justice had to be served by punishing his son. Gone is the God who plays favorites” and so on (*ITW*, p. 52). These ideas are declared “largely dead in theological circles.” What is remarkable is that he so totally ignores the vast influence of Karl Barth at the scholarly level and C. S. Lewis at the popular level, both of whom eloquently reasserted these very ideas against the 19th century liberalism that had denied them.

So what does Spong say is to be done? “The first task . . . is to move beyond the personal images of God” (*ITW*, p. 54). Then, we must side with Paul Tillich who was among the first to popularize the concept of God as the “Ground of All Being.” Today, by “almost common consent” God has been, shall we say, relocated. He is no longer “separate from the world [but is] the source and ground of all . . . the final depth of matter . . . the source of all meaning . . . [and] the holy, mysterious, ultimate power never separated from life [and is] . . . transcendent only in immanence” (*ITW*, p. 57). God can be experienced as “that infinite power who calls our humanity into ever-increasing expansiveness” (*ITW*, 60). In these abstract, impersonal, and all-unifying terms we have a clear, forthright declaration of religious monism: God and the universe are essentially inseparable. This remains an underlying assumption throughout Spong’s works, even if certain unspecified distinctions between God and the universe are said to be still true. In an earlier chapter this idea is specified by this sentence: “God has become for me power that is deep within this world but always more” (*ITW*, p. 45).

We now see how this affects how the bishop would speak of God. We have moved beyond all personal images. Spong finds non-personal words “not as limiting,” as he once thought (*ITW*, p. 57), though it is clear they pose a challenge to his concept of prayer. Words adequate to this impersonal and all-embracing reality must reflect God as present when “consciousness is expanded and personhood is enhanced” (*ITW*, p. 61). Spong meets this immanent God deep within life as “the Divine Energy that is a force for wholeness and healing” (*ITW*, p. 46).

We soon see that this radical departure from historic theism, which undergirds biblical faith, affects our view of authority, particularly our view of Christ. We end up with what might be called a “degree Christology.” Jesus is but one channel for our awareness of the indwelling

life of God. He is not unique. He is different from others only in degree as the decisive presence of God by which all others must be judged. He is “the perfect channel by which all other manifestations of God’s *ruach* [spirit] must be judged” (*ITW*, p. 4). This is indeed a strong claim, when you consider that no objective evidence has been adduced to elevate Jesus to such an exalted position.

Spong’s thesis in *Into the Whirlwind* is that the Church must face the great challenges of relativity by embracing a theology with “no discernible fixed points,” by giving up the “narcotic of religion” that offers certainty and by embracing the “relativity of all truth” (*ITW*, p. 15). This, of course, leaves the puzzling question of how Christ can possibly be what the Bishop claims, namely “the perfect channel” by which all other manifestations of the divine “must be judged.” It is obvious that the Bishop has a difficult time himself giving up a Christianity with fixed points — and facing his own rules.

Let us now see how Bishop Spong’s monism plays itself out in three of his most recent books, *Living in Sin?: On The Edge of Nihilism, Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, and *Born of a Woman*.

Deconstructing the Bible

Living in Sin? is indeed a radical book, not just for its proposals on human sexuality, but for its theology. Bishop Spong’s proposals that the Church bless a time of living together for young couples (which he calls betrothal), bless faithful homosexual unions, and bless co-habiting elderly for whom formal marriage would be too expensive are rather modest when compared with some of the more aggressive advocates of the sexual revolution within the Church. (For example, Professor Carter Heyward’s advocacy of “sexual friendships” and the recent Beyond Inclusion Conference at All Saints’ Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California at which monogamy for homosexual people was said to be unnecessary).

What is truly radical is Spong’s linking of his monist proposal to an approach to biblical analysis that deconstructs the very possibility of there being truth in Scripture. To him the issue of sexuality is finally “a debate over the authority of Scripture and over the role of both Scripture and the church in sustaining the ignorance that is the basis of prejudice” (*LIS*, p. 116). It is well-known that there are ways to deconstruct any text. First, one challenges the text’s message by showing its inner tensions, ambiguities and contradictions; and second, one ascribes to the writer’s social, cultural, and economic circumstances whatever message remains. A text is thus silenced, for it is no longer able to communicate on its own terms. Instead, the interpreter now has a relatively free hand to imaginatively interact with whatever strikes his or her interest. The text, in effect, becomes inspirational mood music for the interpreter’s own creativity and imagination.

We see a parallel with this in the Bishop’s two-pronged strategy: first, he challenges the Scripture as a reliable witness and source for the faith, and second he “unmasks” the Bible’s patriarchal prejudice.

The first prong

The first prong of Spong’s strategy aims to free us from the normative claims of the Bible and its “literalistic imprisonment” (*LIS*, p. 93). Unless “fundamentalistic interpretations of the Bible are discredited,” he says, “the Bible itself will be rendered impotent and valueless” (*LIS*, p. 93). As others in this volume have pointed out, Spong’s crusade against literalism seems almost a consuming passion. While literalism is never defined in *Living in Sin?*, it is generally clear what is meant: an approach to Scripture that attempts to discern the mind of the author and then holds such insight in its proper context to be binding truth.

For Spong, to read the Bible literally is to read it assuming it has a coherent witness to reality and its diversity is complementary, rather than contradictory. Spong sees contradiction to be of the essence of Holy Scripture: “In the Bible there are conflicting accounts of creation, conflicting versions of the Ten Commandments, conflicting understandings of who Jesus is and was, conflicting details concerning what happened on the first Easter” (*LIS*, pp. 111-112). Starting with the assumption that no author is really objective, and that all authors have their own agenda, Spong insists that every writer distorts what he or she writes (*LIS*, p. 112). One can’t help wondering if this applies equally to bishops! So, “Who is literally correct?” (*LIS*, p. 110). Clearly no one, according to the bishop’s logic. The Bible is unreliable at its deepest theological levels — in its teachings about creation, Christ, the Resurrection, and a great deal more.

Once literalism and coherence have been deconstructed, Spong is able to give a more “realistic” view of a given text than the traditional, or the plainly intended, one. For example, Old Testament texts were written from a particular point of view, to “justify true conquest of the land” (*LIS*, 112). In the battle between the worshipers of Yahweh and the worshipers of Baal, Yahweh worshipers won and got to tell their story of the conflict. Since winners write the history, the events narrated can be seen at best as only one side of a larger ideological-religious conflict.

By breaking out of the “prison of literalism” the bishop is able to see the Bible as a purely human document reflecting little more than the struggles and ideologies of its time. It offers no timeless binding truths to aid and instruct God’s people through history. Perhaps some truths can be seen behind the ancient texts, but the process of uncovering them can only begin once one has been delivered from the “bondage of literalism.” The net effect of this project is to make the Bible self-contradictory and unworthy of enlightened confidence.

The second prong

The second prong of the Bishop’s strategy is to propose a social location for the biblical writers that accounts for why they say what they do about God. He builds his case first by saying that humans “*always* form their understanding of God out of their own values, needs, and self-understandings. We *do* make God in our own image” (*LIS*, p. 122 — italics mine). This starting

point is necessitated by Spong's commitment to the 19th century idea of projection, developed by Feuerbach and then Freud, who contended that all our religious ideas are mere projections of internal needs, hopes, interests, and drives. Applying this insight to the Old Testament, Spong sees a "pervasive anti-female bias that permeates every page of their Scriptures" (*LIS*, p. 120).

In prehistoric times, he conjectures, people lived in a sort of undifferentiated world of nature/goddess worship. As the male began to become more isolated from the family matrix he began to create more male-type deities. The Old Testament represents the ideological triumph of male hegemony. We are left with one true masculine deity. He is Lord, King, and Law-giver of Israel. For the bishop this means that the Old Testament represents a stage in human consciousness — the projection of male interests onto the gods (see *LS*, chapter 8).

Since the Old Testament God is merely a male projection, it cannot have enduring value and moral authority for our Church or culture. We are at a different stage of development and thus recognize how deformed the Old Testament, and by extension the whole of biblical religion, really is. It's emphasis on God's sovereignty and difference from creation is but a reflection of the male quest for control and domination over women.

Bishop Spong puts a very interesting spin on his case against the Bible. Since all religion at the cognitive, conceptual level is projection, we must be relieved of the need to read the Bible or any religious document as either coherent at face value or binding. We are delivered from this need by exhibiting its contradictions, and revealing its projections. This leads to the conclusion that although religion is some form of participation in the Divine, no religion can be literally true. In particular, since the Bible's basic theological content posits a male deity who is Lord, Judge, and King, we must put this all behind us for we have transcended that stage and seen more truly the nature of religion and life.

At the conceptual center of *Living in Sin?* is the argument that the Bible can have no binding authority. One would be a fool to read it in search of any coherent, binding content. Indeed, if read literally (as traditional Christians have read it) the Bible is nothing short of evil, since an "anti-female bias . . . permeates every page" (*LIS*, p. 120).

It may be instructive to observe what else Bishop Spong does to the text in order to discredit it. He claims that "the law of Sinai was addressed only to men" (*LIS*, p. 129), though nothing in the narrative in *Exodus* 19 and 20 suggests this limited application. Spong tells us that the Tenth Commandment (against coveting) mentions a wife along with an ox, the Old Testament degrades women by reducing them to property. Doesn't

he remember the Fifth Commandment? How can the mother who is to be honored by her children be treated as property by their father? There is no basis in the Old Testament for simultaneously honoring someone and treating that person as property.³

Spong goes on to claim that "Women were defined in the Bible almost entirely in terms of their sexual function" (*LIS*, p. 130), yet *Genesis* 1 gives to both men and women dominion over the earth (1:26,28). Also, *Proverbs* 31:10-31 is a poem of praise for the virtuous wife without one direct reference to procreation. And, what does one make of the *Song of Solomon*? In *Rescuing the Bible* Spong claims that "in a patriarchal age, nations did not seem to have mothers" (*RTB*, p. 41), yet in *Genesis* 17:16 Sarah is explicitly called "a mother of nations." The bishop's zeal to challenge Scripture seems to have moved way beyond the facts.

Salvaging Salvation

If the Bible is full of contradictions and sexism, and if the biblical rendering of God expresses a stage in the movement of consciousness no longer ours, an age in fact we now see as evil, can *anything* be retrieved from its ancient pages? Like a magician reaching into his top hat Spong surprises us with an emphatic yes. He insists that he takes the Bible seriously, though not literally, and that he can see a Word behind the conspicuously flawed words, a transcendent truth behind the all-too-human projection. That word is that "God is ground of all being" and "the source of life" (*LIS*, pp. 160,161). Creation is good and to be valued. We see the God who is the source of life in Jesus, who as God's Word makes creation's goodness real and apparent. That is what salvation is all about. (*LIS*, p. 160). Monism can be miraculously seen shining through the cracks in Scripture! All is one; all is good.

Try to understand the logic here. God, as the depth or ground of all creation and is not separate from or above creation. The creation's goodness derives from its participation in God. That goodness has become manifest in Jesus. Because each of us is rooted in the ground of all being, we too are good. Thus the call to salvation in Christ is simply the call to be like Jesus, to cast aside all that hinders, restricts, and discourages and to follow the call to be what one is. In the words of the popular mythologist Joseph Campbell, each one of us is called "to follow your bliss."

Not only is the Gospel for our new emerging consciousness pure religious monism, but the self becomes the center since it is empowered by nothing less than the ground of its own being. It is not empowered by anything outside itself. Spong here makes heroic work of presenting his monist vision of salvation as both authentically Christian and relevant.

To follow this vision one must be "willing to live fully, freely, and openly, scaling the barriers that inhibit life, escaping the straight-jacket of someone else's own

³ For further discussion, see Christopher J. H. Wright's *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1990) pp. 200-210. This view of marriage, Wright shows, "is only an inference from a presupposition about the character of Israelite marriage," a presupposition he proves to be very doubtful.

stereotype of whom I am" (*LIS*, p. 160). Indeed, "the Word of God in Jesus is a call to me to be myself, my whole self, without apology, without boasting . . . That is what it means to me to worship the one who is the ground of all being" (*LIS*, p. 162). It is hard to reconcile this with Jesus' call to self-sacrifice, turning the other cheek, taking up one's cross, or even loving one's neighbor. Religious monism leads to expansion, not obedience, to self-fulfillment, not sacrifice. One recent culture analyst, Richard John Neuhaus, has coined the phrase "the unencumbered self" to describe American culture.⁴ The Bishop's words are an excellent example of this contemporary desire to be rid of all obligations and commitments other than those that are self-generated.

It is worth remembering that the habit of seeing Scripture through the eyes of some "ism" is not new. More influenced by monism than they were willing to admit, liberal German theologians in the earlier part of our century wrote political speeches for Kaiser Wilhelm. They had given up any transcendent objective stance by which to challenge the German war machine. Karl Barth remembered that betrayal as a "black day." Later the German Church had all too little backbone to challenge Hitler. Critical liberal theology had against confused the voice of culture with that of Scripture. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon observed that "Nazi Germany was the supreme test for modern theology." The issue was, then as now, whose voice will prevail?⁵

This is the milieu out of which Spong's hero Paul Tillich came. It was one in which Christianity had been radically reshaped to fit the spirit of the times. Following the romanticism of the German poets, the Aryan mysticism of many artists and musicians, the syncretism of philosophers like G. W. F. Hegel, and the deference to culture of theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher, German church leaders in the 1930s had adapted the person of Jesus to their own monist agenda. Jesus was a true Aryan — the antithesis of the meek, self-effacing, self-giving messiah of popular piety. The Hebraic Jesus of the Jewish Gospel writers was a travesty of the strong, bold, life-affirming Christ who had ennobled the German peoples for centuries.

This all has a strangely familiar ring, as we hear today about a Christianity boiled down to pop psychology formulas like "be yourself" and "live fully, freely, and openly." We must not forget that had it not been for the courageous witness of the Confessing Church, with leaders like Karl Barth, Martin Niemöller, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the deconstructionists of German liberalism would have carried the day.⁶

The point I am making is that the freedom the bishop celebrates gives no critical leverage by which to evaluate one's personal passions. It should not surprise us that the bishop's Jesus looks strikingly like a new Age guru through whom the divine light shines. This is the Jesus of monism, but neither the Jesus of the Gospels nor the Eternal Son of God. To this we have an answer. Alister McGrath has noted that "The authority of Scripture is . . . something profoundly liberating. It frees us from the slavish cultural demand that we follow each cultural trend, and offers a framework whereby we may judge them."⁷

The bishop and homosexuality

When we come to examine what the Bishop says about homosexuality, we should not be surprised to discover that he finds Scripture to have no binding power. He admits that the two texts in the Holiness Code in *Leviticus* do condemn homosexual acts, but argues that the authors of this document were not possessed of "sufficient knowledge . . . to make an adequate judgment for all ages" (*LIS*, p. 145). In fact, "The Levitical condemnation of homosexuality is a pre-modern illustration of ignorance" (*LIS*, p. 147).

In Paul's case, we have no more than "ill-informed, culturally biased prejudices" (*LIS*, p. 152). Indeed we discover that this converted Pharisee, who claimed after his conversion to "delight in the Law in his inward parts" (*Romans* 7:22), was actually "anti-Semitic." (*LIS*, p. 152). In *Rescuing the Bible*, this discerning of Paul's real motives is taken a step further, and it is hypothesized that he may have been a self-loathing, repressed "gay male" (*RTB*, p. 119).

In examining *Romans* 1 and its teaching about homosexuality as a practice that distorts the order of creation (this is the widely-acknowledged meaning of "against nature"⁸), Spong notes that Paul sees homosexuality as "a punishment meted out to those who rejected the God of creation" (*LIS*, p. 149). Since this text assumes that God is the separate author of creation, and that there is a real, objective moral order with real universal standards, it must be rejected. Spong sees the whole argument as reflecting an outdated worldview and therefore simply unacceptable. Here we see an approach to the text that would discredit it if it challenges the reader's assumptions.

Search for the hidden truth

The Bishop, as we have seen, appeared poised over the abyss of nihilism in *Living in Sin?*. He came perilously close to dismissing every possible aspect of the faith as a tool for cultural hegemony and a projection of male self-interest and neuroses. In *Rescuing the Bible*

⁴ In *America Against Itself*, edited by Richard J. Neuhaus (University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) chapter 4.

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon, 1990).

⁶ See chapters one and two of *Resident Aliens* and Robert P. Ericksen's *Theologians Under Hitler* (Yale University Press, 1985).

⁷ Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth* (IVP, 1995) p. 62, italics mine.

⁸ See Richard B. Hays' "Relations Natural and Unnatural" in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (1986) pp. 186-95; C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans 1-8* (T. & T. Clark, 1975) p. 104; and James Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Word Books, 1988) pp.53, 74-75.

from *Fundamentalism*, he tries to return to more positive themes. The Bible is not to be considered evil, with its every page laced with sexism; rather the biblical writers were simply naïve and uninformed, sharing the prejudices and pre-scientific world pictures of their intellectual and cultural environment.

The task of this more recent book is “to rescue the Bible from the exclusive hands of those who demand that it be literal truth, and second to open that sacred story to levels of insight . . . that literalism never produced” (RTB, p. 10). His project is to achieve in his rereading of Scripture what “no one seems ready to invest the energy [in] . . . the task of reforming the Christ story” (RTB, p. 38). Here we see a now familiar pattern, beginning with the Enlightenment, of seeking the “hidden truths” of Jesus behind the plain meaning of the text.

Positioning himself in a rhetorical *via media*, Spong proposes to give us a view of Scripture that takes it seriously but not literally, somewhere between the arrogant literalists and the ignorant, skeptical liberals. He describes the fundamentalistic or literal reading of Scripture as absurd and mindless (RTB, p. 249). But his challenge to liberal Protestantism is equally clear. He sees liberalism’s message as fuzzy, imprecise, and relatively unappealing. “They have no real message. They tinker with words, redefine concepts... behind... a few pseudoradical thinkers” (RTB, p. 37). While he writes the Fundamentalists off, he is deeply concerned to inspire the Protestant liberals with a love and understanding of Scripture.

But here is the paradox, for it is Spong who takes a more literal view of the Bible than most literalists. He writes that *Genesis* 1 gives us “a vision of the cosmos that no educated person could today assume . . . namely that the earth is flat, surrounded by water, [and] the sky is a dome over the earth into which a sun has been placed” (RTB, p. 27). God is “living just above the sky [and] would intervene in the life of this world to effect a cure . . . or deliver [someone] from peril” (RTB, p. 32). Thus by depicting the worldpicture of the Bible as conveying prescientific pictures, Spong dismisses it as hopelessly pre-modern and irrelevant.

But clearly, this will not work. Anyone can easily see the difference in *Genesis* 1 between the picture given and the meaning proclaimed. *Genesis* 1 was given to tell us not that there is an ocean in the sky, but that there is one transcendent Creator and that we are valued members of that creation. There is no reason to confuse the world picture with its theological revealed meaning.

But the bishop wants us to get beyond not only the outdated worldpicture, but this limited world view. We moderns “must think about God in the light of our perceptions of divinity” (RTB, p. 85). We must accept the “dawning realization that God might not be separate . . . but rather deep within . . . the sum of all that is, plus something more”(RTB, p. 35). With this emerging realization he reconstrues the faith and attempts to restore its plausibility to the contemporary skeptical mind. This is not an optional task, but one which is required because of the monist view of God as “deep within . . . the sum of all that is, plus more.”

Entering the experience

Spong has told us that we must get behind “the ancient world with its narrow focus, its limited embryo of reality, its pre-scientific mind set of miracle and magic” (RTB, p. 37). We must enter “the experience out of which the text came to be written” (RTB, p. 24). But how could one possibly get behind the text and enter the experiences that produced stories of the burning bush, the deliverance through the Red Sea, the thunder of God on Mt. Sinai, the victory of Yahweh on Mt. Carmel, the feeding of the 5,000, and the appearances of the risen Christ?

This is essentially impossible for three reasons: first, both the experience and the report are inextricably interwoven (we weren’t there); second, there is no “mechanism” for engendering such experience (we can’t go back); and third, these events were depicted as uniquely grounded in the transcendent will and action of a Sovereign Creator God (they are *sui generis*, that is, one of a kind). We simply cannot create burning bushes or the experience behind them any more than we can manufacture elation for a Super Bowl victory that happened in the past. From the traditional perspective, God is simply not available in that way. He makes himself available to us on His own terms through the text of Scripture. I say this, of course, because I am not a monist.

What is fascinating is Spong’s optimism that such an experience can be entered. How would one ever know that one had truly entered into Moses’ experience of the burning bush? To this insoluble problem his monism comes to the rescue. When Spong reads his Bible his world view tells him that he is in touch with the same reality “out of which the literal text came to be written” (RTB, p. 247). Thus we should assume that whenever, like Jesus, one has the “courage to be himself” (RTB, p. 243), whenever one experiences a “call to love, to live and to be and to work for those things that create life,” one is entering into an experience *in principle* which is in continuity with that of the biblical writers. Of course, a modern person would describe this experience in terms of self-actualization rather than transcendent intervention, because people know God “only when [they] enter deeply into life” (RTB, p. 245).

Viewed this way, the words of Scripture and the creeds no longer offer a “sterile choice between literalism and nothing.” Beyond these dated words expressed in an outdated worldview is “the same reality that I am in touch with today at the edges [depth?] of my human limits . . . Then suddenly the ancient biblical story becomes my story... I know then that I have touched divinity . . . that is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (RTB, p. 243-244). Confidently, he describes his response: “I breathe that divinity in and I worship its source and I commit myself anew to live as one is transformed by the infinite and eternal presence of God” (RTB, p. 244).

The intrinsic absurdity of the whole proposal is not hard to see. First, the claim of fundamental continuity between the modern monist’s awareness that life is to be actualized and the descriptions of an encounter with God in the biblical narrative beggars the imagination.

To propose continuity between the experiences of generic self-actualizing optimism with an encounter of the holy God of Scripture leaves one breathless.

Second, over the case hangs the universalizing call to “embrace the subjective and relative character of everything [the Church] says and does” (*RTB*, p. 234). But surely this “everything” must apply to the bishop’s own proposal. If it does, then why should his monism be seriously embraced? This is not a trivial objection. The claim that “God is the sum of all that is plus something more” is *not* a relative claim. It is a first principle, which if not absolutely true means that everything else the Bishop says is no more than merely a subjective venting against traditional Christians. First principles are not offered, nor do they function as, a relativistic subjective guess. Spong does not offer his proposal as a relativistic subjective hunch. He is a committed religious monist who means business— even as he inconsistently contends that all knowledge is relative!

The Divine within the human

In the final book we will describe, *Born of a Woman*, we see the same familiar themes we have noted in the others. Again Spong places his proposal between “the two sterile camps of believing literally or rejecting all” (*BOW*, p. 15). Again he sees the biblical world picture as destroying the literal plausibility of the text. Again he makes an intense case against literalism, as “an enemy to faith in Jesus Christ” (*BOW*, p. 11). Again he salutes his heroes such as J. A. T. Robinson, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Matthew Fox, all committed monists. Again he is committed to the monist first principle that the “divine essence [is] not separate from and not identical with but incarnate within humanity, emerging from the heart of life in self-giving love” (*BOW*, p. 40).

What is new in this book is the attempt to ground the monist first principle in the New Testament witness to Jesus’ Resurrection. The truth of Easter is not “a supernatural miracle but . . . the dawning internal realization that this life of Jesus reflected a new image of God” (*BOW*, p. 40). The truth behind the mythological depictions of the empty tomb and the appearances of the resurrected Jesus was the realization that the “divine essence [is] not separate from . . . but incarnate within humanity” (*BOW*, p. 40). One wonders what other “new insights” are to be seen behind the reports of Jesus’ Resurrection!

In his handling of the Virgin Birth Spong gives much insight into the narrative structure of the text. Clearly his enjoyment of the story shines through in his well-crafted descriptions. Yet this event cannot be understood as literally true: “Virgins who give birth without a male agent exist for us only in legends and fairy tales” (*BOW*, p. 84, also pp. 59-60). The Bishop deals with the key texts in *Matthew* and *Luke* showing their inner tension and improbability. The writer of *Matthew* “created this birth tradition out of the whole

cloth of the interplay between his imagination and the Hebrew Bible” (*BOW*, p. 84).

The new aspect of Spong’s argument is his use of midrash to explain why the text cannot be taken literally. He defines midrash as the attempt by Jewish rabbis to probe the Torah (Old Testament) in order to discern its truth and apply it to the present situation. Midrash, he says, was aimed at interpreting the present by the past. Since the New Testament writers believed Jesus was the “key to the Jewish Scriptures,” they retold and invented “stories out of the Jewish religious past to illuminate a new experience” (*BOW*, p. 18).

The birth stories became a case in point. The New Testament writers appropriated Old Testament stories to interpret the life and significance of Jesus. This means that, “There was nothing objective about the Gospel [birth] tradition” (*BOW*, p. 19) and to read these stories as literally true is to “violate” the author’s intention. “The only obvious historical fact beneath these narratives is that Jesus was born” (*BOW*, p. 21). In *Who Was Jesus?* The Anglican New Testament scholar N. T. Wright responds by charging that the bishop “has grabbed this word [midrash] out of the air. . . . He misunderstands the method itself, and uses the bent tool to make the gospels mean what he wants . . . The gospels are not midrash”⁹

The value of the idea of midrash to Spong is that it enables him to solve a serious problem with biblical skepticism one step further as it relates to a creative first century Church. To be truly plausible, biblical skepticism has to dismantle the surface tradition as a web of improbabilities and contradictions and recover the “real Jesus” behind the text, and then (this is crucial) it has to describe how we get *from* the “real” Jesus *back* to the text we now have.

For example, if we show that the Resurrection accounts are contradictory and implausible, and believe we have recovered something of what really happened, we still have to go on to show *why* the text says that Jesus died and rose again. It is this second task that has been most difficult for skeptics. If the Resurrection never happened, if there were no empty tomb and no post-Resurrection appearances, if what “really” happened was a new monist awareness of God, then why did the evangelists write all those resurrection stories? Why did they not simply give a monist rendering of Jesus’ life? Later Gnostic writers certainly tried something like this. This has been the problem. Midrash is the answer, since it explains the creative impulse that generated the New Testament narrative we now have — at least as Spong uses it.

This is a remarkable, though highly implausible, achievement. Spong can explain what really happened back in the first century in terms of the plausibility structures of the twentieth century. Thus he can give it a religious depth, and explain why the story exists in its present form. He knows the real truth, can explain the appearances, unmask literalism, and reveal the original

⁹ N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Eerdmans, 1998) pp. 72-73.

intention of the biblical authors. Quite an achievement — if you can believe that cats like to swim. If you can't, then we have no more than the ramblings of a tragically skeptical but highly fertile imagination.

Concluding observations

I have surveyed several recent works by Bishop Spong to find the conceptual first principle of his theology, which I have called monism, and to explain how it works itself out in his view of Scripture, Jesus Christ, salvation, and sexual ethics. Although he continues to affirm his monist principle and identify himself with Bishop Robinson, Spong's understanding of monism does not seem to have developed. Surprisingly, one finds the same collection of phrases used almost liturgically over twenty years of writing. They may shed light in new areas, but there doesn't seem to be a great deal of ongoing reflection. This is because whenever much reflection is given there is always a movement to the divine as impersonal. No matter how much development one might wish to show, an impersonal deity is always static — and boring!

Second, there is a strange reluctance on the Bishop's part to look long and hard at his first principle. Is this strange reluctance because there is a fear that behind the verbiage one finds only superficial metaphysical speculation? Ought not one's first principle be to examine one's first principle?

Third, the concept of God the Bishop uses seems more to elevate the self than to move anyone to worship. Indeed, with his theology, *can* one worship? The categories of obedience and living into the praise of God's glory are noticeably absent in his writings. Instead we have the "unencumbered, expanding" self who with Jesus can say "I AM." This makes us all potential little "godlets," if you will. In the end the monist God becomes nothing but a means to reinforce

the absolutization of the self. The Bishop's worldview is really no more than a way of giving religious legitimacy to the lifestyle the authors of *Habits of the Heart* called "expressive individualism." It was their conclusion that expressive individualism "is remarkably thin when it comes to any but the vaguest prescriptions about how to live."¹⁰ The exaltation of the self is ultimately the death of the soul. As the Psalmist said, "He gave them what they asked but he sent leanness to their souls" (*Psalms* 106:15).

I conclude by again referring to the Oxford theologian Alister McGrath, as he comments on Bishop Spong's theology. "Spong constructs a fantasy world, in which his own vision of a politically correct culture leads him to impose stereotypes upon the New Testament with a fierce and uncritical dogmatism and a lack of scholarly insight."¹¹ As a point of fact, Spong does speculate that future bishops will be "taking part in defining God . . . [and] reinterpreting creeds" (*LIS*, p. 223).

The question I cannot shake is this: Is a Church that expends its energy defining and reinventing itself really something that any normal Christian would want to be a part of?

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¹⁰ Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (University of California Press, 1985) p. 81.
¹¹ *A Passion for Truth*, p. 65.

Destructive Criticism And The Old Testament

by Wayne Jackson

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Article Description: The investigations of “higher critics” have proceeded along lines buttressed with biased presuppositions that are grossly inaccurate, and which have been repeatedly and thoroughly discredited by reputable scholars.

Dr Richard E. Friedman, a professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at the University of California (San Diego), has attracted considerable publicity in recent years with his radical claim that Baruch, Jeremiah’s scribe (Jer. 36:4), authored much of the Old Testament. Friedman’s book, **Who Wrote the Bible?** (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), argues—on the basis of language analysis, structure, and the style of the book of Jeremiah (all subjective criteria)—that there are remarkable similarities between this document and several other Old Testament books.

Friedman has concluded that not only was Baruch the author of Jeremiah’s prophecies, but also major portions of other Old Testament books (e.g., parts of Deuteronomy, Joshua, and the books of Kings and Chronicles.) Moreover, the professor opines that no serious scholar today accepts Moses as the author of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament). He suggests these documents were “probably compiled in Babylonia during the fifth century, by weaving together the work of two or three other authors.”

Dr Friedman’s approach to the Old Testament is typical of the liberal twist of mind that has seized many religious teachers in the so-called scholastic community. It is fraught with ignorance—eclipsed only by arrogance—and is diseased with dishonesty.

Higher Criticism

The expression “higher criticism” has to do with the study of sources, times, and the authorship of ancient literary documents. Many of the biblical “higher critics” have been grossly influenced by German rationalism. Accordingly, they have been “destructive” in their approach to the study of the Bible. Their investigations have proceeded along lines buttressed with biased presuppositions that are grossly inaccurate, and which have been repeatedly and thoroughly discredited by reputable scholars.

Let us consider some of the bases upon which the destructive critical theories rest:

1. There is a denial of the miraculous elements of Scripture which result from naturalistic assumptions. The Bible is viewed as merely a collection of myths and legends. The accounts regarding the creation, the fall of man, the flood, etc., are, with a proverbial wave of the hand, dismissed from the realm of factual history. We are patronizingly told that these “charming stories” contain lessons for us, but are not to be understood as literal history. One writer, for example, has explained the Genesis record of creation as “something that never was, but always is.” Such is the typical nature of modernistic mumbo-jumbo.

A classic example of this sort of perspective is found in **The Broadman Bible Commentary** (Nashville: Broadman, 1973). Therein Adam, the first man, is treated as a mere “symbol” of mankind, rather than as an historical person. Joseph Callaway of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary writes: “If we rob Adam of his symbolic meaning and simply literalize him, then we reduce him to one historical individual for the anthropologist to study.” Professor Callaway goes on to suggest that if this is our view of Adam, in reality, “We have lost man!” (pp. 47-48).

Consistent with the foregoing suppositions, therefore, is the notion that there can be no such thing as “predictive prophecy” (since this would involve a miracle). No Old Testament character could have foretold the details of particular events—many years before their actual occurrence. Characteristic of this mode of thought was the statement of professor A.B. Davidson. “The prophet is always a man of his own time, and it is always to the people of his own time that he speaks, not to a generation long after, nor to us” (**A Dictionary of the Bible**, James Hastings, ed., Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1902, Vol. IV, p. 118).

Noted scholar J.A. Alexander (of Princeton) was quite correct when he observed that about the only matter upon which the critics really agree is that there simply “cannot be distinct prophetic foresight of the distant future” (**A Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah**, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953 Reprint, p. 24).

Consider this example: Since the book of Daniel contains clear statements as to the fate of certain empires (e.g., Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, etc.), it is alleged that the narrative could not have been penned by Daniel; rather, the document supposedly was authored by some unknown scribe of the inter-biblical era (c. 167 B.C.).

Porphyry, a pagan philosopher of the late 3rd century A.D., was the first to deny the genuineness of Daniel’s prophecies. He wrote fifteen books against Christianity, the twelfth of which was intended to depreciate the predictions of the inspired Daniel. But, as Jerome, an ancient scholar (c. A.D. 348-420), once noted, such oppositions to the prophecies are “the strongest testimony of their truth. For they were fulfilled with such exactness, that to infidels the prophets seemed not to have foretold things future, but to have related things past” (quoted by: Thomas Newton, **Dissertations on The Prophecies**, London: B. Blake, Bell-Yard, Temple-Bar, 1831, p. 202).

A denial of Old Testament prophecy, of course, flies directly in the face of Jesus Christ. Without belaboring the point, we merely mention that the Lord affirmed the Old Testament prophets spoke and wrote about Him (cf. Lk. 24:44; Jn. 5:39, 46-47). The destructive critics would indict Jesus as being a victim of the ignorance of His day— or else nothing more than a dishonest charlatan.

2.The “higher critics,” considerably influenced by Darwinism, *assume that the biblical narratives developed along evolutionary lines*. Harry Emerson Fosdick, a radical modernist, wrote: “We know that every idea in the Bible started from primitive and childlike origins and, with however many setbacks and delays, grew in scope and height toward the culmination of Christ’s Gospel” (**The Modern Use of the Bible**, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1924, p. 11).

It is argued, for example, that material which appears technical must be assigned a late date— even if a great variety of evidence reflects an earlier period of composition. Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), a prominent leader in the critical movement, contended that the Israel of Moses’ day could not have possessed a code containing the complicated civil and social laws that are reflected in the Pentateuch. Accordingly, the law necessarily must have arisen at a later date.

The discoveries of archaeology, however, have demolished that allegation. A number of law codes have been exhumed from the ancient past, i.e., the Sumerian systems of Ur-Nammu (c. 2050 B.C.) and Lipit-Ishtar (c. 1850 B.C.), the Akkadian laws of Eshnunna (c. 1950 B.C.), and the code of Hammurabi (c. 1792-50 B.C.). These systems, which were several centuries before Moses, were as technical as the Hebrew code (though the Mosaic law is morally superior by far) (see: “The

Code of Hammurabi,” **Christian Courier**, March, 1999, p. 43).

It might be noted further that liberals of an earlier generation maintained that Moses could never have authored the Pentateuch, since the art of writing was unknown in his day. Never mind that the Bible clearly indicates otherwise (cf. Ex. 17:14). The claim was made that writing was invented only at about the time of David (c. 1000 B.C.). Archaeological discoveries, of course, have long since dissolved such misguided charges (see our book, **Biblical Studies in the Light of Archaeology**, Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press, 1982, pp. 30-32). In his fascinating book, **History Begins At Sumer**, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), the late Dr Samuel Noah Kramer, America’s foremost Sumerologist, has shown in great detail that civilization, complete with schools, writing, etc., was an established fixture in the Mesopotamian world *more than a thousand years before Moses was born!*

But here is an important point which highlights the lack of integrity on the part of the critics: Evidence for early writing *was known already* in the time of Wellhausen, but it was ignored in deference to the sacrosanct theory!

3.Based upon *supposed literary “strata” or sources*, critical theorists, through “comparative studies” (again, a highly subjective and speculative concept), have dissected certain biblical books according to alleged authors, times, etc.

The well-known Graf-Wellhausen school of thought, for instance, divides the Pentateuch into four basic documentary sources, called J, E, P, and D. These segments supposedly represent Jehovistic, Elohist, Priestly, and Deuteronomic origins. For example, because certain divine names (e.g., “Jehovah,” or “Elohim” [God]) are used in various portions of the Pentateuch, the critics assumed that such “patterns” must imply a variety of sources. These scholars are totally dominated by the ideology that differences necessitate multiple authors. Such a notion is utterly ridiculous, and it has been demonstrated to be fallacious time and time again.

There now are known to exist numerous documents of antiquity— admittedly *unified* literary productions— which employ the use of alternate names as a form of stylistic relief. Kenneth A. Kitchen, of the School of Archaeology and Oriental Studies at the University of Liverpool, has discussed this matter in considerable detail in his book, **Ancient Orient and Old Testament** (London: Tyndale Press, 1966, pp. 120-125). He says that “major variations in style” are “universal in ancient texts whose literary unity is beyond all doubt” (p. 125).

Professor Kitchen further declares that “even the most ardent advocate of the documentary theory must admit that we have as yet no *single scrap* of external, objective, i.e., *tangible*, evidence for either the existence or history of ‘J’, ‘E’, or any other alleged source-documents” (p. 23, emp. in original).

Even certain liberals have been forced to admit that the JEPD hypothesis is really without merit. For example, Umberto Cassuto, late professor at the

University of Jerusalem, authored a work, **The Documentary Hypothesis** (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), in which he confessed the main arguments for this theory are “without substance.” He declared that the system is an edifice “founded on air,” and that it is “null and void” (pp. 5, 100, 101).

Moses H. Segal, Professor Emeritus at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, has written: “[W]e must reject the Documentary Theory as an explanation of the composition of the Pentateuch. The theory is complicated, artificial, and anomalous. It is based on unproved assumptions. It uses unreliable criteria for the separation of the text into component documents” (**The Composition of the Pentateuch - A Fresh Examination**, p. 95; as quoted in Herman J. Otten’s, **Baal Or God**, New Haven, MO: Leader Publishing Co., 1965, p. 179).

There simply is no support for the documentary theories of the higher critics, and there is much evidence against them.

A Legal Test of the Critical Theory

The methodology of the higher critics was highlighted some years ago by an interesting case that proceeded through the Canadian and British court systems. The entire affair is set forth in G.M. Price’s work, **Modern Discoveries Which Help Us To Believe** (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1934, pp. 57-58). Here are the facts:

A lady named Florence Deeks brought suit in the Ontario courts against H.G. Wells and his publisher, the Macmillan Company. Allegedly, Wells had plagiarized a manuscript which Deeks had submitted to these publishers, and from which she claimed Wells had borrowed extensively in his celebrated book, **Outline of History**.

The defendants denied the charge, affirming that Wells’ work had been done in England, and he had never seen Miss Deeks’ manuscript. When the case went to court, Deeks employed D.A. Irwin, M.A., Ph.D., Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature at the University of Chicago, as an expert to show, in detail, the many ways in which her manuscript and Wells’ book resembled one another.

Professor Irwin was delighted to oblige Miss Deeks, since, as he boasted, “this is the sort of task with which my study of ancient literature repeatedly confronts me, and I was interested to test out in modern works the methods commonly applied to those of the ancient world.”

The legal test, however, was a devastating blow to the “critical” procedure. The judge dismissed the case, characterizing the analyses of Professor Irwin as “solemn nonsense.” The jurist further said: “His [Irwin’s] comparisons are without significance, and his argument and conclusions are alike puerile.” In a word—the so-called “critical method” was judged to be just plain silly!

But the case was appealed to the Superior Court of Ontario, and then finally to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council of England, the highest legal body of

the British Empire. The judges announced that Dr Irwin’s arguments were “almost an insult to common sense,” and they decried the “utter worthlessness of *this kind* of evidence” (original emphasis).

Higher Criticism and a Parody

In order to expose the utter folly of the so-called “critical” methods, J.W. McGarvey—once described by the London Times as the greatest Bible scholar on either side of the Atlantic—authored (in 1893) a piece titled, “A Literary Analysis of an Ancient Poem.” The hilarious satire throws a floodlight upon the absurdity of the critical ideology. The well-known poem, analyzed by Professor McGarvey, reads as follows:

Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard,
To get her poor dog a bone.
When she got there, the cupboard was bare,
And so the poor dog had none.

Pursuing the same sort of methodology as that employed by those who dissect the Bible into its alleged literary sources, Professor McGarvey presented the following parody of this nursery rhyme. [Note: We have paraphrased McGarvey’s composition for easier reading.]

In the uncritical ages of the past, this poem was believed to be the composition of a single person—a very ancient English woman by the name of Goose. Whether we should style her Mrs. Goose, or Miss Goose, we have no means of deciding with certainty, for the stories which have come down to historical times concerning her are mostly legendary. It might be supposed that the title “mother” would settle this difficult question; but, as in certain convents of our day, venerable spinsters are styled *Mother*, so may it have been in the days of Goose.

But, leaving this interesting question as one for further historical inquiry, we turn to the poem itself, and by applying to it the scientific process of literary analysis, we find that the document did not originate, as our fathers have supposed, from a single author, but that it is a composite structure, at least two original documents having been composed within it by a Redactor. This appears from the incongruities between the two traditions which evidently underlie the poem.

One of these traditions represents the heroine of the poem, a venerable Mrs. Hubbard, as a benevolent woman, who loved her dog, as appears from the fact that she went to the cupboard to get him some food. If we had the whole story, we should doubtless find that she did this every time the dog was hungry, and as she surely would not go to the cupboard for the dog’s food unless she knew there was some in the cupboard, we can easily fill out the story of her benevolence by assuming that she put something away for the dog when she ate her own meals.

Now, in direct conflict with this, the other tradition had it that she kept the dog “poor;” for he is called her “poor dog;” and, in keeping with this fact, instead of giving him meat, she gave him nothing but *bones*. Indeed, so extreme was her stinginess toward the poor dog that, according to this tradition, she actually put

away the bones in the cupboard with which to mock the poor dog's hunger.

A woman could scarcely be represented more inconsistently than Mrs. Hubbard was by these two traditions; and consequently none but those who are fettered by tradition, can fail to see that the two must have originated from two different authors.

For the sake of distinction, we shall style one of the authors, Goose A, and the other, Goose B. In these two forms, then, the traditions concerning this ancient owner of a dog came down from prehistoric times. At length there arose a literary age in England, and then R [Redactor] put together into one the accounts written by the two geese, but failed to conceal their incongruities, so that unto this day, Mother Hubbard is placed in the ridiculous light of going to the cupboard when there was nothing in it; of going there, notwithstanding her kindness to her dog, to tantalize him by getting him a mere *bone*; and to cap the climax, of going all the way to the cupboard to get the bone when she knew very well that not a bone was there.

Some people are unscientific enough to think, that in thus analyzing the poem, we are seeking to destroy its value; but every one who has the critical faculty

developed can see that this ancient household lyric is much more precious to our souls since we have come to understand its structure; and that, contradictory as its two source documents were, it is a blessed thing that, in the providence of God, both have been preserved in such a form that critical analysis is capable of separating and restoring them (Biblical Criticism, Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1910, pp. 34-36).

Conclusion

There have been many efforts across the centuries to destroy the integrity of the biblical record. Some attacks come from militant skeptics— who make no apology for their in-your-face assaults. Other efforts are more subtle. They issue from those who profess a friendship with the Scriptures, but who, in reality, are enemies as deadly as the rabid atheist. The conscientious Christian need not be distracted by their fanciful dreamings.

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See Page 113
for more
details about
the camp

The Wellington Christian Apologetics Society will be hosting Dr Arnold Fruchtenbaum, founder of Ariel Ministries, on the first weekend (4,5,6th) of May 2001. Public meetings will be on Friday night and all-day Saturday.

Full details at our website: www.christian-apologetics.org

Dr Fruchtenbaum & Pastor Mottel Baleston will also be guest speakers at the Ariel Ministries Teaching Camp, held at Lake Taupo, Monday 16 April to Sunday 22 April.

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"The Jewish People in the Plan of God - Romans 9, 10 & 11" (5 hours)
"How to Understand the Bible in Context" (5 hours)

Pastor Mottel Baleston will be taking the latter two topics.

Total of 26 hours of teaching over 7 days.

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You can visit Dr Fruchtenbaum's website at www.ariel.org

Resurrection: Myth or Reality?

Resurrection: Myth or Reality?

(Harper, San Francisco, 1994)

by Bishop John Shelby Spong

Reviewed by Kathleen Loncar BA (Hons.) (London)[Classics], M.A. (Massey)

[History].

Bishop Spong's book *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* is written with evident conviction and love of the subject, but to me the arguments leave a great deal to be desired. Sometimes they tend to be circular and at other times are based on what seems to be inadequate reasoning. I would like to summarise some of the points which have struck me, but I am sure that other people will find others in a book which certainly gives the reader a lot to think about.

First I feel I must point out that some of the Scripture references are inaccurate. On page 57 Spong refers to Colossians 5:16. There is no such text, since Colossians contains only four chapters: nor can I find in looking at verse 16 of any of the chapters any wording of the kind he is referring to. On page 134 he incorrectly refers God's promise "I will be his father and he shall be my son" (2 Sam. 7:14) to David. The passage quite clearly states that the promise is made to David's son. It appears that it refers to Solomon ("He shall build a house for my name") and could not be a prophecy about Jesus, because it goes on to refer to what will happen when he commits iniquity: but in any case it is definitely not a promise made to David.

Also Spong claims on pages 53-54 that the word used for the appearances of Christ to Paul in Galatians 1:15 is *ophthe* which does not imply visual sight. He compares this with the appearances of God to Abram and Moses (Gen. 12:7 and Exodus 3:2) in which the Septuagint translators have used *ophthe*. They did indeed, and in the burning bush episode it is quite clear from the whole account that physical sight is meant. Indeed our word "optics" comes from the Greek word because it *does* mean physical sight. However, in Galatians 1:15, at least in my Greek New Testament, a quite different verb is used, *apokalupsai*, so unfortunately for Spong this elaborate argument is pointless.

Some people may argue that these are minor details, but I believe such errors are quite unacceptable in what purports to be a work of scholarship, one indeed which attempts to show what is lacking in other people's scholarship.

However, it is undoubtedly more important to look at the main thrusts of the argument.

Firstly, Spong claims that the first account of the Resurrection by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, does not imply a physical resurrection at all, but a raising of Jesus by God in a glorified form, with no period on Earth followed by Ascension: the "appearances" to Cephas and others which Paul mentions are purely spiritual ones. Between Paul's summing-up and the writing of the

Gospels, Spong says that all sorts of physical details were added, which he proceeds to analyse and to suggest reasons for. But before doing this he says on page 55:

It is certainly legitimate to say, as one archbishop has, that "belief in the resurrection is not an appendage to the Christian faith. It is the Christian faith." But it is quite illegitimate, based on the biblical text itself, for anyone to say what another archbishop was quoted as saying: "I believe that those dead bones of Jesus got up and walked out of that tomb." The first statement is the essential mark of the Christian story. The latter statement is a gross liberalisation made by those in fundamentalist or evangelical traditions who have not adequately searched the depths of the biblical text they claim to be championing and defending.

But if the fundamentalist and evangelical Christians are interpreting the texts so wrongly, the question still remains as to why the Gospel writers added so many details in the first place. According to Spong, the early statement made by Paul was cast in credal form and by Spong's interpretation is clear enough. The subsequent details in the various Gospels are certainly somewhat difficult to reconcile with each other, though as Dorothy L. Sayers said, if one remembers that people were going back and forth in the vicinity of the tomb while it was still half-dark, one would expect some confusion in the accounts. Spong however, uses some rather special pleading to explain the build-up of detail which frankly strikes me as what would have been deliberately misleading if Matthew and the others had set out to embroider their material with the intention he suggests. I would not want to be party to a religion whose early writers did this and I am surprised that he would.

However, I would point out that the kind of resurrection which Spong believes in and which he claims is implied by Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15, was already part of the teaching of the Pharisees and therefore it is difficult to see why the early Christians' teaching it would have aroused quite such a furore. Consider, for example, the account in Acts 23:6-9 of Paul's speech to the Jewish Council in Jerusalem when he set the Pharisee and Sadducee factions arguing with each other by saying "I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead I am on trial."

It is quite clear from Martha's words to Jesus in John 11:24 about Lazarus "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day," that Jesus's disciples already believed in a spiritual resurrection. Therefore, what

happened at the resurrection of Christ must have been perceived as something essentially different.

Another aspect of Spong's argument is that early Christianity suffered from being uprooted from its Jewish beginnings and that it needs to be reinterpreted in its Jewish context if it is to be understood. On page 16 he says that the centre of the Jewish world, Jerusalem, was destroyed in 70 AD by the Roman army, so that "the Christian story born in that Jewish context soon thereafter began to float exclusively in a gentile sea." So the Gospels, "deeply shaped by the midrash tradition" were no longer understood. Apart from the fact that Spong himself later goes to some lengths to show that the Gospels were all written later than 70, which rather spoils his own argument, it is simply not correct that the rest of the world was exclusively a "gentile sea". There were already important and influential Jewish communities with their own synagogues in most of the main cities in the Greco-Roman world, and the refugees from Judaea, after 70, most likely went to join them. It is clear from *Acts* that when the apostles went on their missionary journeys they preached in the synagogues first, and afterwards to the gentiles. Some of these Jewish communities had been well established for lengthy periods.

Curiously, Spong contradicts himself on pages 66 and 67. First he states that antagonism grew up between strict Jews and Jewish Christians after the fall of Jerusalem because strict Jews were clinging as hard as possible to their own traditions because they had been dispersed into the gentile world. Then on the next page he states that the Jews soon forgot their traditions because of becoming hellenised. It is not clear why the same process should have such diverse effects, or precisely which groups are being affected so differently.

It is also curious that in view of his emphasis on the Jewishness of early Christianity he ignores the great Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria. Indeed he is not the only modern scholar to ignore this very important man. Philo was a Jew born about 25 BC, very learned in Greek philosophy, who wrote many works which set out to use Greek thought to explain Judaism to non-Jews: to him, pagan thought had been struggling to understand truths which Jews had already understood much better. His teaching is of particular importance to students of the New Testament because he appears to have been the originator of the concept of the Logos. Writing of God he says:

by Goodness he begat the Universe, and by Authority he rules what he has begotten. And there is a third thing which being in between them, brings the two together, his Logos, for by Logos God is both ruler and good... the Logos was conceived in God's mind before all things and is manifest in connection with all things.¹ (Philo de Cherubim tr. E.R. Goodenough)

The parallel with John's Gospel Ch 1 is obvious, and it surely means that we do not have to assume a very late date for John's Gospel. Philo died in 40 AD and presumably his works were accessible to educated Jews and Jewish Christians.

Spong explains the stories in the Gospels as being examples of Jewish midrash. This is a method of explaining scriptures by seeking parallel stories in earlier

scriptures and seeing the significance of these as a way of interpreting the later ones. Spong quotes the Jewish Encyclopedia on page 15. Midrash is: "...the attempt to penetrate into the spirit of the text, to examine the text from all sides, to derive interpretations not immediately obvious, to illumine the future by appealing to the past."

As a method of appreciating the sacred texts this appears to me to be wholly admirable. Unfortunately Spong tends to use it to explain away real events in the New Testament. Every time an event in the New Testament reminds him of something in the Old Testament, he suggests that it probably did not actually happen: it is merely a way of identifying Jesus as an important figure in the Jewish tradition by attributing these significant events to him. This does seem to be carrying the midrash idea far beyond what is the original intent of the method. Further, he carries some of the parallels he thinks he can see to unacceptable lengths. To compare Mary's song of praise in Luke 1 with Hannah's in 1 Samuel 1-2 is, I think, entirely justified: but to suggest that the story of Christ walking into the Jordan to be baptised, and thus parting the heavens so that the Spirit of God could descend upon him, is a retelling of the parting of the Jordan river by Joshua and Elijah and Elisha (page 9), is surely stretching the idea to absurd lengths.

Indeed Spong alleges that the suggestion that the heavens had to be physically parted in order that the Spirit of God could descend was necessary because in the first century people believed that the earth was a flat space at the centre of the Universe with a blue canopy called the sky over it which divided Earth from Heaven (page 41). This is nonsense. As early as the fifth century BC the Ionian Greek philosophers were enquiring into the nature of the Universe and their theories included the idea of a spherical earth. Aristotle in the fourth century BC had arrived at the definite conclusion that the earth was a spherical planet surrounded by concentric spheres within which the other planets orbited around it. Heracleides, a pupil of Plato, suggested that the earth turned round on its axis. Eratosthenes used trigonometry to measure the circumference of the earth with reasonable accuracy.

About 33 BC Aristarchus of Samos affirmed that the earth moved round the sun rather than the sun round the earth, but this was not confirmed until several centuries later.² However, it is clear that there was a great deal of sophisticated theorising about the nature of the Universe and certainly the childish belief enunciated by Spong would not have been general in the first century AD among persons of any standard of education. Spong alleges that the belief in an ascension to heaven by Christ implies the idea that the earth is flat, but I have never understood why anyone thinks this. All motion away from a spherical body appears from its surface to be motion upwards. If one sets off in an aircraft from Wellington to London or Bombay, one will be going upwards.

Finally, I would like to consider what Spong has to say about the reasons why we supposedly cannot take the Gospels as being narratives of actual events because of the alleged lapse of time before they were written. Here of course he is on common ground with many, if not most, of today's commentators, though I would note that in a recent work called *The Jesus Papyrus*³ (reviewed in the *NZ Listener* of 21 September 1996 by Paul Trebilco), C.P.

Resurrection: Myth or Reality?

Thiede and M. d'Ancona have argued for a date 60 AD for the writing of Matthew's Gospel based on their investigations of some papyrus fragments of the Gospel held in Magdalen College, Oxford. However, even if Spong's dating of the Gospels is correct (70 AD for Mark, the others later) he is still not justified in saying (page 58) "the major eyewitnesses were no longer living." By 70 AD Jairus's daughter for example, would only have been in her early fifties. I would call her a major eyewitness who would certainly not have forgotten Jesus or failed to talk about him to other people over the years!

However, I would query whether it is justifiable to push the writing of the Gospels so late. Let us look at the internal evidence of the documents as we would with any other historical writing. For example, Luke wrote the *Acts of the Apostles*. Apparently when he completed it Paul was still alive in Rome and had been there for two years. Surely if Paul had died before Luke completed *Acts* he would have mentioned it - Paul was martyred after all. We know when Paul was sent to Rome because it was soon after Festus became governor of Judaea and we know that that was in 60 AD. So Luke completed *Acts* in about 63 AD. But as he makes quite plain at the beginning of *Acts* he had

already written his Gospel: both of them were apparently written for a certain Theophilus, who was, we must assume, a gentile Christian, or at least a very interested enquirer, perhaps one of a circle of such enquirers.

As Sherwin-White says in *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, documents relating to all ancient history disagree among themselves, but historians of the period are reasonably confident that they can sort out the essential truths of the matter. He sums up thus:

It can also be suggested that it would be no harder for the Disciples and their immediate successors to uncover detailed narratives and sayings of Christ within their closed community, than it was for Herodotus and Thucydides to establish the story of the great events of 520-480 BC. For this purpose it matters little whether you accept the attribution of the Gospels to eyewitnesses or not.⁴

This is very true: but my own feeling is that there would have been plenty of eyewitnesses around to be consulted and I believe we should take the founding documents of our faith as serious history.

Endnotes

¹ *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus*: Erwin R. Goodenough (Yale University Press, 1940).

² M. Cary and T.J. Haarhoff, *Life and Thought in the Greek and Roman World* (University paperbacks, 1961), Ch. VI.

³ Carsten Peter Thiede and Matthew D'Ancona, *The Jesus Papyrus* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1996). [See review in *Apologia* 7(1) 2000, p. 42]. **Editor**

⁴ A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1963).



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What of the Spong Song?



(First published in the Tablet (London) (10 September, 1994).

Republished in Welcome (September 1994, No. 101).

"Resurrection: Myth or Reality"

A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity

Review by Gerald O'Collins

Professor of Fundamental Theology,
Gregorian University - Rome

John Spong, the bishop of the Episcopal diocese of Newark (New Jersey), seems a caring, prayerful person. But a kindly heart and lots of fine rhetoric cannot make up for the lack of scholarship and critical judgement shown throughout this book.

The bibliography contains at least seven mistakes. In the book itself false biblical references abound. What is said about a key verb St Paul uses in Gal. i:15f. shows that the bishop has forgotten any Greek he ever knew.

Victims of papal persecution after Pope John XXIII are said to include Teilhard de Chardin; he died in 1955, three years before Pope John was elected.

Raymond Brown and Joseph Fitzmyer are listed among those unfortunates who have "found themselves removed, silenced, harassed, or compromised in some way". This is news to me. Fr Brown has been and Fr Fitzmyer is a member of the papal biblical commission. Is this a Machiavellian way of compromising them?

Defamation

Later in the book both turn up again in company with 15 other "New Testament scholars", who all allegedly join with the bishop in "rejecting the literal narratives about the Resurrection" as no more than "Christian legends".

They and some others on that list might well consider bringing a legal action against the bishop and/or his publishers for professional defamation. Brown and Fitzmyer have repeatedly gone on record as accepting the historicity of the burial by Joseph of Arimathea, Jesus's post-Resurrection appearances and the discovery of his empty tomb - all of which Spong rejects.

In a curious fashion the bishop talks of his seventeen "New Testament scholars" in the present tense: "we who are convinced", "we who reject", and so forth.

Half of them (like William Albright, Rudolf Bultmann, C.H. Dodd, E.C. Hoskyns and Karl Rahner) are long dead and have no chance of dissociating themselves from Spong and his views.

Some of them, such as Karl Rahner, Hans Kung and Edward Schillebeeckx, cannot be classified as New Testament scholars in the proper sense of the term. Does the bishop really care about accuracy and truth? Or is all this part of what he calls floating with him "on a sea of timelessness"?

Old Hypotheses

Much of his reconstruction of Christianity's origins is not new. Old hypotheses turn up again: about Jesus being buried in a common grave, the male disciples fleeing to Galilee, the new beginning with the repentant Peter's post-crucifixion insights, Mary Magdalene as Jesus's wife (called a "life-affirming speculation"), the "discovery" of the empty tomb as a legend, the so-called creation of Jesus's burial story out of Isaiah 53:9 (a thesis soundly rejected once again by Morna Hooker's recent commentary on Mark's gospel), and the parody of Jesus's bodily resurrection as his corpse resuscitating and "walking out of the tomb".

The bishop's "explanation" of John 21 (with Peter on a hunch throwing the net out on the right side of the boat and then finding on the shore "a piece of uneaten broiled fish" on a "primitive grill" which some other fishermen had left behind) would have made hardy nineteenth-century rationalists blush.

Early in our century Martin Dibelius tried out the view that the Jewish scriptures (rather than actual events) provided the "source" for various details in the passion narratives.

Midrashic Theory

More recently some scholars have detected here and there in the New Testament elements of Jewish

midrashic techniques of telling stories with literary embellishments. Apparently ignorant of the major recent commentaries on Mark and Matthew (by Davies, Gnilka, Harrington, Hooker, Luz and others), the bishop pushes a midrashic theory to his own idiosyncratic extreme. Mark ("Christian midrash at its best") is supposed to have set the style for the later gospel writers, who freely created the Easter stories and all kinds of narratives out of the Jewish scriptures that they had inherited.

To support his argument, Spong uses a couple of maverick scholars. For his interpretation of Mark's empty tomb story, he relies on Schillebeeckx's Jesus. He seems unaware both of the severe criticisms top-flight biblical scholars brought against that book and of the way Schillebeeckx himself later modified his reductive interpretation of the Easter appearances and the empty tomb.

In its entry on "Midrash" the recent magisterial *Anchor Bible Dictionary* includes a bibliography of 64 books and articles, nine of which show up in Spong's study.

Scholarship



His work simply does not belong to the world of international scholarship. No genuine scholars will be taken in by this book. But ordinary readers who are not too familiar with modern biblical studies could easily be impressed by Spong's title of "bishop" and his pretended scholarship.

To explain the formation of the Easter narrative the bishop also draws on the Jewish Feast of the Tabernacles. If you believe his account, you will believe anything.

To be true to the author's central thesis, this book should have been entitled "Midrash or Reality?" But "midrash" is a less polemical term and down-right obscure. "Myth" is a fighting word and so earned its place on the cover. In his preface the bishop thanks a long list of persons and animals (his "granddogs and grandcats"). He does not mention having shown his manuscript to one or two professional scholars. My advice for his next book (surely he will find the year 2000 an irresistible topic?) is to let some real experts check the text before publication.

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Bishop John Spong's recipe for the extinction of Christianity

A Review of: Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile

by John Shelby Spong

(HarperCollins, 1998, 257pp, RRP \$19.95)

Reviewed by Frank Mobbs

Republished from AD 2000 (September 1998, pp. 14-15).

Frank Mobbs, Ph.D. (Syd), M.A. (Oxon), M.A. (Birmingham), M.Litt. (UNE), B.Ed. (Qld), B.A. (Syd), Dip. Ed. (UNE), has taught at several universities in Australia and overseas and writes on theological topics for a wide variety of journals.

In his latest book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, Bishop John Spong addresses the fact that, as he sees it, Christianity is on the brink of extinction.

Bishop Spong of Newark, New Jersey, is part of the Anglican (Episcopalian) Church in the USA which has declined dramatically in the number of its adherents in recent years.

The author makes clear his aim in writing the book: to reformulate Christianity (p. 227). This means discarding all those beliefs which make someone a Christian and replacing them with other beliefs, and then labelling the believer "Christian".

Believer?

"I define myself as above all things a believer" (p. 3), says the Bishop. Having thus spoken, Spong lists lots of things in which he does not believe; the articles of the Apostles' Creed, the sacraments (p. 191-196), heaven (an "ancient spot just beyond the clouds", p. 205) and hell, etc. The Bishop is a great non-believer in Christian doctrines. Why? Because, he says, we live in a thought-world which is incompatible with that of the authors of the Bible.

But wait a minute. Let us examine the meanings which Spong gives to each doctrine. For example, he does not believe in "God the Father Almighty" because the word "Father" elicits the notion of "an old man who lives just beyond the sky" (p. 5), a notion which justifies the oppression of women.

Here one sees Spong's technique at work, one which he employs throughout his book. He gives a caricature of a belief of Christians, pours scorn on it, declares it to be out of date, and then proceeds to provide his substitute.

Another example from the Creed: "born of the Virgin Mary". Spong thinks, or says he thinks, this means that God acted like a male human who deposited

his seed in the female. This notion, he says (p. 12), was discredited when the female egg cell was discovered in 1724! The notion "violates everything we know about biology". It certainly does, but it is not a Christian belief. Why? Because Christians do not have a belief about how the Holy Spirit brought about the conception of Jesus, for the very good reason that the New Testament has nothing to say on the matter. Seeing that the Holy Spirit is Almighty God, Christians have always considered that it was no great problem for the Holy Spirit to solve.

So, if Spong is denying caricatures of Christian beliefs, does it follow that he must hold true Christian beliefs? Not at all. With the aid of his heroes - the Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, and non-believers such as Michael D. Goulder and Don Cupitt (Anglican priests turned atheist) he has developed a body of beliefs especially tailored to replace Christian ones. Holding these beliefs, he is able to describe himself as "a passionate believer" (p. 3).

Bishop Spong's main attack is directed at the Christian notion of God. First, he rejects what he calls "the theistic God". What is Spong's brand new replacement? Well, "this God can never be enclosed by propositional statements" (p. 4: cf. p. 47).

Were Spong to take himself seriously, that would be his final statement about God. Unable to be consistent, he goes on to enclose God in lots of propositions. "The God I know is not concrete or specific" (p. 4). God is not a being. It [not he] is the Ground of Being [following Tillich], "a presence discovered in the very depths of my life, in the capacity to live, in the ability to love, and in the courage to be" (p. 132). God has none of the attributes of a person: it is impersonal, as impersonal as a rock (p. 60). God does not help us (p. 59), is not located in an external place (p. 59) (as he thinks traditional Christians believe).

Doctrine of God

... Having a true notion [of the doctrine of God] is important, for as English philosopher, Peter Geach, somewhere remarked, "To worship a false God is to worship no God at all.... So the flourishing replacements of Christianity, like ... much feminist

writing, begin creating a God more to their authors' liking - thus reversing the Miracle of Cana, by turning wine into water."

How does Bishop Spong speak about Jesus Christ - is he God's "only Son", thus sharing God's nature? Remember, God is the Ground of Being. What is "it"? Our author's fragments of description of the Ground of Being include: "the very core and ground of all that is" (p. 64), "the infinite centre of life" (p. 64), and "that which calls people into life" (p. 65), "not separate from us" (p. 165).

Two comments are in order. First, these descriptions are calculated to sound profound. Second, they have no meaning. What, one might ask, is "the infinite centre of life"? And if the Ground of Being (God) is not separate from us, would it go out of existence if all humans ceased to exist?

Of course, Spong has covered himself by saying his God (Ground of Being) is "not concrete or specific". That being the case, God could be, well, anything. So it is no trouble to formulate a doctrine of the divinity of Jesus.

Jesus Christ is a "spirit person" (p. 100). What is spirit? "Spirit is a nebulous, hard to define, totally subjective concept" (p. 100). "This word appears to point to a presence that is assumed to be real but cannot be easily described". Notice it "appears" to point to point to something and "it is assumed to be real". He differed (from you and me) only in degree, the degree to which the God-consciousness came to fullness in him" (p. 131) - though what that means escapes this reviewer.

There are three notable deficiencies in this book.

Firstly, it contains examples of illogicality:

- (a) Language "can never capture truth" (p. 225) - which entails that what Bishop Spong has just said cannot express the truth.
- (b) Planet Earth evolved to its present state over billions of years, therefore, God did not create it.
- (c) The Gospels are very unreliable, but Spong refers to them frequently for confirmation of his views.
- (d) "In the presence of the Spirit, the human community was to be universal" (p. 124). Could it be anything else?
- (e) Belief in miracles belongs to a primitive past, but Jesus performed miracles (p. 125).

Secondly, one notes the author's abuse of Scripture.

Spong regards himself as a Bible scholar and spends most of his time attacking biblical fundamentalists. But Christians (and Jews) in all ages have been sophisticated interpreters of the Bible. Is it possible that Spong does not know this fact - can he be so arrogant? The other possibility - one I hesitate to entertain - is that

he is gambling on the presumed ignorance of his readers.

Scriptural errors

Scriptural errors abound in this book. Contrary to what Spong says, Jesus did not appear to his disciples "out of the clouds of heaven (Matt. 28:16-20)" (p. 115). John 7:29 does not report any sayings of Jesus. In his conversations with the rich young ruler and with the woman caught in adultery, Jesus did not "give himself to others to a remarkable degree" (p. 126). "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" does not mean that Jesus had "the ability to live, to love, and to be" (p. 166). Mark 3:21 does not report that Jesus's mother was seeking to "put Jesus away" (p. 109).

Spong seems to think Christians hold they are bound to believe all that is in the Old Testament. So he gloats at their apparent abandoning of the Bible as irrelevant (p. 154). But the New Testament witnesses to the fact that Christians believed they were a party to a new covenant, only parts of which coincided with the old covenant. The rule of faith which they had received from the Apostles was the standard by which to judge the contents of the Old Testament.

Now Spong must know all this. So what is he up to? Writing an excessively long propaganda tract comes to mind as an answer.

The conclusion is confirmed by noting the many ways he belittles opponents. They are: "upholders of defining stereotypes of antiquity", "anxiety filled", "immature", manipulators of guilt who use the Sacrament of Penance, etc, as "guilt levers".

Thirdly, Spong's book contains non-sense writing:

"It is the being of each of us, our full humanity, that also will finally connect us to the meaning of God" (p. 132). "The deity I worship is rather part of who I am individually and corporately" (p. 147). "Prayer is what I am doing when I live wastefully, passionately, and wondrously" (p. 147). "Death which opens all things to new possibilities..." (p. 147).

Perhaps Spong is right when he says he is "a God-intoxicated human being" (p. 3).

Modern liturgists, however, will be struck by a flash of Spong perceptiveness. He notes that "Free standing altars have turned the priest around to face the God in the midst of the people" (p. 182); and that people no longer kneel during the Eucharist. He interprets these facts as a recognition that the traditional notion of God is dying.

The American, Father Andrew Greeley, was once asked for the formula for the success of his steamy novels. He replied that a story focusing on priests and their sexual exploits could not fail. Similarly, Spong cannot fail, for what could be more exciting than a Christian bishop who is hell bent on destroying Christianity?

The Problem with Bishop Spong's Religion: A review of *Can a Bishop be Wrong?* Ten Scholars Challenge John Shelby Spong

Reviewed by David Mills



David Mills

Can a Bishop be Wrong?, edited by Peter C. Moore (Morehouse, 1998) is available for \$19.95 (including postage) from the bookstore of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, 311 Eleventh Street, Ambridge, PA 15003; 1-800-874-8754; and Bookstore@tesm.edu.

Answering the Bishop of Newark's claims is, to be honest, like shooting fish in a barrel. Bishop Spong declares that people who fly in jet airplanes cannot believe in the God of the Bible, although a) a lot of us do and are actually intelligent (he would doubt this), and b) the invention of the jet engine tells us nothing whatsoever about whether the Son of God became man.

That we can do more and more things in the world does not tell us who or what created and maintains the cosmos. You might as well say that the people who first used rocks to grind their corn could no longer believe in the gods of their fathers — or that Bishop Spong's

children can't accept his God because the computer was invented after he was born.

Shooting fish in a barrel is not a very interesting sport to watch, and you may well ask why anyone would spend a long evening reading *Can a Bishop be Wrong?*. The answer is: because Bishop Spong has put very clearly a belief that in a much vaguer and indirect form afflicts the Episcopal Church, and indeed all the mainline Churches: that the Christian revelation is not true.

The Metaphorical Method

The priest who on Easter morning preaches cheerfully about hope and perseverance and urges his people to keep on trying when things seem darkest, but says nothing about whether or not Jesus' body remains in the tomb, is saying indirectly what Bishop Spong says directly. To be fair, he may be saying it unintentionally, but he is still saying that the bodily resurrection does not matter.

The priest who on moral questions appeals to a flexible general principle ("love," usually) and avoids the specific instructions of Scripture, is treating the Bible in the same way as Bishop Spong. He may not make the same radical proposals for revising Christian moral teaching, but he has rejected the crucial details of the revelation just as thoroughly. In both cases, the priest's teaching is not essentially different from the Bishop of Newark's, and therefore it will over time wreak the same harm on human souls, mild and inoffensive as it may seem to be. It will do so because it leads people away from the realities the Bible reveals.

Such people share with Bishop Spong a way of treating the Scriptures. They make any uncomfortable historical fact a metaphor for a more comfortable idea, a colorful way of putting it, and replace any unfashionable moral teaching with broad and malleable principles, though in language lifted if possible out of the Bible. Let me give an example.

In *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, Bishop Spong declared that the "limited view" that the Son of God was made man, died, rose again, and ascended into Heaven "has faded," meaning that we now know better. We know that Jesus was not the Son of God, but was a man "alive, totally alive, and in that vibrant vital life God was experienced."

We know that “This God [is] the presence of life that animates the universe, that reaches self-consciousness in Homo sapiens and that breaks open to the essence of transcendence in Jesus of Nazareth.” We “worship this God and acknowledge the saving power of this Jesus when we dare to live openly, fully, completely — affirming the life of God that is within us.” You get the idea.

In *Can a Bishop Be Wrong?*, Peter Moore, bishops James Stanton and FitzSimons Allison, and eight other scholars examine Bishop Spong's works in great detail. Trinity's professor of theology Stephen Smith contributes an essay on Bishop Spong's “monism,” that is, his rejection of the transcendence of God. Other writers include David Scott of Virginia Theological Seminary, George Sumner, the new principal of Wycliffe College in Toronto, and Russell Reno of Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska.

The book is written for the educated laity, with a high degree of clarity. The authors carefully explain Bishop Spong's ideas on the Bible, the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, sexuality, and similar subjects, and then equally carefully explain his errors in logic and scholarship. The result is not only a thorough and final refutation of the bishop's arguments, but a good education in orthodox Christianity itself, as the truth of the Gospel becomes clearer when contrasted with an alternative.

Two small criticisms. First, the book needs an essay on Spong's rhetoric, for his ability to make in one phrase a bad idea look like a self-evident truth helps explain his success in debate and in the media.

Second, the book needs a reflection on what to do with Bishop Spong — how believers should treat him,

and by extension his allies, in his role as bishop. Should they share at the Lord's Table with someone who does not believe in the Lord, for example? The Church in England broke with Rome in the sixteenth century over smaller differences in doctrine than those that divide believers from Bishop Spong. (See *Titus* 3:9-11 and *I Timothy* 6:3-5.)

The Metaphorical Failure

Can a Bishop be Wrong? needed to be written, and needs to be read, because the ideas Bishop Spong expresses so clearly harm human souls, even in the much vaguer form preached from many pulpits. A metaphorical religion is certainly appealing. It is infinitely easier to live openly, fully, etc. (a command that really means whatever you want it to mean) than to obey the Man who said that lust is adultery and hatred murder and expects us to take up a cross and die. But a metaphorical religion is also the broad way that leads to destruction, because it does not lead to the Lord.

One may preach the Resurrection as a lesson in perseverance, and people will still come to church — some to be reassured, some out of habit. But they will not be transformed. It is far, far better to bring them to meet the risen Lord, who died for our sins and was raised from the dead that we might live with Him forever — openly, fully, completely — in the Kingdom that shall have no end.

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David Mills is Trinity's Director of Academic Publishing, Editor of Mission and Ministry, and Assistant Librarian. He has edited a collection of essays on C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Guide: C. S. Lewis and the Art of Witness* (Eerdmans, 1998) and is working on a companion collection to be titled *Worth Doing Badly: G. K. Chesterton and the Art of Witness*. He is also a senior editor of Touchstone and the American correspondent for the English magazine *New Directions*.

The Many Faces of Christ

(St. Andrew's Trust, Wellington, 1998. Paperback pp. 63)

by James Stuart

Reviewed by Dr G.H. Duggan S.M.



Rev. Dr James Stuart

The title of this booklet correctly identifies its contents. To the question which Christ addressed St Peter: "Who do you say that I am?" many different answers have been given in the two millennia since that date, and Stuart gives an account of these, from the earliest ages down to our own time, ending with his own.

Within the last two centuries we have been given the "liberal Christ" of Schleiermacher. For this German theologian, Christ was "the archetype" of authentic humanity" in relation to God, and his 'God-consciousness' was the truly divine, which is the basis of all religious experience, and, Schleiermacher concludes: "The true nature of religion is neither this idea nor any other, but the immediate consciousness of Deity as he is found in ourselves, and in the world."

In our time, we have had "Christ as the Man for Others" of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. For him, Christ is a non-religious Christ, who alone makes sense for the modern man, who is now spiritually adult, and is called on to live in the world as if God did not exist.

More recently, we have had "Christ the Liberator" of the Peruvian theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez. To understand who Jesus Christ is, we must begin with his preference for the poor, for in Jesus Christ, God has acted in history for the poor and against the rich and powerful. So the subject of his liberation theology is not theology, but liberation. More recently still, we have had the feminist Christ of the radical feminist theologians, a numerous group, including such figures as Rosemary Ruether, Sister Sandra Schneiders I.H.M., and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza. Their Christ is "the prophetic, iconoclastic Christ, who moves among the oppressed and seeks their liberation. Among those groups are women, who have been marginalised by the social, religious, and political arrangements of the time. Jesus calls "for the renunciation and dissolution of the web of status relationships by which societies have defined privilege and unprivilege." These theologians see Jesus as primarily the liberator of women, and read the Gospels in that light, making much for example of the fact that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalen before St. Peter.

Stuart concludes: "The immense variety of images of Jesus illustrates that there is not one Christian answer for all ... to assume that a particular image of Jesus is the true and only image for all time borders on cultural arrogance and historical ignorance... What we are

discovering today is that Jesus is not only one with us, he is one of us. In his humanity, he is as divine, as all of us are: that is his power and his presence among us" (pp. 57-58).

Earlier (p. 18) he had described Jesus as "the charismatic leader of an emancipatory movement that was democratic in character, and radically egalitarian," and this movement was preparing for the day of "the imminent intervention of God." And "when this great judgment took place" it would liberate Jewish peasants from both Roman oppression and the oppression of the Jewish aristocracy and ruling groups." So it would seem that Stuart agrees with Gutierrez, the liberation theologian, regarding Jesus and the nature of his mission.

These multitudinous and very divergent conceptions of Christ call to mind the story of the blind men asked to identify an elephant, each from a partial contact with the animal, none of whom identified it correctly.

The principal source of our information about Christ is the New Testament, especially the four Gospels, but these are supplemented by the Epistles of St. Paul, St. Peter, and St. John.

Josephus and Tacitus add a little to this story, but it is fragmentary, and serves mainly to show that Christ really existed in the reign of Tiberius, in a Palestine governed by Pontius Pilate.

What anyone makes of the Gospels, will depend in large measure on the philosophy he brings to his study of them.

This story is, on the face of it, a very strange one. It is not primarily an account of the teaching of Christ, as the Jesus Seminar scholars assume, but an account of who he is and what he did.

From the Gospels we learn that he is the Son of God who came into the world before the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C. and died an ignominious and very painful death, probably on April 7, in AD 30, and rose bodily from the dead on April 9. For most of his life he was an unknown carpenter in an out-of-the-way village in Galilee - in Chesterton's phrase "the most impressive silence in the history of the world."

One can approach the Gospels with an open mind or with the conviction, which is a reflection of one's philosophy of life, that such notions as "the supernatural order" or "miracles" cannot represent anything but are figments of the imagination, pure myths, dreamed up by mystics in flights of fancy, as they withdrew from conscious apprehension of the real world.

It is clear that Stuart belongs to this latter class. So he does not admit that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God in the sense defined at the Council of Nicaea. "The radical divinisation of Jesus of Nazareth by Paul" he tells us (p. 24)," transformed Jesus into the mythical figure of the cosmic Christ." Indeed, he tells us (p. 33) that "there is no certainty that Jesus ever understood himself as messiah." This is a cavalier dismissal of Christ's words to the woman of Samaria (John 4:26), uttered when there was no danger of such a claim provoking an insurrection. It is a dismissal also of his reply to Caiaphas, in which he claimed much more, in words that evoked from Caiaphas the charge of blasphemy (Mark 14:26).

It is needless to add that Stuart does not admit the bodily resurrection of Jesus as an historical fact... It was, he says "a phenomenon," and "Christianity may have begun with Peter, one of Jesus' followers, who believed that Jesus rose from the dead" (p. 19). He uses the different terms "three days after" in the Gospel of Mark and "on the third day" in the later synoptic gospels of Matthew and Luke to suggest that there is a discrepancy in the accounts, Matthew and Luke correcting Mark (p. 20) whereas it is clear that the terms are interchangeable. St. Matthew, reporting Christ's prophecy of his resurrection, uses one phrase in 12:40, and the other in 16:21 and 20:19.

He writes about the ministry of Jesus: "As far as I can ascertain, Jesus never extended his ministry beyond the confines of his uniquely Galilean context" (p. 19).

So, with one stroke of the pen he consigns to the realm of legend the testimony of John, that Jesus spent some time in Jerusalem debating with Jewish leaders, his presence in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles (October, 29) and the Feast of Dedication (December 29), the cure of the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus, and can declare (p. 14), that Jerusalem is a city in which "Jesus spent only a few weeks of his life."

He asserts also that "Jesus had no intention of starting a church" (p. 19). St. Mathew (16) testifies to the opposite. But Stuart would dismiss that passage as part of the "theological overlay" under which the genuine history is buried. But then he faces the difficulty that very early there was a distinct Christian community, which described itself as "the Church" (Greek ecclesia, Hebrew Qahal) as in Acts 12:3; (and the great historian Harnack puts the writing of Acts in 61 A.D.).

The Donatist crisis, he tells us (p. 32), "gave rise to the ecclesiastical structures which enabled the Church to survive the demise of the Roman empire." The Donatist schism began in 313, and we know from the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, written in 108 A.D., that the churches in such places as Antioch, Ephesus and Smyrna were highly organised, each with one

bishop and bodies of priests and deacons. And, in the years of peace (260-300) that preceded the persecution of Diocletian, bishops held several councils, including the one in which Paul of Samosata, the Bishop of Antioch, was deposed (AD 268).

On p. 27 Stuart tells us that the Nicene Creed, formulated in 325 by the Council of Nicaea., was "the first formulation of what Christians call the doctrine of the Trinity."

There were other creeds, like the Apostles Creed, that were just as Trinitarian in structure as the Nicene, which were much earlier. Moreover, Tertullian, writing about the year 200, describes the formula which

catechumens had to pronounce on being baptised, and this contains a clear affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity. They had to profess their faith in "The Father, Lord of the universe; and in the Saviour, Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate; and in the Holy Spirit, who, through the prophets announced beforehand things relating to Jesus." He added "We are baptised, not once, but thrice, into the three persons severally, in answer to their several names."

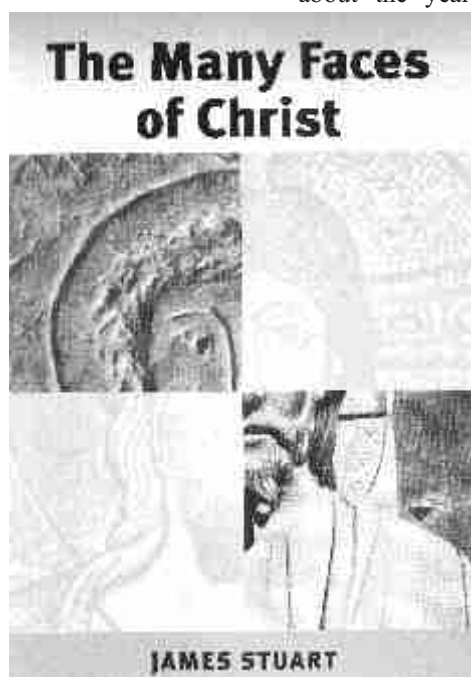
Coming to modern times, Stuart tells us that "since Copernicus, there has been a permanent conflict between modern science and the Christian religion" (p. 45). That there has been such a conflict is a myth, used for propaganda purposes by the militant secularists. A firmly established scientific truth

cannot really contradict a religious truth revealed by God, since he is the author of both orders, the natural and the supernatural. If there is a conflict, it will be because there has been either a misstatement of what God has revealed, or, on the other hand, a scientific guess has been put forward as a certain truth, established with the use of the scientific method.

The great evangelist of the scientific method was Rene Descartes, whom Stuart describes (p. 45) as "a devout Catholic" and a "brilliant scientist." Neither adjective is appropriate, for Descartes did indeed retain his Catholic faith, and did some scientific investigation, but he was not devout, and most of his scientific conclusions proved to be false.

It is true that Descartes' conception of knowledge is "the foundation of all modern thought" but, as Hume grasped, it leads inevitably to total scepticism, for we cannot proceed from "certainty about self" to "certainty about God," or indeed to certainty about the existence of the visible world.

We have indeed "crossed the Rubicon of Cartesian Dualism" but all biologists and psychologists know that this Dualism is false. For man is not two complete substances, quite distinct from each other, a body that is a pure machine, and a mind whose essence is thought, which for Descartes interacted at a point in the pineal



gland, but as Aristotle and St Thomas taught, Man is a single substance, composed of matter and spirit.

It would take too long to demolish his account of Luther's revolution. Enough to say that the piety in which Luther was entrenched in his monastery was not the "traditional Catholic piety of works," but was Pelagian in inspiration. Nor was his preaching in the beginning the result of "disillusionment with the Catholic hierarchy of his time," but sprang from an insight about justification, which he was sure was the work of the Holy Spirit and he could not be told that he was mistaken. On p. 48 we read that Luther "began his translation of the New Testament into German, so that his people could read the Scripture, not in Latin, but in their own tongue, and decide for themselves." This claim of originality has no basis in fact because before Luther there were 18 German editions of the whole Bible, 14 in High German and 4 in Low German.

Stuart accepts the current dating of the Gospels and tells us that Paul's letters "predate the gospels by at least 15 to 20 years." Even with this dating, which can be, and has increasingly been, contested, the time is very short for the formation of that "overlay" of theological myth beneath which the historical facts are buried. Since Reimarus, more than 250 years ago, Rationalist scholars have been digging, in search of the "historical Jesus," so different from the Christ of faith. Without success: and scholars like Drews and Couchoud have adopted the desperate tactic of saying that Jesus never existed as a person on the stage of history, but is a purely mythical figure created to satisfy the religious yearnings of some first century mystics. Even D.F. Strauss never went quite that far.

Giuseppe Ricciotti, sums up his magisterial account of the "Rationalist Interpretations of the Life of Christ" (*The Life of Christ*, pp. 179-210) as follows: "The left wing seems to have consigned the historical Jesus inexorably to the tomb. On one corner of that tomb the mythologists or their successors, will write Nemo; the eschatologists will reject this inscription as a grave offense against history, and in another corner they will write Ignotus; but then both groups will proceed to help each other roll the stone against the entrance to the sepulchre. In happy accord, they will affix their seals to it and then sit down together before the closed door to keep their watch" (p. 216).

Appendix

"There is a scholarly consensus", Stuart writes (p. 5) that Jesus was born in 4 B.C." This is not correct. There is a scholarly consensus that it was earlier, and could have been any year between 5 and 7 B.C. It is certain that it was before the death of Herod the Great. This occurred, Josephus tells us, around the time of Passover in 4 B.C. and Passover in that year fell on April 12. (This was 749 A.U.C. [ab urbe condita] in the Roman calendar. So Dionysius Exiguus, the Scythian monk, who put the birth of Christ in 753 A.U.C. was at least four years out in his calculations).

Christ was born in Bethlehem; St. Justin Martyr, who was born about 100 A.D. in Nablus, about 40 miles

north of Bethlehem, tells us Christ was born in a cave - one of the limestone caves outside the town, often used for stabling animals, such as donkeys. That is why Mary laid him, the new-born babe (Greek *brephos*), in a manger. The Magi worshipped Christ about two years later, when he was a child of about two years (*paidion* in Greek), when the Holy Family were living in a house (Matthew 2.11) in Bethlehem. Valasquez has got it right when, in his painting "The Adoration of the Magi," he portrays Jesus as a child sitting on his Mother's knee.

The Magi told Herod that they had come to Jerusalem because they had seen the star, a sign of the King of the Jews, in the East, and were come to do him homage. What was this star?

William Barclay (*The Gospels and Acts*, Vol. I, pp. 233) quotes Ethelbert Stauffer, a Lutheran scholar, as stating that "the star of Bethlehem is a fact of history", after mentioning the view of the Rationalist Guignebert: "Neither the visit of the Magi, nor the appearance of the miraculous star, nor the massacre of the innocents has any other basis than the imagination of the hagiographer who put the whole story together."

Barclay continues: "There is ample proof that the ancient Babylonian astronomers could calculate the movement and conjunction of the planets in advance. The 'Berlin Table' is a papyrus copy of a list, drawn up in 17 BC, and covering planetary movements until 10 AD. The Star Almanac of Sippar (on some of the latest cuneiform tablets) drew up, a year beforehand, the planetary movements for 7 BC.

In the spring of 7 BC, Jupiter crossed the path of Venus in the sky. And in summer and autumn of the same year, Jupiter and Saturn met in the Sign of the Fishes, a meeting called the *conjunctio magna*, the great meeting, a meeting

which occurs only once in 794 years. There is no doubt at all that the ancient astronomers could and did forecast these meetings.

"So much for the astronomy; but what did astrology make of these meetings? Jupiter was regarded as the star of the world's ruler; the constellation of the Fishes was regarded as the star of the last times; Saturn was regarded as the star of Palestine. So then when Jupiter meets Saturn in the constellation of the Fishes, this means: There will appear in Palestine in this year the ruler of the last days."

So the Magi made their preparations and, I suggest, arrived in Palestine in 5 B.C. There they told their story to Herod the Great and when they failed to return to him, he "gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem who were two years and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi" (Matthew 2:16) (NIV rendering).

So I am inclined to think that 7 BC (746 A.U.C.) is the most likely year in which to place the birth of Christ.

Rev. Dr James Stuart holds a Doctorate in Systematic Theology and Social Ethics from the University of Zurich. He was the John Wesley Lecturer in Systemic Theology at St. John's Trinity Theological College in Auckland. In 1995 he was appointed Minister at St. Andrew's on the Terrace and is currently Chairperson of the St. Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society.

Dr Veitch, I presume?

Dr Veitch, I presume?

Justin Cargill

"Veitch's position as minister untenable."¹ The headlines assigned Bob Shaw's article in the *Evening Post* summarised well the general position taken by *Apologia* in its recent "Focus on James Veitch." Admittedly, some of the articles were focused on Rev. Dr Veitch's claims rather than the issue of whether he should remain in the Church while making them, but the general thrust was to insist that although the curtain is raised the stage is bare.

This issue received a number of responses which is not surprising. Calls for an associate professor in religious studies to seriously reconsider his position, do, after all, create what might be called "the ripple effect."

Crosslink is the newspaper of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Cooperative Venture Churches in New Zealand. Peter Veugelaers contributed an article in which he announced the fact that the *Apologia* issue in question was soon to be published. Drawing from its editorial, he explained that it was taking the position that Dr Veitch had seriously misinterpreted the true Christian position on key doctrines. Veugelaers reported that Dr Veitch had refused to comment.² This was a sensible and honest response on Dr Veitch's part since he had not yet seen anything in print and it meant that, at least on this occasion, he ran little risk of saying anything for which he might be criticised.

Although Dr Veitch had nothing to say, two other prominent members of the Presbyterian Church stepped into the breach. They appear not to have looked where they were going.

A liberal's liberality

It is a little difficult to be critical of Rev. John Murray, a retired minister of the Presbyterian Church and a

friend of Dr Veitch, for his comments were clearly designed to be congenial and conciliatory. He took the view that critiquing was "worthwhile." He also felt that the conservative-liberal debate "will continue until we find a larger unity of understanding where 'liberals' will help 'conservatives' to grapple with the unknown and

Veitch's position as minister 'untenable'

By BOB SHAW

The row between Christian traditionalists and liberals has flared up again with an attack on a Victoria University academic by the Wellington Christian Apologetics Society.

Jim Veitch, senior religious studies lecturer at the university and a Presbyterian minister, has come under fire from the society for a booklet he published in 1997.

The reinterpretation of the Gospels by Dr Veitch in the booklet *The Birth Of Jesus: History Or Myth* makes his position as an ordained minister "quite untenable," says editor David Lane in the latest issue of the society journal, *Apologia*.

He said Dr Veitch had publicly denied the bodily resurrection of Christ and had claimed 80 percent of the sayings attributed to Christ in the Gospels came from his followers.

Dr Veitch responds: "I continue to be puzzled by the intensity with which some Christians set out to try and destroy the integrity of other Christians for openly exploring issues and for attempting to set out alternatives based on the same evidence."

Two hundred copies of the journal, which focuses on Dr Veitch, are being distributed to church groups, universities and theological colleges nationwide.

Among his journal critics, in articles written at various times, are theologians Fr George Duggan, of Silverstream, and Dr Paul Trebilcock, of Dunedin.

Mr Lane said the intention was to address some of the many errors and



James Veitch

flawed reasoning in the booklet.

Dr Veitch considered the articles surprisingly out of date and written within a very narrow understanding of Christianity. He said they illustrated the huge gap between the conservative wing of the Church that wished to hang on to traditional views at any cost and the side that wished to be open about Christianity's origins.

Controversy is not new to Dr Veitch, who caused a stir in 1996 when he said Jesus was not the Son of God but created as divine by the Church. Two years later he upset a local church group when he described Jesus as a wise man not a saviour figure.

The Evening Post, Wednesday 15 March 2000

to enter into the new experience. And 'conservatives' will help 'liberals' keep their feet on the ground on that other part of reality, the experience of daily living."³

Whilst such comments are therefore conciliatory, it is difficult to know what they actually mean.

What is this "new experience" with which liberals can help conservatives grapple? Rev. Murray seems to define it as an experience of grappling with the unknown. But if liberals think they have some experience of grappling with the unknown, it is probably as well that they keep this to themselves. Anyone who claims to have experience grappling with

the unknown is likely to be treated no more seriously than a character from *Jason and the Argonauts*.

Of course, Rev. Murray may simply mean that liberals have learnt to live with the fact that there are many uncertainties and things which we just cannot know. But conservatives also admit to not having all the answers. They acknowledge the presence of mystery, yet when they do they are accused of being anti-reason. Their appeal to faith is rejected as an intellectual cop-out.

What are we to make of the idea that "conservatives" will help 'liberals' keep their feet on the ground on that other part of reality, the experience of

Apologetics Society explores works of James Veitch and John Spong

By Peter Veugelaers

The Wellington Christian Apologetics Society is devoting two issues of *Apologia*, the Society's journal, to critiquing James Veitch and John Spong's scholarship.

In response to Dr Veitch's booklet entitled *The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth* the Society endeavours "to address some of the many errors of fact, faulty presuppositions, flawed reasoning and unscholarly conclusions it contains," stated President of the Society, David H. Lane in his editorial. Mr Lane says the Society "is not aware of any similar critiques of his work" and the booklet was sent to a number of scholars to be critiqued.

The second issue includes a major critique by Mr Lane of John Spong's writings, and this paper was sent to over 2000 church leaders in New Zealand in late 1997, following John Spong's visit here in October that year.

Since 1991, the Society "seeks to work with and serve the Christian churches in Wellington and New Zealand to develop an active interest in Christian apologetics," says Mr Lane.

Mr Lane wants readers of the journals to see that "it can be clearly demonstrated that Veitch and Spong seriously misinterpret the true Christian position on key doctrines such as the bodily resurrection of Christ."

Dr Veitch, Associate Professor of Religious Studies

of Wellington Victoria University, refused to comment.

John Murray, a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa/New Zealand and friend of Dr Veitch, thinks "critiquing" is worthwhile. The conservative and liberal debate "will continue until we find a larger unity of understanding where 'liberals' will help 'conservatives' to grapple with the unknown and to enter into the new experience. And 'conservatives' will help 'liberals' keep their feet on the ground on that other part of reality, the experience of daily living."

Dr James Stuart, minister at St Andrew's on the Terrace, Wellington, says he has "no problem with intelligent, thoughtful conservative scholarship as long as it is open to different points of view and doesn't try to censor and control theological debate and exploration."

He has some reservations, though, "about the apparent motives behind the work of the Apologetics Society. On one hand the Church has often sup-

pressed (theological debate) and has an equally long history of oppression, persecution and intolerance towards new ideas and different ways of understanding."

Dr Stuart sees there are far more important issues such as power, control, sexuality and justice than the so-called conservative and liberal debate.

"While society struggles with immense environmental, bioethical and social dilemmas, the Church in Aotearoa New Zealand majors in minors and minors in majors. The debate will continue as long as this malaise persists in the Church."

While society struggles with immense environmental, bioethical and social dilemmas, the Church in Aotearoa New Zealand majors in minors and minors in majors. The debate will continue as long as this malaise persists in the Church

*- Dr James Stuart,
Minister St Andrew's on the Terrace*

daily living”? If language means anything at all, and let us assume for a moment that it does, it seems we are being told that conservatives can so live in this world that they are able to teach liberals a thing or two about living in it as well. Whatever else we may think of conservative theology, it does not seem to prevent conservatives functioning successfully in this modern world. Somehow their faith is not entirely at odds with what they see about them. It is not irreconcilable with their everyday experience. Such a claim is refreshing, for it contrasts nicely with Dr Veitch’s insistence that people are leaving the Church because its theology is not up-to-date or relevant. For this reason he thinks Christianity should be repackaged for a new age. He believes the Church’s “intellectual credibility has been seriously undermined.”⁴ He feels people are leaving the Church “because the intellectual structure of Christianity is [sic] really gone down the gurgler.”⁵

Whilst on this point, it is probably as well to note another one. Dr Veitch’s insistence that the Church has lost its intellectual credibility is difficult to square with his comment that when the Church has done its rethinking “it will develop a faith that values stories for what they are but not intellectually defend what it holds to be true.”⁶ Does Dr Veitch not intellectually defend the things he holds to be true? He may be concerned that the Church has lost its intellectual credibility but he is not helping matters if he truly believes it is wrong for the Church to intellectually defend itself. That really would be to disengage from reality.

Perhaps Dr Veitch was misquoted. He has certainly shown that he knows better. Elsewhere he has written, “It seems to me that the historical does matter, otherwise Christianity will forever remain a network of socially constructed ideas linked in some kind of loose fashion to an ever-changing image of Jesus used as a surrogate figure for God.”⁷ He speaks of liberal and critical scholars, with whom he would identify himself, “trying to uncover the roots of Christianity in the life of the historical Jesus and as a consequence also facing the re-working of Christian belief so that it is both consistent with its founding figure’s intentions and credible to people living in the twenty-first century.”⁸ Here again, we find Dr Veitch returning to the theme that the Church has lost its credibility. How does he think this credibility can be regained? He suggests the Church should be involved in the intellectual task — the historical does matter, the Church needs to uncover the roots of Christianity, it needs to be faithful to its founder’s intentions, it needs to be credible. So, yes, Dr Veitch does think the Church should be engaged in an intellectual defence. He just thinks there are some things (quite a few things, actually) which the Church should no longer be defending.

To return then to the main point at issue, we have had Rev. Murray telling us that conservatives are in some way capable of helping liberals cope with daily living and we have had Dr Veitch maintaining that conservatives adhere to an outdated, irrelevant theology. At least we can acknowledge Rev. Murray’s attempt to find something conciliatory to say about conservatives, and perhaps we should just leave it at that.

Accusations and reservations

The comments by Dr James Stuart, the minister at St Andrews on the Terrace, were less surprising. His response in regard to *Apologia* was one of reproach rather than rapprochement. He said he had “no problem with intelligent, thoughtful conservative scholarship.”⁹ This does not mean that he is himself an intelligent, thoughtful *conservative* scholar. It just means that he thinks there can be a place for such scholarship as long as it is open to different points of view. This is quite generous, given that intelligent, thoughtful conservative scholarship has steadied the Church through every theological fad and fancy thus far and provides the nourishment upon which liberalism feeds.

Dr Stuart went on to suggest sinister intent on the part of the Apologetics Society. He had reservations. Would that this meant only that he was flying somewhere. His reservations were in fact “about the apparent motives behind the work of the Apologetics Society.” He went on to clarify this and created an image which is rather unpleasant. “On one hand the Church has often suppressed (theological debate) and has an equally long history of oppression, persecution and intolerance towards new ideas and different ways of understanding.” Actually, the Church has also been accused of being judgmental and harsh — an accusation which it seems can now be levelled at Dr Stuart.

Admittedly, the Church (or better, some of its representatives) has made errors of judgment and people have suffered accordingly. But it doesn’t follow that the Church should be robbed of the right of defence. Nor at the risk of appearing small-minded should we pass by the opportunity to point out that liberals are not sainted lilies. Conservatives have their own stories to tell. They have encountered ridicule and intolerance because of their “older” ideas and orthodox ways of thinking. Indeed, it does become a little irksome to conservatives to read of the constant stream of liberal theologians reporting to the media just how silly and old-fashioned conservative ideas really are.

Dr Stuart appears to think in stereotypes, so it will probably be difficult for him to accept that the Apologetics Society does not object to Dr Veitch expressing his opinions. It just doesn’t think he should be expressing these views within the Church. Yes, Dr Stuart may think this is oppressive and intolerant, but does Dr Stuart have no opinions himself? After hearing the complaints of people like Dr Stuart, it becomes difficult to avoid the conclusion that they just do not appear to take theology very seriously. Believe what you wish — well almost. Scratch the surface and you will find Dr Stuart does not tolerate everything. This is precisely why he makes little effort to invite conservatives to his pulpit.

Dr Stuart would of course object to the idea that he does not take his theology seriously. But he then needs to be more careful when he states that “there are far more important issues such as power, control, sexuality and justice than the so-called conservative and liberal debate.” Here we are reminded again of his failure to understand what the debate is all about. It is not too difficult to guess at some of the issues Dr Stuart has in mind but has he not stopped to think that the

worldviews and presuppositions underlying the various theological positions influence our responses to all these issues?

Summing up his position, Dr Stuart said “while society struggles with environmental, bioethical and social dilemmas, the Church in Aotearoa New Zealand majors in minors and minors in majors.” Well, whatever else we may think of this sentiment, it is at least at variance with what Dr Veitch has been trying to do. We can of course assume it was not designed this way, that Dr Stuart was perhaps too busy to think through the implications of what he was saying. The fact is that Dr Veitch does not mind airing his views publicly. He is passionately committed to what he believes to be the truth. He explains that what he says is “the result of thorough research and long pondering.”¹⁰ This does not mean his opinions are correct but it does mean he spends a lot of time thinking about them. It must be hurtful to be told that you are majoring on minors. The fact is of course that he is doing no such thing. He at least recognises the significance of the issues even if others do not.

Catching up with the doctor

So we have heard from Rev. Murray and Rev. Stuart. They at least made their basic positions obvious even if some of their ideas were a little confused. But what of Dr Veitch? Although he refused to comment to *Crosslink*, he later had some things to say. And so we bid a fond farewell to *Crosslink* and return to the pages of the *Evening Post* and to Bob Shaw’s article.

It seems the *Apologia* articles mystified Dr Veitch: “I continue to be puzzled by the intensity with which some Christians set out to try and destroy the integrity of other Christians for openly exploring issues and for attempting to set out alternatives based on the same evidence.”¹¹

So it seems that Dr Veitch was puzzled and there is only one way to interpret his comment. The next time conservatives go shopping they should buy some brains and while they are at it they should shop around for better morals too. Dr Veitch certainly says that some Christians are setting out to destroy the integrity of other Christians. This would seem to imply that they lack integrity themselves. He says some Christians dislike the open exploration of issues. This would seem to imply that they are closed-minded, dogmatic and bigoted. If there were any ambiguity in Dr Veitch’s meaning, it was soon cleared up. He proceeded to say that the articles in *Apologia* “illustrated the huge gap between the conservative wing of the Church that wished to hang on to traditional views at any cost and the side that wished to be open about Christianity’s origins.” In Dr Veitch’s opinion, then, conservative Christians do not think themselves and they do not want others to think either. They are intellectual hillbillies.

The fact is of course that it is not as bad as all this. Such people do not wish a return to the inquisition. Even aside from more moral considerations, it is generally recognised that inquisitions often have a habit of turning back upon the inquisitors anyway. Nor do they wish to conceal the evidence at all cost. They are not this intellectually schizophrenic. It needs to be

reinforced, however, that they do take the view that if people insist on promoting unorthodox views they should not be promoting them in a Church founded on orthodox creeds. And, yes, they do approach this issue with some intensity — very much the same kind of intensity to be found in people like Dr Veitch.

In fact, it is possible that Dr Veitch was not applying himself fully to the *Evening Post* interview anyway. Perhaps he was afraid that a conservative would leap out at him. After all, if they wish to hang on to their traditional views at any cost who knows what they might do? But, yes, it really is true that Dr Veitch was quoted as saying that “some Christians set out to try and destroy the integrity of other Christians...for attempting to set out alternatives based on the same evidence” (emphasis mine).

It is difficult to believe that Dr Veitch would have expressed himself in this way. He was possibly misreported or thinking of other things. The fact is that conservatives and liberals are not using the *same* evidence. If they were they would be drawing the *same* conclusions! Evidence is data which has been interpreted. Conservatives and liberals do not interpret all the data in the *same* way. That’s why they differ! Dr Veitch probably meant to say that liberals are attempting to set out alternatives based on the *same* data. This would make sense but it is still not quite correct. Recall that Dr Veitch and the Jesus Seminar too, for that matter, reject the authenticity of over 80 percent of the sayings attributed to Jesus by the Gospel writers.¹² Whether they are right to do so is another matter. The important point to note is that conservatives and liberals do not use the *same* data — not when liberals have already discounted 80 percent of it!

Employing a ploy?

Dr Veitch is also said to have “considered the [Apologia] articles surprisingly out of date and written within a very narrow understanding of Christianity.” Why is Dr Veitch so surprised? Is this a concession that conservatives are capable of providing up-to-date arguments? We are probably all familiar with this sort of throw-away comment. It is what we might call the ‘dismissal ploy.’ We have probably all encountered this ploy at one time or another. When an individual has neither the time, inclination or facts to become involved in a contentious discussion you will often find them responding that the issue is either “far more complex” or that the opposing arguments are “out-of-date.” This provides a quick psychological victory. What could Dr Veitch say that would possess the minimum number of words with the maximum effect? He could dismiss the arguments as out-of-date. Everyone knows what that means. This does not mean that Dr Veitch is engaging in some kind of verbal artifice. It must be particularly satisfying if you can employ the ‘dismissal ploy’ whilst being yourself convinced that the arguments of your opponents really are out-of-date. The ‘dismissal ploy’ works almost every time — almost every time that is, except when your own arguments are out-of-date.

When Dr Veitch dismisses arguments as “out-of-date,” he no doubt means to suggest that the arguments have now been discredited. But the expression can also mean that they are just no longer

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fashionable. Interestingly enough, Dr Veitch's own views are not fashionable. Dr Veitch is a member of the Jesus Seminar and the Seminar has acknowledged that its views are not widely known outside scholarly circles.¹³ This is one of the things which urges them on in their missionary zeal. Nevertheless, both Dr Veitch and the Seminar promote the view that their theories represent the mainstream of New Testament scholarship. Whether we take this positive stance probably depends in part on whether we are members of the Seminar, for the fact is that the Seminar conceals its own marginality amongst scholars by insisting that all those scholars with whom it disagrees are marginal.

Certainly, however, the views of Dr Veitch and the Seminar are not in fashion, for if they were, most people within the Church would not have to rethink anything. If the Seminar's views are fashionable at all they are fashionable only within the circles in which its members mix.

So what are these views? Dr Veitch rejects the traditional picture of Christian origins as unified. He is convinced that there were a number of early competing "Christianities," each group repackaging its ideas in different ways to reflect who they were or what they wanted to become. Dr Veitch is very keen on the idea of repackaging.¹⁴ It is no doubt because of his belief that the early Christians repackaged their ideas that he feels the Church should be able to do the same thing today.

A photograph of Dr Veitch taken from the *Evening Post* features on the front cover of *Apologia*. He is shown at his desk surrounded by books. If we look closely we can see the kinds of books he has been reading. One book stands out prominently. It is lying on his desk within arm-reach. The book is entitled *Who wrote the New Testament?* Its author is Burton Mack.¹⁵

Off the track with Burton Mack

Mack is professor of New Testament at the School of Theology at Claremont in California. He believes that almost everything we thought we knew about the origins of Christianity has to be radically revised. This is hardly surprising if we are to become convinced as he is that there were a number of distinctive groups of Jesus people in the earliest years. He talks of the "Q community," the "true disciples," the "congregation of Israel," the "Jesus School," the "Jerusalem pillars," and the "Christ cult."

These groups were very different from one another. It would probably not have been helpful or healthy to invite most of them to the same party. In fact, it probably would not be a particularly good idea to invite Burton Mack to a party. Within minutes he would report back with the distressing news that the guests weren't friends at all. Instead they represented half a dozen competing factions all searching for myths to justify their presence.

The suggestion is not that Dr Veitch relies upon Burton Mack. Dr Veitch is old enough to have opinions of his own. The point is that Burton Mack and Jim Veitch are convinced most of us have to radically re-evaluate Christian origins. This again highlights the fact that their position is a marginal one.

There are of course few apparent problems with Dr Veitch's views on Christian origins until we think to read the New Testament documents themselves. There we find that there were indeed some real and important disagreements amongst the first Christians. This should not surprise us. The founding fathers of any group can disagree. They have different backgrounds, experiences and personalities which will produce all sorts of group social and organisational dynamics which will change over time. The New Testament makes this clear. The first Christians possessed different backgrounds and experiences and some had more forceful personalities than others — probably because they were human beings. But the New Testament also makes it clear that there was a central core of agreement amongst the first Christians and they worked their way through the differences — sometimes in spite of their backgrounds and personalities. The apostle Paul seemed to be convinced that the leaders of the Jesus movement held similar ideas. He did not receive from James the right-hand of fellowship (cf. Galatians 2:9) in the context of a meeting in which it was decided that James would preach adherence to the Jewish law whilst he himself would go to the Gentiles with his elaborately spun mythologies about a dying, rising god!

Such a simple appeal to the New Testament documents would not sit well with scholars who have devoted their lives to reconstructing Christian origins based on ideas about the hypothetical beliefs of hypothetical communities which lie behind hypothetical and late Gnostic documents. But of course such ideas can be pursued in good conscience if we dismiss the canonical documents as unreliable and any arguments in their support as out-of-date. The category of myth can then become useful as a means to assign anything which does not fit one's worldview. Anything that does not fit is out-of-date.

Missing links?

It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that Dr Veitch does not derive his conclusions through a particularly rigorous intellectual exercise which sees him weighing up probabilities and sifting various levels of evidence. He may be convinced that he is exploring issues and setting out alternatives but he gives the impression of a man who knows in advance exactly what he will find. This is clear in a number of places.

Dr Veitch tells us for instance that the resurrection was packaged for a Greek environment. The Greeks believed in a world of Greek gods and goddesses. When they heard the story of a rising and dying god who was actually the god of the universe being incarnated, later killed and then resurrected, this was bound to have an appeal. "That's the kind of thing that evidently grabbed people's attention," Dr Veitch says.¹⁶ In his opinion this accounts for the emergence of the belief in the bodily resurrection. Does it indeed? Actually, it would only do so if Jesus did not rise from the dead. The issue really involves matters of methodology and highlights an anti-miraculous bias on Dr Veitch's part. The fact is of course that if we can show that Jesus did not rise from the dead, the appeal to the Greek worldview is illuminating. Until we can show this, the Greek worldview is merely interesting. Of course, Dr Veitch

would respond that we can show that Jesus did not rise bodily from the dead. But the strength of that case is only as strong as its weakest link and some of the links do not even touch!

There is another problem with Dr Veitch's scenario. It's actually a rather simple point — so simple in fact that it seems to have been overlooked. The apostle Paul complains that his preaching of the crucifixion is considered folly by the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23). His experience in preaching the crucifixion to the Gentiles was frustrating. Dr Veitch may insist that the resurrection was packaged for Greek consumption and that such claims grabbed people's attention. But if Paul was so capable of inventing mythologies to accommodate the cultural biases of his audience, why did he not do the same with the crucifixion (cf. for instance, 1 Corinthians 2:2)? Why did he not play down the manner of Jesus' death? It looks very much as if Paul stuck to what he believed to be the facts and then like everyone else, who is passionately committed to the truth, got very upset when he was not believed.

Alternative scenarios?

In another example, Dr Veitch, intrepid explorer that he is, set out in pursuit of alternatives — this time in an article on Easter for the *Evening Post*.¹⁷ But he would appear once again to have left home without his compass and other navigational aids. He tried to explain what really happened at the time and it is very clear from his discussion that he was not there.

Dr Veitch says "the writer of Mark made up the story of the arrest and trial of Jesus and of the manner of his dying." How does Dr Veitch know this? He doesn't. Not if the evidence he produces in support of his assertion is anything to go by. He tells us that "the way Jesus was treated was more in keeping with the way a Roman administration would have treated someone of rank who had committed treason." Dr Veitch says that Jesus was identified as a peasant so "an administrator like Pilate would not have been consulted. The soldiers and their officers, who were responsible for keeping law and order would have dealt with Jesus themselves." Actually, Pilate was also responsible for keeping law and order. That is partly why he was there! Is it likely that he would have left his soldiers to conduct capital cases? And in a place as volatile as Palestine where bungling at any level could have major implications? The procurator needed his fingers on the pulse. If Dr Veitch thinks his scenario is plausible, he would not have made a good procurator. Jesus had attracted a following and the Jewish authorities were creating a stir. What were the underlying reasons? What were the real issues? No Roman officer would have had the confidence to make decisions regarding such matters without first involving Pilate. To pre-empt any decisions Pilate might wish to make regarding such matters was not the way to ensure one's survival. Rome did not tolerate presumptuousness. Nor did its procurators.

Dr Veitch then tells us that Jesus' "body would never have been left for his family or his friends to bury for that would have been to give the Jews a martyr. The Romans were not into giving the Jews any encouragement at all." From this, Dr Veitch concludes

that the Romans would have buried or dumped Jesus' body. But why would the Romans have been so concerned to avoid giving the Jews a martyr? After all, they had just created the conditions for martyrdom by crucifying Jesus in the first place. The Romans must have been a woolly lot indeed. Actually, there are reasonable grounds for concluding that the Romans sometimes handed back the responsibility for burying the bodies of those they crucified and there are reasonable grounds for the claim that the Romans did not take responsibility in Jesus' specific case.

Although the Romans normally kept the bodies of crucified criminals on the cross until they were decayed or devoured by scavengers, the body could be released to relatives or friends.¹⁸ We even have a body to prove it. The remains of a crucified Jew have been recovered in an ossuary in a burial cave in northeast Jerusalem. The man died somewhere between the beginning of the first century AD and AD 70.¹⁹ This find demonstrates that it was permitted for the executed to be claimed by the family and given a proper burial. We cannot know what offence this man committed but literary evidence indicates that release of the bodies of crucified victims depended upon the whim of the authorities — whether, for instance, it was the emperor's birthday. It also, no doubt, depended in part on whether a major offence had been committed.²⁰ Mark makes the passing comment that Joseph of Arimathea "took courage" when he applied to Pilate for the release of Jesus' body (15:43). Joseph was neither a relative or friend and it doubtless took some courage to request Jesus' body. The fact that he was granted the body is consistent with the idea that Pilate may not have been convinced that Jesus was the threat which the Jewish authorities had made him out to be.²¹

In fact, the granting of Jesus' body fits the historical context well. Large numbers of visitors had come up to Jerusalem for the Passover. To avoid unrest amongst them, Pilate may have been happy to grant the release of Jesus' body.²² If Pilate was indeed convinced of Jesus' innocence he might well have been prepared to hand Jesus' body over to a member of the Jewish Council who made a specific request. Pilate was hard but there is no reason to think he would have turned down a request of this nature. And by releasing Jesus' body to a member of the Jewish Council, he was thereby handing responsibility back to the Jews anyway.

Finally, the release of Jesus' body also suits the psychology of the situation well. The return of Jesus' body is exactly what we might expect Pilate to do under the circumstances. The Jewish authorities had tried to force Pilate's hand. Pilate was not the sort to forget the way they had played the Caesar card: "If you release this man you are not a friend of Caesars" (John 19:12). He retaliated by placing the words "King of the Jews" above Jesus' head. The Gospels indicate that Pilate had already been referring to Jesus as "King of the Jews" throughout the trial. The Jewish authorities had rejected this and called for his crucifixion. Pilate would have taken great pleasure in placing these words over Jesus' head. It would have been a further act of defiance, an exertion of independence and a further humiliation of the Jewish authorities if he were to permit Jesus' body

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to be properly buried by a member of their own Council!²³

The release of Jesus' body is perfectly plausible. Dr Veitch may wish to object but if the evidence he provides is the only evidence he has, the suspicion is that he objects because he begins with the *a priori* assumption that it simply could not have happened that way. Dr Veitch "knows" Mark's gospel is fiction so almost everything Mark records is fiction. It is very compelling logic for those who do not wish to be convinced by the facts because their mind is already made up.

Confounding us further, Dr Veitch tells us that Jesus' body "would have been disposed of by the Romans: privately buried in an unmarked grave, thrown into a lime pit or tossed into a refuse dump." He exhausts almost all the options except the one option which Mark gives us. Dr Veitch certainly shows that he can set out alternatives! In regard to the Romans' motives behind the disposal of Jesus' body, he adds, "This would have been the ultimate insult to the family. Without a body and a grave it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to grieve." This is quite incredible really. Dr Veitch might like to tell this to those whose sons or brothers lie buried in unmarked graves on the other side of the world. And if he manages to convince them that their grief is extremely difficult or impossible, he could try his argument on those who have lost loved ones at sea. It is difficult to know what Dr Veitch is thinking unless he is so committed to discrediting the Gospel narratives that he just isn't thinking clearly.

Dr Veitch could of course possibly be thinking of grief in a technical sense. The absence of the body meant it was difficult or impossible for Jews to engage in the whole ritualistic process surrounding death which involved anointing of the body and so on. But if this is what Dr Veitch has in mind then, such grief would not merely have been extremely difficult. If they did not have the body it would indeed have been impossible. But it is unlikely that the Romans would have been so concerned with causing "ultimate insult" to Jesus' family unless they were first convinced that Jesus was really a threat and again, given that the Romans were sometimes prepared to hand over the bodies of criminals who had been crucified, there is no reason to discount the Gospel accounts.

Continuing his pursuit of alternatives, Dr Veitch says there are no resurrection stories in Mark because "that would have spoilt Mark's story." He suggests that Mark wishes to conclude in a way that leaves his readers thoughtful and uncertain. His intent is "to carry the listener to the end of the story and to then leave them up in the air wondering what the real punchline might be." Sometimes it helps to read the text. Mark tells us that the women enter the tomb and are told by a young man dressed in a white robe, "He has risen, he is not here." They are directed to the place where Jesus' body had been lain, and then told they are to see Jesus in Galilee (16:5-7). That's clear enough, isn't it? Yes, there are no appearance stories as such,²⁴ but Mark clearly subscribes to the belief that Jesus had conquered death. He had been raised from the dead and his tomb was left empty. Dr Veitch's conclusion is that Mark's purpose

was to leave his listeners uncertain but the only thing uncertain is Dr Veitch's conclusion.

It is difficult to see how Dr Veitch could squeeze so many non sequiturs and so much special pleading into so few words. His arguments are so weak they should not be allowed out of the house. And yet Dr Veitch is no fool. Why then the errors of logic, the simple mistakes in reasoning? The suspicion is that Dr Veitch has become so locked into his framework that he can no longer see past the door frame.

Further adventures with the doctor

In yet another example, Dr Veitch attempts to explore issues and set out alternatives and once again he disappoints. Here, he attempts to maintain that the actual circumstances of Jesus' birth were unknown. How does he know this? He says the writers of Luke and Matthew present stories which are "incompatible and point in very different directions."²⁵ Let us suppose, however, that the writers had different points to make and selected from the *same* or *similar* data only those details which they required, could this not help to explain the "different directions"? And if we were predisposed to reject the writer's testimony may we not conclude that "different directions" are in fact "incompatible" ones? Is Dr Veitch so predisposed? There are good grounds for concluding that he is. How else can we understand his claim that if the writers are incompatible this means the circumstances of Jesus' birth were unknown? The most we could say with confidence is that the origin of Jesus' birth was unknown to *one* of the writers. How can we justify the conclusion that it was unknown to them *both*? If we were to argue that because two writers are incompatible neither has access to the facts, we would have to conclude that everything Dr Veitch says is wrong as long as we can find someone who holds views incompatible with his own.

These are basic errors of methodology. Dr Veitch compounds them by asserting that neither Mark nor John, the earliest and last of the four Gospels, contain birth stories. He tells us this is "an omission which suggests the actual circumstances of the birth of Jesus are missing." No it doesn't. The most this need suggest is that the writers omit the birth stories! Dr Veitch is going to extraordinary lengths to prove that the Gospel writers have no real knowledge of what they are writing about. How we can derive any conclusions from the fact that both the *first* and *last* Gospels omit the birth stories as if there is some significance in their first and last status, is beyond comprehension. Only when we begin with the assumption that the stories are unhistorical are we going to employ arguments which read between the lines and then assert that the lines themselves aren't really there. Of course, if either the first or the last Gospel recounted a birth story similar or otherwise to that provided by Matthew or Luke, Dr Veitch would probably cite this as evidence that the actual circumstances of Jesus' birth were unknown!

In this game the critics always win. The critics win over historical data. The critics win over sound methodology. The critics win over logic. But in reality the victory is an unreal one, achieved at an enormous cost. It is of little value in this world and it will be of no value in the next.

Endnotes

- ¹ Bob Shaw. "Veitch's position as minister 'untenable.'" *The Evening Post*, Wednesday 15th March 2000, 10.
- ² Peter Veugelaers. "Apologetics Society explores works of James Veitch and John Spong." *Crosslink* March (2000). Also available online: <http://www.crosslink.org.nz/March2000/FEATURES/f4.htm>
- ³ John Murray. Quoted in Veugelaers.
- ⁴ James Veitch. Quoted in Giles Wilson. "Breaking the Faith." *The Dominion*, Saturday 7th December 1996, 18.
- ⁵ James Veitch. Interview by Mark Sainsbury. *Holmes Show*, Television New Zealand. Friday April 10th 1998. Edited transcript in *Apologia* 7, no. 1 (2000): 9
- ⁶ James Veitch. Quoted in Wilson.
- ⁷ James Veitch. "Patrolling the right path: Tom Wright's figure of Jesus." *Forum*, new series 1, no.2 (1998): 356.
- ⁸ Veitch, p.379.
- ⁹ James Stuart. Quoted in Veugelaers.
- ¹⁰ James Veitch. Quoted in Wilson.
- ¹¹ James Veitch. Quoted in Shaw.
- ¹² See, for instance, *The five gospels: The search for the authentic words of Jesus: New translation and commentary*, eds. Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar (New York: Macmillan, 1993).
- ¹³ Robert Funk. "The issue of Jesus." *Forum* 1 (1985): 8. The Jesus seminar has called its translation of the Gospels, *The complete Gospels: Annotated scholar's version*. This tends to suggest that all other translations are the work of non-scholars. It's quite embarrassing, really.
- ¹⁴ Veitch, interview.
- ¹⁵ Burton L. Mack. *Who wrote the New Testament: The making of the Christian myth* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995).
- ¹⁶ Veitch, interview.
- ¹⁷ James Veitch. "Passion, violence, death, Easter." *The Evening Post*, Saturday 22nd April 2000, 11.
- ¹⁸ William Lane Craig. *Assessing the New Testament evidence for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus*. Studies in the Bible and early Christianity, 16 (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1989), p.174; Gerd Ludemann. *The resurrection of Jesus: History, experience, theology* (London: SCM, 1994), p.44; Stanley E. Porter. "Joseph of Arimathea." *The Anchor Bible dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:972.
- ¹⁹ V. Tzaferis. "Jewish tombs at and near Giv'at ha-Mivtar, Jerusalem." *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970): 31. Tzaferis concludes, "It is possible therefore to place this crucifixion between the start of the first century and somewhere just before the outcome of the first Jewish revolt" (p.31). For an analysis of the remains of the crucified man, see N. Haas. "Anthropological observations on the skeletal remains from Giv'at ha-Mivtar." *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970): 49–59. Ludemann objects to the attempt to find an analogy between the burial of this man in an ossuary and the burial of Jesus on the grounds that in the one case we have the burial of bones in an ossuary while in Jesus' case we have the burial of a corpse. Ludemann adds that neither Jesus' family nor disciples were interested in Jesus' body so "it is hardly conceivable that they could have been informed about the resting place of the corpse, so as later to be able to bury at least the bones" (p.44). Ludemann misunderstands the point. The point is that if it was possible for the bones of a crucified man to be retrieved and later placed in an ossuary, the body itself must initially have been buried in a place both locatable and accessible. It could not have been thrown in a common burial pit or destroyed. This means that although Jesus was crucified it does not follow for this reason that his body was dumped by the Romans. Ludemann's comments about the family's lack of interest in the burial are misplaced. As it is, he later says "I rule out as a historical possibility for the Judaism of the time that Jesus was buried by women disciples" (p.207, n.200) and the fact that Jesus was not buried by his own male disciples can be accounted for on very simple grounds — they were terrified and had fled. The Gospels all agree that this is how they responded and under the circumstances their response makes sense. Ludemann's response does not.
- ²⁰ See Craig, and Ludemann, p.206, n.193 for references.
- ²¹ Craig.
- ²² Ludemann, p.44.
- ²³ Admittedly, this scenario depends on the assumption that the canonical Gospels are substantially historical and tell things as they basically were. This means that each Gospel provides details which can throw light on the others. It is interesting to note that when such an assumption is made and the varying details are brought together, a coherent picture emerges. Funny that. It is almost as if each Gospel writer was telling it like it was. For a detailed discussion of the dynamics between Pilate and the Jewish authorities, see James Patrick Holding. "The trial on trial: A defense of the authenticity of the trial narratives" [4 April 1998]. Tekton Apologetics Ministries. Available: http://www.tektonics.org/tekton_02_03_01.html [20 August 2000].
- ²⁴ The last 12 verses of Mark (16:9-20) do describe resurrection appearances but these verses constitute one of the most disputed textual problems in the New Testament. Since they do not support Dr Veitch's point it is not surprising that he would reject their Markan authorship. No matter. Dr Veitch's case is not supported by the verses he does accept.
- ²⁵ James Veitch. "Anyone for honesty at Christmas?" *The Evening Post*, Thursday 24th December 1998, 13. Reprinted in *Apologia* 7 no.1 (2000): 10.

Review of Apologia Vol. 7(1) 2000 - "Focus on James Veitch"

by Noel Cheer

Editor, Sea of Faith Network NZ Newsletter

No. 36, May 2000, pages 6-9



Noel Cheer

"Faith Seeking Understanding"

Apologia is the journal of the Wellington [New Zealand] Christian Apologetics Society (Inc.). No issues were published in either 1998 or 1999 but this comprehensive issue was published early in the year 2000 with the overall title "Focus on James Veitch". The President of the Society and also the journal editor, David Lane, may be known to readers as the scourge of John Spong during his 1997 visit. The next issue of the Journal will "focus on John Spong". Their website is at

www.christian-apologetics.org

It is perhaps significant that the motto "Fides quarens intellectum" [faith seeking understanding] appears on the cover. It is usually attributed to Anselm (1033-1109) and may be justifiably applied to the writings of Jim Veitch - particularly his *The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth?* (St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society 1997) which is specifically attacked in this issue of the Journal. But, to be fair, we should also apply it to the overall motive of the attackers. So different are the "understandings" of Veitch and his critics that we can observe that Christian faith looks no nearer finding consensus.

Editorial

The Editorial takes the opportunity to lash out at the "so-called" Jesus Seminar, of which Jim Veitch is a Fellow. The epithet, "so-called", characterises the

Editor's dislike of the Jesus Seminar. But, at this point his main target is Veitch's approval of a novel (*Two Thousand Years Later: A Novel* by Peter Longley) which supports Veitch's theory of Jesus' being the result of Mary having been raped by a Roman soldier. Veitch is criticised, not so much for this sordid speculation but for his rejection of the literal "Virginal conception of Christ as taught in the Scriptures and by the Church".

A glance at the Society's Statement of Belief inside the front cover shows their acceptance of, inter alia, "innerancy of the Bible"; "the full divinity and humanity of the Son"; "the universal guilt [note that this is not just a propensity for sin - you're guilty!] of mankind since the Fall"; "the sacrificial death on the Cross (as Representative, Substitute, Victor etc.) of the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God"; "the bodily ... resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead understood to be an actual event ...". So, it is easy to displease the Society, as indeed Veitch "and his mentor Lloyd Geering" have done ... and often.

The Editorial touches on what this reviewer takes to be a central problem of traditional Christianity - but from the opposite pole from which Veitch, and members of the Sea of Faith, might approach it.

How can ordained clergy (of whom Veitch is one) continue to preach and draw a stipend while departing from "the faith once delivered to the saints"?

Their Editor observes: "Financially suckled by their churches, such ministers, hucksters of so-called "modernity" [post-Modernity would be more appropriate!] lack the backbone to abandon the Church and its teachings and go and join the Skeptics Society ..."

It is perhaps a measure of his lack of appreciation of the views of Veitch and members of the SoF that the editor cannot credit them with a sincere attempt to develop Christianity in directions that embody new understandings resulting from, not only Biblical scholarship but also from the human sciences such as psychology, sociology and anthropology.

The remainder of the Editorial is given over to explaining that "our purpose in putting together this issue ... dealing with Rev. Dr Jim Veitch's booklet is to address some of the many errors of fact, faulty presuppositions, flawed reasoning and unscholarly conclusions [which] it contains."

Biography

A biographical article about Jim Veitch follows. Apart from the odd sniping comment (the reference again to Lloyd Geering as Veitch's "mentor" seems to be offered in that spirit) it is a useful background piece.

Fruchtenbaum

Criticism, in the academic sense, starts with the article In Critique of "The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth?" by James Veitch by Arnold Fruchtenbaum Th.M., Ph.D., President, Ariel Ministries, Tustin, California.

In his first paragraph he raises a criticism that re-appears several times in this Journal; that Veitch's footnotes quote the writings of "other liberal theologians" rather than "actual historical documents". There are 71 footnote [s] (actually endnotes) which account for 11 of the 28 pages. Given their smaller typeface they would account for more than 40% of the text of [the] booklet. It must be left to the reader to decide whether this is a fair criticism, given that the purpose of a footnote is only sometimes to demonstrate that the main text is "true". Often a footnote is an amplification of the main text or is an interesting tangent.

More to the point, the second paragraph notes that Veitch "writes his article with certain presuppositions that he accepts as fact", as though Veitch were the only one who did. The Journal's "presuppositions" as set out in their Statement of Belief and, as one would expect, Veitch's do not coincide.

Fruchtenbaum grapples with the distinction between "myth" and "history" with "myth" coming out the loser ("only myths"). This is similar to the way that myth, as a category of expression, loses out badly in the hands of the tabloid press. One would hope that a "Th.M" and "Ph.D" had a more sensitive appreciation of the interrelationship of myth and history. He rightly discerns though, that in Veitch's account of myth, a story involving supernatural agents or events automatically consigns it to "myth". Of course that doesn't always preclude an historical substrate - only its evaluation need to be mythical.

The remaining disagreements that Fruchtenbaum has with Veitch can be, perhaps simplistically, accounted for by his accepting the Gospels at face value: that they are accurate, objective accounts of what happened. It is, of course, the thesis of The Jesus Seminar, Jim Veitch and many others that this has been adequately demonstrated not to be the case. Whatever value the Gospels have, it does not lie in their authenticity.

Duggan

There follows a critique by Rev. Dr George Duggan S.M. After teaching philosophy and acting as rector of a university hall and Marist tertianship, Dr Duggan is living in retirement at St. Patrick's College, Wellington from where he frequently writes Letters to the Editor of Wellington's "Evening Post" newspaper.

He is unimpressed, almost explosively so, by Veitch's booklet. "Although the text is buttressed by footnotes to give the semblance of a scholarly work, [the lack of footnotes might also have been a ground for disapproval!] it is incredibly shoddy." Dr Duggan himself adopts the practice that Jim Veitch was accused of by the Editor. Duggan too quotes his favourite sources (Stanley Jaki; Martin Gengel; B.F. Westcott; Ricciotti; W.M. Ramsey; E. Meyer; A.N. Sherwin-White; W.H.C. Frend; William Barclay; John Chapman; W.R. Farmer; A.H.N. Green-Armytage; Renan; C.H. Dodd; Peter F. Ellis; John A.T. Robinson; J.W. Wenham; C.C. Torrey; ... and more). Argument must surely consist in more than stacking quotations and paraphrases.

Like Fruchtenbaum's dismissal of "myth", Duggan disvalues "metaphor" and will not let Veitch get away with "God is the metaphor ..." To Duggan, "metaphor" appears as "no more than a figure of speech": not what Veitch meant by metaphor at all. It was therefore inevitable that Duggan would insist on miracles (as God's intervention) over against Veitch's requirement to put aside the miraculous elements of the Gospel stories. Central to much of The Jesus Seminar's tentative conclusions (their methodology precludes setting things in concrete) is that Jesus neither claimed Messiahship nor set up an ongoing church organisation. They (and Veitch) derive that from their scholarship, the details of which are beyond the scope of this review. Duggan's response is to quote the Gospels, accepting them at face value. This is, of course, consistent with the Statement of Beliefs of the Society but it is the end of any dialogue between the Society and anybody who doubts the face-value authenticity of the NT material. In passing, one has to wonder how many Christians would identify with the sternly literalistic apologetics of the Society. According to Duggan, "rationalist exegesis of the New Testament ... is a parasitic growth ..."

Neither does Duggan separate out the contribution made by the Apostle Paul to the growing Jesus Christ story. It all goes in one supposedly homogeneous and coherent story - Epistles and Gospels - ignoring the scholarship that shows the spin-doctoring of the Gospel writers and the Cosmic Christ fantasy of Paul. And, of course, Veitch and Duggan could not agree on the literalness of the virgin birth, or even on which Gospel came first: Mark (Veitch) or Matthew (Duggan), or on the dating of the NT books. Duggan ends with a tasteless assertion that such scholarship as Veitch, and many others are engaged in, is a form of corruption.

Tovey

By contrast, Dr Derek Tovey's "response" is of much milder tone. He sees the book as suffering from its provenance - it was a lecture with footnotes added later - leading he says, to some over-simplification.

In developing his argument, Tovey observes "we cannot read back into the New Testament later Chalcedonian formulations". This reviewer's discomfort with the Journal arises mostly from that quarter. It does seem that *Apologia's* standpoint is that of a matured view of Jesus - his teachings and his times - that would not have been available in the first century. It [is] like reading the last page of the novel first, then

starting on page one with a headful of developed outcomes.

But Tovey's "style" is mid-way between that of Veitch and that of the Society - at least he admits of the possibility of debate over the gospel "records". He argues persuasively that not only is arriving at the historical truth difficult because of the paucity of material but that, on the way, our own preference guide us is what evidence seems more or less credible. But this is, mercifully, a far cry from Dr Duggan's biblical literalism.

Marshall

A very short response follows, by Chris Marshall, PhD, Head of NT Studies, Bible College of New Zealand. He accuses Veitch of unreasonable optimism over the objectivity of "history" and suggests that his (Veitch's) reading "is itself driven by an ideological agenda - to meet the intellectual needs of modern skeptical Europeans."

Trebilco

Rev. Dr Paul Trebilco, Associate Professor of NT Studies at the University of Otago is the last contributor directly addressing Veitch's book. He finds much of the booklet "interesting and helpful". He comes nearest to agreeing with Veitch: "if belief in Jesus' divinity involved completely overlaying the historical Jesus with something that was totally alien to him, then Veitch has a point."

This is Spong's point too, when he talks of the "interpretative framework of the first century" and The Jesus Seminar's distinction between the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus. Trebilco puts the

debate into the correct arena - not, as with Duggan, simple conformity with the NT record, but to what degree the NT writers were (in their own minds) being literal and to what degree they were expressing in reverential terms their admiration for the man who had changed their lives. Or, more accurately if you allow Veitch's point than none of the Gospel's was written by the disciples whose names they bear, for the man who had inspired 40 to 70 years of fruitful reflection before his story came to be written down for a series of specialised readerships.

Conclusion

Another supporting item, not in the section dealing with Veitch, is what this reviewer can only describe as a defiantly literalistic account of The Bodily Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ by Dr Stephen J. Scott-Pearson. The atmosphere is a long way from the carefully considered phraseology of Tovey and Trebilco.

This contrast, not to be mistaken for genuine debate, is a good example of the disarray that "mainline" Christians find themselves in. Do they, with Lane, Duggan and Scott-Pearson, bid the Rock of Ages cleave for them so that they can have an assured toe-hold on eternity, or do they, with Tovey and Trebilco (even if timidly in comparison with Veitch, Geering, Cupitt, Funk and Spong) engage their intellects and seek understanding for their faith - even at the cost of uncertainty?

Noel Cheer

<http://www.futuresgroup.org.nz/sof.html>

Letters to the Editor (cont. from page 3)

16 March 2000

Dear David

Thank you for sending me a copy of *Apologia* concerning James Veitch. I look forward to reading what the contributors have to say.

My kind regards
The Right Reverend Dr Thomas J. Brown
Bishop of Wellington

23 March 2000

Dear David

Your letter of 21 March and the copy of "Apologia" are very much appreciated. It is good to have the critique of Dr Jim Veitch's writings. I'll read the material with real interest.

With all warm best wishes for the success of the Society's activities.

Yours sincerely in Christ Jesus
Cardinal Thomas Williams
Archbishop of Wellington

29 March 2000

Dear David

I am writing to say thank you for sending me a copy of *Apologia*. At this stage I have not read it in its entirety; however, that which I have, I have found to be very enlightening. It is great that as a society you will respond to and challenge those who set themselves up (or are set) as "authorities" on Christian thought and practice. I encourage you to keep up the good work.

May God richly bless you all.

Pastor Paul Cargill
Northwest New Life Church
Christchurch

Response to Noel Cheer

by David H. Lane

(Editor, Apologia)

Noel Cheer, editor of the *Sea of Faith (NZ) Newsletter* is to be commended for providing a detailed response to the latest issue of *Apologia* (2000; Vol. 7 [1]) entitled "Focus on James Veitch".

He is quick to dismiss those who accept the Gospel accounts as authentic records of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, as not engaging their intellects and as those whose faith is not seeking understanding (contra Anselm). He accuses contributors Drs Fruchtenbaum, Duggan, Scott-Pearson and the editor, of clinging to a threadbare "sternly literalistic apologetics" in order to gain a "toe-hold on eternity". He argues that Rev. Dr Jim Veitch's approach, in contrast, particularly his *Birth of Jesus* booklet, indicates that he is indeed one to whom Anselm's words "faith seeking understanding" does apply, because he at least engages his intellect (in implied contrast to *Apologia* contributors?). In an apparent about-face he then concedes that, "to be fair", the Society's critique of Veitch also exemplifies Anselm's approach, which is the motto of the Society.

He refers to Veitch's position as being "attacked" in the editorial and by the journal contributors and accuses the editor of "lash[ing] out at the Jesus Seminar" (because the editor refers to it as the "so-called" Jesus-Seminar) and "sniping" at Veitch because the editor refers to Lloyd Geering as Veitch's "mentor".

The latter claim appears to be unjustified, given that sympathetic journalists and others, such as Bob Shaw of the *Evening Post*, have frequently used the term "mentor" to characterise the Veitch-Geering relationship. It is well known that much of Veitch's public notoriety (if any) has come about through his deliberate attempt to advance the liberal cause of Geering, his Masters thesis supervisor and the one he has willingly played "understudy" to for much of his academic life at Victoria University. Furthermore, Veitch's regular (and for some tiresome and repetitious) public recounting of the so-called Geering-heresy trial details in lectures and in the media (he has written a major work on the subject - still as yet unpublished), underlines the link in the minds of the public. (It is noteworthy that Bishop John Spong, whose views Cheer likens to Veitch's, refers warmly to the late John A.T. Robinson in his *autobiography Here I Stand* (2000), as his "mentor", crediting his writings and thinking as having been extremely influential in his own 'spiritual' journey).

It should be noted that Veitch has regularly "attacked" the key doctrines of the Christian faith and "sniped" at the sincerely held beliefs of orthodox Christians, not only in *The Birth of Jesus*, but in his public lectures and in the media. It seems that such emotive terms as "attacking" and "sniping" are deemed not appropriate to use when describing Veitch who, like

the Jesus Seminar scholars, writes Cheer, is only trying "to develop Christianity in directions that embody new understandings resulting from, not only Biblical scholarship, but also from the human sciences such as psychology, sociology and anthropology". The fact that conservative scholars like Dr Fruchtenbaum, a Messianic Jewish believer with an encyclopaedic knowledge of Hebrew scholarship, traditions, language and so on, also seeks to sincerely arrive at a true understanding of the Scriptures and his Christian faith, is not even taken into account by such question-begging approaches. Again, the fact that world authorities in Semitic languages, New Testament studies, archaeology, science and other fields, have become convinced of the authenticity of the Gospel accounts, while engaging their intellects in their research, risks appearing of little consequence to Cheer. The Wellington Christian Apologetics Society has regularly featured such scholars over the years in its programmes of seminars, lectures and publications.

The work of such scholars is flawed however, in Cheer's view, because they have failed to adopt the 'vastly superior' "methodology" of the Jesus Seminar, adopted also by Veitch (a Seminar Fellow), Funk, Geering, Cupitt and Spong, one which "precludes setting things in concrete". But let us pause. Cheer concedes that the Jesus Seminar participants find nothing profitable in the view that the Gospel accounts are authentic or that supernatural intervention is a possibility: this is ruled out a priori. Dr Fruchtenbaum points out this dismissive approach, central to Veitch's biased analysis, in which unstated presuppositions are accepted as fact. However, Cheer suggests that his criticism of Veitch's presuppositions fails because he (Fruchtenbaum) writes (says Cheer) "as though Veitch were the only one to do so" [i.e. to employ presuppositions. Emphasis added]. The real point is, however, that Veitch's presuppositions, like those of many liberals, are (generally) unstated. Fruchtenbaum, having disclosed his own presuppositions up front, discloses Veitch's hidden presuppositions by analysing his treatment and application of the term "myth" to the Gospel accounts.

Cheer seeks to contrast the overly "literalistic" approach to apologetics of Drs Fruchtenbaum, Duggan and Scott-Pearson, with that of the contributions from Drs Tovey and Trebilco. He states that the latter group go as far as adopting an approach closer ("even if timidly in comparison") to that of Veitch, Funk, Cupitt, Spong and Geering. But it appears that such a suggestion would rather cause a theological moderate to conclude that someone advancing the idea of such unlikely bedfellows, betrayed only a limited grasp of the theological issues at stake and the nature and size of

the theological chasm that divides Tovey and Trebilco from the views of Veitch et al.

Cheer quotes Trebilco: "... if belief in Jesus' divinity involved completely overlaying the historical Jesus with something that was totally alien to him, then Veitch has a point" (emphasis added). It is astounding that he draws encouragement from this statement, taking it to mean that Trebilco is siding with Veitch (albeit "timidly") to some degree. On the contrary (note the word "if"), Trebilco is clearly not suggesting that there is any inconsistency between the "historical Jesus" presented in the Gospels and the "Christ of faith" proclaimed by the Apostle Paul. Rather, he sees a consistency between the two, while acknowledging a development and progression - the understanding of the divine nature of the Son of God is enlarged in meaning to its cosmic and universal dimensions in later writings. Trebilco makes it very clear that Veitch has not established his point, for he writes:

Yet why was it that the early Christians so quickly spoke of Jesus in language previously reserved for God? It is unlikely that this was because of the influence or imposition of outside factors, such as Hellenistic religions, or mystery cults, and so on [as Veitch and the Jesus Seminar argue], since these developments took place within a very short time when most Christians were Jews. The reasons for this development lie rather, amongst other factors, in the impact of the life and ministry of Jesus himself, in his addressing God as Abba, in the implicit claims he made as outlined above, in the resurrection as the vindication of Jesus' ministry, and in the presence of the risen Lord in their midst. This means that rather than speaking about the early Church "creating" a divine Jesus [as Veitch claims], we would be better to speak of the early Christians making explicit what was implicit about Jesus, or developing what was there in embryonic form from the beginning" (p. 3. Emphasis added)

Cheer has surely engaged in wishful thinking regarding Trebilco's position. He also disappoints with an uncharacteristic apparent sneer at the "spin-doctoring of the Gospel writers" and seems to betray a sad refusal to engage with the sublime insights of the Apostle Paul's position when he refers to the "Cosmic Christ fantasy". Two things here. There is no shortage of undeniably orthodox thinkers, such as Austin Farrer, who can combine quite radical New Testament scholarship with a full blooded supernaturalistic faith. None of these, however, would dream of using the impertinent slur of "spin doctoring". Secondly, the suggestion of a Paul who needlessly expands upon a supposed "simple Gospel of Jesus" was massively discredited by the time of Chesterton, and more cautious liberals were explicitly distancing themselves in the 'seventies of the past century from this Nineteenth Century article of unreconstructed liberalism in the same way they were retreating from

claims that the Hittites never existed or that writing was unknown in the time of Moses.

The Cosmic Christ, rightly understood, provides the path upwards out of the sterile see-sawing between a short-sighted literalism on the one hand and a sterile and restless radicalism on the other, but one is sad to observe Mr Cheer seeming to block off that upward path in advance through misguided adherence to discredited Hegelian speculations. Conservative Christian scholars have always recognised the development process referred to by Trebilco, but find no evidence that a belief in the "divine nature" of Jesus was somehow overlaid on the "historical Jesus" as something "totally alien to him" (as Cheer puts it), by the writers of the Gospels and other New Testament books, as the Jesus Seminar scholars maintain. Nor should a development process be uncritically assumed. This assumption was behind much of the insistence that the Johannine Prologue, for example, was far too lofty and "developed" to be from John, and "had" to have been a later addition by other authors. A massive computer study confirmed single authorship of John's Gospel, and obliged an embarrassing choice between computer study and developmental dogma. Mr Cheer cannot, of course, resist a dig at the Chalcedonian formulations, yet as Karl Barth points out:

"To surrender the absolute and essential Godhead of Jesus Christ amounts to surrendering God himself. Such is the meaning of the early Church's struggles. Modern theologians who mock the people of Constantinople disputing on whether Jesus Christ is analogous to God or God himself show themselves more stupid than they. For here is the knot of the question." (...) "The criticism levelled against orthodoxy during the past two centuries is quite simply barbarian: it does not even know what it is talking about. Useless complication and subtlety were not shown by those ancient fellows but by the modern savants who did not try to understand and who did not understand."¹

Dogmatic development is a necessary and organic development as the fires of the original Apostolic revelation grow colder, as it were, and things implicit and apparent to all originally need to be codified for the many. Mr Cheer can presumably see the foolishness of the various sects which seek a primitive Christianity supposedly free from Chalcedonian "Churchly" overlay, but seems strangely blind to the fact that the similar postmodernist project runs an even greater risk of finding only its own reflection. Particularly with such "soft" pseudosciences as sociology in play, anachronistic reading in of meanings absent from Scriptural texts is almost inevitable. Interestingly, Drs Trebilco and Tovey specifically endorse the Statement of Faith adopted by the Wellington Christian Apologetics Society with regard to the full divinity of Jesus Christ, a belief rejected by Cheer, Veitch, Geering, Spong, Cupitt, Funk and other liberals.

¹ Karl Barth, *The Faith of the Church* (Collins Fontana pbk, 1960, First British Edition), pp 62-63

Cheer suggests that the editor has little appreciation of the Sea of Faith members' "sincere attempt" to "develop Christianity in directions that embody understanding...". Sincerity is not the question here. The Dolly Pond Church of God with Signs Following² doubtless holds its beliefs in all sincerity, but that should not and would not prevent either Mr Cheer or *Apologia* from criticism of them in both senses of the word. But the editor does not address himself to the beliefs of Sea of Faith. While Cheer may feel that an "attack" on Veitch must be redressed by Sea of Faith, the aim of this issue of *Apologia* is clearly stated: it is a critique of Jim Veitch's booklet. While Cheer is free to sincerely believe and promote the view that Veitch is developing Christianity in the directions he outlines, others have the right to post a warning and say "this teaching is outside the sphere of true Christian faith" and provide the evidence. Once the major tenets of a faith have been abandoned by a minister within the Christian Church and propagated publicly, a response is called for from the Christian community and especially the professing Church.

When the likes of Jesus Seminar Fellows and their supporters dismiss biblical scholars who accept the authenticity of the Gospels, as not even engaging their intellects in seeking an understanding of their faith, one wonders about their ability to provide an objective and reasoned assessment of the debate. A new form of intellectual bigotry emerges in the liberal camp - one which seeks to clutch a toe-hold onto the crumbling philosophical foundation of an increasingly threadbare positivism.

Cheer claims that the relationship between "myth" and history has not been understood or appreciated sensitively by Dr Fruchtenbaum. Duggan is labelled as grossly over-literalistic in his understanding and a failure when it comes to understanding the true nature of "metaphor". There is a considerable degree of truth in Cheer's claim that some conservative evangelicals show a weak understanding of myth when they dismiss it as "mere myth". There is likewise however an alarming mirror-image of such misunderstanding on a greater scale (and with considerably less excuse) in the blatantly reductive and often breathtakingly coarse and

rationalistic approach of Sea of Faith. Indeed, hubris seems often revealed in such claims by liberals. A true grasp of the meaning of such terms is proclaimed to be their exclusive preserve. Cheer's problem is that he wants to apply no less contrived definitions of "myth" and "metaphor" to the Gospel accounts: narrow and reductive definitions that satisfy his liberal agenda. The definition used by Veitch of myth as a story involving supernatural agents, for example, is both reductionist and question-begging, and a thousand miles from the numinous awe apposite to these staggering tales. Even Lloyd Geering has recognised this, with his statement that (on this reductionist definition of myth) the only myth proper in the book of Genesis is that involving the "sons of God" (Genesis 6: 1-2)!

Cheer appears to wish to maintain some "upper story" reality (the so-called "mythic" element) while gutting the Gospel accounts in particular of almost all their connections to a real-time historical world. He ignores the fact that literary scholars (e.g. C.S. Lewis) have decisively refuted this type of liberal misapplication of the term "myth" to the Gospel narratives, showing how Myth can become Fact: how events literal and historical enough to delight a fundamentalist may at the same time embody layers of transcendent meaning to transport a poet or mystic, and to speak what otherwise cannot be spoken. In their misguided efforts to try and downgrade the historical authenticity of the Gospel accounts ("the typical liberal reduction process - abridging the Gospel", as Bonhoeffer put it), the postmoderns posit a false alternative. Do the five porches in St John's story of the healing of the man ill for thirty-eight years in John 5 speak of the five books of Moses, for example? If so, then they are and can be only myth (in the pejorative sense), says liberal dogma, or rather said liberal dogma - until the archaeologists dug them up.³ They then belatedly realised that which should have been apparent all along: the porches were as literal as can be and as full of metaphorical meaning and import as can be. The fundamentalist who clings to the literal porches has at least a chance of discerning the deeper theological meaning of the story; the radical who decides in advance that the story is a fiction, albeit with the possibility of a remote and possibly arbitrary

² A Pentecostal church made famous for snake-handling once resulting in the demise of both its pastor and assistant pastor, the result of an over-literal exegesis of Markan texts about the drinking of poisons and taking up of serpents.

³ As no such structure as that described by the John 5 account had been uncovered until recent times, liberal scholars insisted that the tale of the disabled man at Bethesda was a particularly obvious example of the Evangelist freely inventing the account for theological reasons. The five porches, they held, symbolised the five books of the law (which should have illuminated the way to life) far too neatly and conveniently to be possibly literal or descriptive. The Evangelist had invented the five porches, they claimed, to draw a theological contrast between the Law and the Gospel of Jesus, and only a fool would take the account literally, as to porch-count was to miss the whole point of the story, a point held to be strictly moral and theological rather than journalistic. There were thus some very red faces when what could only be the structure alluded to by John was excavated and found to have five literal porches, exactly as described by John. More perceptive scholars had not been trapped by a false alternative. Marsh, for example, had written in his 1968 commentary:

"The pool is said to have five porches. It is hard to resist either the mere matter-of-factness of this statement (why should this piece of information be false?) or its symbolic suggestiveness..."

The logic that Marsh found so difficult to resist was, of course, the truth, and he did not need to have an archaeologist's spade bludgeon him to the recognition of it. But what was a logical step for Marsh has proved a chasm for the Sea of Faith. Always and everywhere the fatal confusion: either meaning or history; either faith or fact: not both. As Bonhoeffer put it, liberal theology stands or falls on its attempt to show that Jesus is Someone other than the Christ, and its failure to do so has an unexpected result, as it spells the death of liberal theology itself.

“substrate”, displays a blindness which may be tragic. The same principle applies, of course, to the Resurrection and Ascension, and Barth was sublimely correct when he wrote:

“... if someone should accept, all in one piece, what he learnt in Sunday School I should tell him: You are wiser than if you were to interpret the Ascension in a merely spiritualistic sense”.⁴⁴

Cheer is therefore saddled with the task of explaining how a cloud of nonfundamentalist witnesses, including many who have made a lifetime study of literary forms and comparative mythologies, accept the substantial authenticity of the orthodox faith. This leaves his criticisms of the *Apologia* statement of faith and contributors somewhat beside the point even if they were valid. The point is not simply that a jerky and unwieldy statement of faith heavily skewed towards conservative evangelical Protestantism will not square with the nostrums of a Veitch, but rather that Veitch’s position will equally not square with the great historic creeds at a single point, nor even with the mainstream of a more moderate and intellectually principled liberalism. He has also to come to grips with the liberal J.A.T. Robinson’s *Redating the Gospels* and its well-researched claim that all four Gospels were written *before* the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD: a Robinson the Sea of Faith people seem to neglect in favour of the ‘sixties Robinson and an enthusiasm for a late dating of the Gospels, itself dated and untenable. I am reliably informed that Knox College staff (hardly known as devotees of hyperfundamentalism...) cautioned students, on the publication of Robinson’s seminal *Redating* book, that all presumptions on late Gospel dating were to be placed on hold on the light of Robinson’s book, a piece of advice the wisdom of which has been amply demonstrated in the years that have followed but which seems lost on Jim Veitch.

The range of approaches found among the contributors to the “Focus on James Veitch” issue of

Apologia is presented as a weakness by Cheer. He sees it as evidence of the demise of the evangelical position. On the contrary, the fact that all contributors disagree fundamentally with Veitch’s approach, while maintaining their differences, says it all. Veitch’s viewpoint is a minority one among New Testament scholars world-wide and could with equal logic be held to represent the death-cry of a dated liberal faction of the church. Veitch’s views are rightly regarded as bizarre by many mainstream liberals and even by some more educated radicals. Cheer would have us believe that “so different are the ‘understandings’ of Veitch and his critics that we can observe that the Christian faith looks no nearer finding consensus”. He fails to recognise, as Duggan points out, that the often hoary arguments Veitch and those like him put forward, are nothing new. Dissenters and heretics have abounded throughout the history of the Christian Church. And yet the fundamental doctrines such as the deity of Christ have never changed. This does not rule out the need for greater illumination of the meaning and application of Holy Scripture to the modern world, and it certainly does not imply a weakness inherent to doctrinal tenets of the faith if they do not “evolve” or “adapt” to fit supposedly modern viewpoints and mores.

Dr Duggan was correct to conclude that Veitch’s booklet “is incredibly shoddy. It abounds in categorical statements about the New Testament books and history of the early Church, many of which are not only doubtful but demonstrably false.” While it may be argued that Cheer failed to address any of these criticisms in his lengthy critique, one has the impression that Cheer stands somewhat apart from the Sea of Faith people, particularly in his willingness to review at some length. It is evident that many of the issues alluded to call for more extended treatment, while others need to be picked up, all in the light of Anselm’s motto.

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⁴ Karl Barth, *The Faith of the Church*, p. 97.