

Jesus for the Non-Religious

John Shelby Spong

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John Shelby Spong was the Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, for more than twenty years and is one of the leading spokespersons in the world for an open, scholarly, and progressive Christianity. He is a well known author (16 books?) and very popular speaker around the world. He even has a few fan websites!

Spong's audience in his latest book is the non-religious believer, and not the non-believer. This is a very important distinction in understanding what he tries to achieve. He states "I insist that there must be a way to be both a believer and a citizen of the twenty-first century".

His strongest appeal seems to be to those who have lost the connection to traditional theology and those who have often become estranged from the traditional church, yet who still prefer to call themselves Christian (as he does of himself, p7). He puts it strongly, "I do not ... believe in a deity who does miracles – nor do I even want such a God" (p54). Another example that illustrates his preference for strong language includes calling literalising Easter the "defining heresy of traditional Protestant and Catholic Christianity" (p117, 127) and calling opponents of his views "hysterical".

The title "Jesus for the Non-Religious," is a phrase borrowed from Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who envisioned a new religionless Christianity. In this book Spong attempts to strip away the interpretive mythology surrounding Jesus of Nazareth, believed to be creations of the Gospel writers, and identifies the Jewish religious and liturgical background out of which those interpretations came. This leaves us with a portrait of the very Jewish Jesus in whom God's love was to be seen so uniquely. Spong describes Jesus as the breaker of tribal boundaries. By far the largest section of the book is an attack on "the supernatural forms of yesterday's Christianity." By stripping away all of this, we might hope to find reality of Jesus as a God experience.

Systematically Spong sets out to demythologise the Gospel stories. Joseph was a mythological character and we have no certainty what Jesus' mother was called, only that she wasn't a virgin. There weren't twelve disciples, there were no miracles (healing, nature, feeding, etc), there was no Judas Iscariot, no betrayal, no Joseph of Arimathea, no witnesses at the cross, no resurrected Christ appearing, etc, etc.

How does Spong achieve this? How does his argument work to enable him to dismiss all supernatural events (bar the "resurrection event" which we need to explore later)? It is rather simple, really. He dates Paul's writings as much older than those of the Gospel writers. All other writings are according to him therefore less reliable and per definition filled with interpretation and the proclamations of a community of faith (as opposed to remembered history). Basically, if Paul was unaware of an event, it is likely that it wasn't an historical event. E.g. Paul doesn't mention the bodily appearances of the risen Christ, therefore, it wasn't an historical event;

But where do all these myths come from, then? According to Spong they were created by the writers of the Gospel, mainly to explain the context of the late first century and to explain liturgical practices (he calls them liturgical dramas). A key point of departure for Spong is the writings of Paul. He's searching for the Jewish Jesus of whom Paul proclaimed "God was in Christ". While he makes good use of Paul's letters, this is probably also the Achilles heel of this book.

Spong has some significant differences with other leading figures in the so called progressive movement. E.g. Whereas someone like Marcus Borg treats the most spectacular stories in the gospels as metaphorical narratives and not as memory, but still believes that Jesus performed some healings and exorcisms, Spong has moved to a totally rationalistic view of Scripture. To him the modern mind simply cannot accept miracles and therefore they could not have happened.

What I missed most in reading this book, was a serious engagement with the European search for the historical Jesus of the last couple of decades. There are several references to and use of material from US contemporaries (e.g. Crossan & Borg) but hardly engagement with scholars from the rest of the first and third world who have wrestled with these questions in the last twenty years. A simple flick through of his bibliography reveals very few sources dating from after 1990. I've also missed a serious engagement with his mentor (JAT Robinson) on the issue of dating Paul's epistles. Since it is key to his argument that the Gospels were written very late in the first century, one would expect some engagement with those who date the Gospels a few decades earlier. This is a pity and certainly detracts from the scholarship of this book.

Also, one is left hoping for a more substantive explanation of what he means by a non-theistic God, but it doesn't really materialize. In the last chapter Spong admits that he has no idea who/what God is: "I cannot tell anyone who or what God is. . . . The reality of God can never be defined. It can only be experienced, and we need always to recognize that even that experience may be nothing more than an illusion." All he seems to accept as "real" is what he terms "The Jesus experience". What that was, we cannot really know.

Spong strongly makes his point, "we will learn that divinity is not something different from humanity" but the question remains: Is that enough? Could Spong not do this without the person of Jesus? Is that not the next logical question?

In closing, Spong's biggest contributions were surely what he has achieved in terms of contributing to free up thought in the US Bible belt and much wider in terms of liberty and equality for many on what can be termed the shackles of religion (he calls it tribalism, prejudice and religion). This needs to be fully appreciated despite these critical remarks on the scholarship in this book.

Chris Crause