
A Response to Bishop John Shelby Spong

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Bishop John Shelby Spong has been visiting Atlanta and the Cathedral during the last three days, and I devote this Dean's Forum to a review and response of his work.

I like Jack Spong. I invited him to speak at the Cathedral of St. Philip because we are a place of prayer for all people, and I admire his intellectual courage. He is a thinker, and he takes history and logic and science seriously. As many of you know, I love science and astronomy and physics. I like to take those subjects seriously, too!

This morning, I respond to his recent words with respect. He has a wisdom accumulated from many years of reading and teaching. He was educated at Charlotte, North Carolina public schools. He graduated *Phi Beta Kappa* from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He served as an Episcopal priest in Lynchburg, Virginia, and in Richmond, Virginia. Though I think he loves the South, as I do, he was also the Episcopal Bishop of Newark (New Jersey)!

And he was a loyal and controversial Bishop of Newark. He did much for the role of women in the Episcopal Church. He did much for the acceptance of the ministry of homosexual persons in the Church. And, as most of you know, I am in his camp on those issues. During those years, he was willing to tackle, and to talk about, all sorts of other important and critical issues.

But the other reason I like him, besides his being a Southerner, is that he knows the Bible! (Maybe he knows the Bible *because* he is a Southerner!)

However, I do not always agree with Jack Spong's approach; and, thus, I do not always agree with his conclusions. I do think he is a man of faith. He claimed yesterday that he believes Jesus is Lord. That little phrase is key in the Christian life. He is a follower of Jesus. And anyone who follows Jesus is also a friend of mine.

Today, I want to review some of what he talked about, and I also want to respond. Some of what he produces can be quite unsettling to churchgoers. I heard from several people in this parish who were wary about his coming. I heard from others who were thrilled he was coming! In several respects, his questions are not my questions, but I know his questions are shared by many here at the Cathedral.

Thus, I need to respond. And, in fact, I love responding to him! I will speak first about what I admire and support in his presentations. Then, I will present some of my own concerns and differences in our way of thinking. Then, I will open this forum to questions and comments.

First of all, I admire the way Spong takes science, history, and contemporary scholarship seriously. This is critical in the spiritual life, and in the Christian life. He correctly joins the physical and the spiritual life. A good spiritual life is always

physical!

He is right to complain that so many Christians avoid the hard questions. How can we believe that God lives somewhere high in the sky when we know that galaxies exist so far away from us?

Some of his examples are rather ridiculous, but when Spong obsesses on old literal features of the faith, he essentially reminds us that our belief system cannot be literal. Our faith should not depend on old scientific categories of sex and biology and physics.

I honor, and will always honor the liberal intellectual pursuit of truth, and I speak with Jack Spong against all forms of naïve fundamentalism. It is a shallow and fearful way of thinking; and it is a dangerous way to follow God.

I have many non-church friends in Atlanta, and around the world, who appreciate Spong's willingness to tackle hard issues and engage the world. These are people who are seekers, who have not always found the institutional church accommodating to their questions. I want to say to them that we at the Cathedral of St. Philip do accommodate their questions. I believe God accommodates their questions.

I also admire the way Spong knows the Bible. He gets a few biblical citations wrong, but he knows his stuff. "It's in the book," he kept reminding us; and he's right. The best way to learn not to take the bible literally is to read it.

Here is what he said at The Chataqua Institute recently: "Anything that is written down is always finite, mortal, human, and filled with error - error of perception if nothing else. For all words are time bound, all words are time warped. All words are the product of the age in which they were created. That never produces unchanging truth. That never produces literalism." (from a recording of his Chataqua lectures -June 29, 2010.)

And this: "The bible has been used time and again for causes for which it is not worthy. When the Bible is used in public debate, it almost always loses," (Chataqua lectures, June 29, 2010). This is so true.

"So much of the bible makes no literal sense," he says. Spong tells the story of an astrophysicist who sarcastically posits that the doctrine of the Ascension of Jesus, when taken literally, means that Jesus has not left our galaxy yet, that is, if he was travelling at the speed of light, roughly 186,000 mile per second. This is one of those rather absurd examples, but it's a fun one.

In particular, I like Spong's dependence upon Paul Tillich, who wrote predominantly in the 1940s through the 1960s. I am a student of Paul Tillich myself - not literally, I mean; but I drank deeply at his well when I was in college and seminary. I wrote my college comps on Tillich.

Tillich talked of the God beyond god. He reminded us that every definition we have of god ultimately falls short of completely describing God. And he is right. Spong picks up on this when he says, repeatedly, over the weekend, that "our experience of God is not the same as our explanation of God."

"Experiences are eternal," Spong said at one time, "Explanations are not." That is good stuff. Paul Tillich was acutely aware of how our explanations and descriptions of God could actually become idolatrous for us.

Our inclination is to defend our notion of God so vehemently that we miss understanding the real nature of the real God. And so Tillich set about re-framing even how we speak about God. He called god, "the God beyond god," and "the Ground of our Being."

I agree with Tillich. Those of you who have heard me preach and teach know that I like that phrase, "the ground of being." God is that greater than which nothing is. Our very earnest and very thoughtful and very erudite descriptions of God cannot, and can never, completely contain and describe all of who God is.

Jack Spong speaks eloquently on these matters, and I enjoy listening to him. He is witty and insightful and very well-informed. And, finally, he is loving. Yesterday, here at the Cathedral, he ended up talking beautifully about the God of love.

It is by "living fully, and loving wastefully," he said, that we experience the fullness of God in our lives. Living fully and loving wastefully.

I agree with that! But those are not new phrases in the Christian religion. "Loving wastefully" is what the prodigal father did, in the parable we name "the prodigal son." (The word "prodigal" means wasteful or extravagantly lavish). Ireneaus, back in the second century AD, is famous for uttering, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." Living fully. That is exactly what Jack Spong is saying 1900 years later. The glory of God is a human being fully alive.

However, let me say some words, some important words, about how I see God - and religion - differently from Jack Spong.

Again, it may be that he and I understand and speak of God in quite similar ways. But Spong is far more critical of religion than I am. He continues to complain that our language is outmoded, that it cannot carry the meaning that it should anymore. He complained all through his talk about the old prayers of our prayer books. Too much emphasis on miserable humanity. Too much singing about blood.

On the surface, he is right. (That's why we don't use the 1928 Book of Common Prayer anymore!). Religion cannot be based literally on the wretchedness of humanity and the blood of Jesus. Religion is always in danger of stifling human creativity and oppressing people with its power. Religion can be a burden. I hope we all know that.

But here's a major difference between Jack Spong and me. Jack Spong takes things far more cerebrally and materialistically and objectively than I do. He takes things like religious language far more literally than I do.

I believe that religious language, and biblical language has a far more poetic and imaginative dimension than he seems to. For that reason, religious language can carry the weight of many, many more interpretations than just a literal one.

When I say the Nicene Creed, for instance, I am not thinking about the literal circumstances of how Jesus might have been born of a woman who had never had sex. That is just not part of what I am doing when I say the Creed.

What I am doing is stretching the limits of my imagination about the holiness of Jesus, and the open and willing faith of Mary his mother. For me, the doctrine of the virgin birth is a miracle - or sign, because I do think "sign" is a better word - because transcendent God deigns to be manifest in ordinary human flesh. I do not need a biological answer to the virgin birth question. Jack Spong's questions, on the other hand, do seem to need a biological answer.

I simply do not read the bible, either, as pure science or pure history. I am not bothered about whether Jesus literally ascended from the earth forty days after his resurrection. The doctrine means much more to me than a man flying around after his death.

You who come to church Sunday after Sunday, and you hear us Episcopal preachers take on the themes of feast days - like the Ascension, Pentecost, even Easter itself - you hear us do the work of translation. You hear us translate the biblical and liturgical and religious images into something - we all hope - is meaningful today!

There was one line in Jack Spong's last book that was most revelatory for me. Now, many lines were revelatory; but there was one passage, in particular, that described a major difference between him and me. It is towards the end of the book, when he describing how much he has read. (You who heard Spong know that he likes to talk about how much he has read and who he has talked to!)

He says that, as Bishop of Newark, "I developed a passion for reading books on tape. This was before the days of iPods. While driving around the diocese, I was always listening to a book via my tape-player. I managed in this way to read some eighty books a year during my twenty-four-year career as bishop. Almost none of these books were novels, which appealed to me almost not at all. They were rather history, biography, science, political science, economics, and psychology." (page 199, *Eternal Life*.)

He says that he took time to read, but that he read no fiction, no novels, no poetry. That is the difference. That is the

difference between his study and mine. I need the poetic and artistic imagination. For me, authentic religious language is about creativity and imagination. It is poetry, not science.

Apparently, when he was at Chataqua earlier this summer, Jack Spong mentioned that he had had a conversation with Alan Jones, the former dean of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco. Alan is an old friend of mine, too; and I know Alan thinks far more like me than like Jack Spong. Anyway, Spong mentioned that he had decided how he was different from Alan Jones. Spong said that he, Spong, was a left brain thinker; and Jones was a right brain thinker. That's another way of describing how I, too, part ways with Jack Spong. I am a right brain thinker; he is a left brain thinker.

Right brain thinking has driven my own poetry and imagination and art and music. Left brain thinking is about objectivity and mechanics. This may be a reason that, while I like Jack Spong, I do not follow him closely. His dilemmas are not my dilemmas. It does not bother me that the virgin birth cannot be described scientifically. That is exactly its power. Christian doctrines are not meant to be scientific and literal for me.

I need church, because I need the history of words and traditions that have carried many, many levels of meaning. The word is "multivalent." Religious language, and religious symbolism, have multivalent meanings. Good words of any sort carry a multitude of meaning. They do not mean only one thing. Poets know this. Fiction writers know this. Religious people know this. So, liturgical words are difficult, but they are important.

I cannot follow fundamentalism of any sort, whether it be conservative fundamentalism or liberal fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is the inability to admit that one might be wrong. Fundamentalism is any closed system which cannot admit questioning and critique.

Let me say a word here about the wider Episcopal Church, beyond Jack Spong. In the Episcopal Church right now, fundamentalists of both liberal and conservative persuasions are commanding most of the public conversation. Their polemic, and the way the media presents the polemic, has made much of the public oblivious to a vast and broader Episcopal way that refuses to be constricted by fundamentalism. Some people call this vast and broad way a "Middle Way." I prefer the phrase, "Comprehensive Way."

An Episcopal comprehensive way discovers truth along both extremes. A comprehensive way does not simply stay in the middle and avoid extremes. The greater way is able to see truth at both poles of an orbit, but the greater way does not stay at either particular pole.

There was one more thing Jack Spong did say yesterday about the Church that I appreciate. Someone wisely asked him, "If he believed all this, why should anyone go to church?"

He replied that our task was to be fully human, fully alive, and no one becomes fully alive, no one loves fully, as an individual. Becoming fully human, and loving fully, is a communal activity. I agree. That is one of the great reasons to participate in the messy, crazy, faithful, betraying community we call Church. We stumble over language in the church, we hurt each other, but we also forgive each other, we get it right a lot, and we love one another into the fullness of humanity.

Finally, Jack Spong has declared in many places that that religion is dying. I suppose that comment is designed to wake people up, so that they will become aware, and do something. But, again, that is not a new comment for me.

For me, everything is dying. We are always dying. That is one of the chief pieces of religious wisdom that informs and inspires me. That principle is at the heart of classical Christianity.

So, if someone asks me, "Is traditional Christianity dying?" I answer, "Of course it is." Christianity is always dying, but it is always being reborn, too. We are always carrying about the death of Christ, and I quote two magnificent passages from Paul's Letters to the Corinthians:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not

forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. (2 Corinthians 4:7-11).

And, one of my favorite verses of all time, *"Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed."* (1 Corinthians 15:51).

We will not die. But we will be changed. Paul spoke of our individual bodies. But he could as easily been speaking of the Christian Church. A healthy church is always dying to something, and being reborn into something else. That cycle is at the heart of who we are.

In fact, it's another reason to belong to church, to belong to a Christian community, to participate in religious ritual. That ritual, and that rich, poetic, language, teaches us how to change gracefully. How to die gracefully. How to be born again gracefully.

The reason I disagree with Jack Spong on the matter of religion is that I take the word "religion" in a much broader way than he does. I think religion is inevitable. Many of you have heard me speak on the question, "What does it mean to be spiritual and not religious?" My answer is, "It doesn't mean much." The person who is spiritual and not religious does not have a community; does not a body. Probably does not have a life.

Because every structure is a religion of some sort. Religion is inevitable! If you are a Jack Spong groupie, you could gather all his books up and compile your own ritual and liturgy. Of course, he would be appalled if you did that. But the point is that you can take his words, too, and create a limiting, finite structure that would qualify as a religion. But if you didn't build on those words and thoughts, they would be out of date by tomorrow.

At its worst, science can be an unchanging religion, too! The scientist who refuses to grow, who becomes a fundamentalist, is also dangerous. A few years ago, Krista Tippett interviewed on her show ("Speaking of Faith") a geneticist named Lindon Eaves. A curious part of Dr. Eaves' life is that he is also an Episcopal priest. Lindon Eaves, an Episcopal priest and a geneticist, offered these remarks:

"If you really look at human experience, the truth is that we're all living a life of experiment, and I mean in every aspect of our lives. I mean, you know, the "" so you can "" you can either think of let's say the creeds of the great traditions, as it were, as telling you what you ought to think, or you can say they are in some sense comparable to theories of science. They are the best distillations of where we've been. But we don't approach reality treating those models as if they're the last word. We treat them as operational hypotheses."

I loved that comment. What if the creeds are operational theories in the same way that scientific theories are? That makes a lot of sense! We need both of them to live fully and to love wastefully

Every structure, and organization, in our human life is a religion of some sort. And every religion is a "theory" of some sort. I do not mean a theory like a guess. I mean an operational theory, a theory that we need. I mean a theory that works, like the theory of evolution. There is no way to be a scientist without a theory, and there is no way to be spiritual without being religious.

So, yes. Traditional religion is always dying, but it is always being born again, too. I believe in the Resurrection part. I say, "Be a part of its death if you must, but try to be part of its resurrection, too." It's the reason I am gladly and faithfully, not just a Christian, but also a member of the Christian Church.

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(A video of this presentation is posted at <http://vimeo.com/channels/134964>)

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