

JOHN SHELBY SPONG

1931 -



John Shelby Spong has made a name for himself questioning every doctrine of the Christian faith. He was the 8th bishop of Newark in the State of New Jersey.

The following review of his autobiography was written by a lecturer at Moore Theological College in Sydney, Australia.

Where Spong went wrong

John Shelby Spong
Here I Stand
Harper, 2000, 464pp
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reviewed by Mark Thompson

See also: Thompson's review of [Jesus for the Non Religious](#). (2007)

See also: Bishop Paul Barnett's critique of Spong's [Liberating the Gospels](#), written in 1997. (Barnett is a New Testament scholar, from Australia.)

John Spong's autobiography has been published to coincide with his retirement as Bishop of Newark. It is hardly surprising then that this book should read like a defense of his ecclesiastical career. It is dominated by Spong's conviction that his leadership provided the direction which will allow the Christian church to survive into the next millennium.

Those of us who have become acquainted with Spong only through his controversial writings will be surprised to discover another side to the man as he tells his own story. The tenderness of his references to his first wife Joan and his obvious devotion to her throughout her long mental and physical illness is immensely attractive. His courage in the face of the racial segregation rampant throughout America in the 1950s and 1960s; his willingness to take a stand, face the consequences head on, and the intense personal loyalty he displayed to those who shaped his life and thinking (e.g. Bishop John Hir and Bishop John A. T. Robinson), are all admirable qualities. Readers of this book will not be able to escape the conclusion that Jack Spong is a man who feels things deeply and attempts to live out his convictions with integrity.

Nevertheless, the book also parades the flaws that have become all too obvious in his previous writing. There is an arrogant tone to the book. Spong repeatedly casts himself in the role of a rare and genuine leader, one of very few who sees things clearly and accurately. All those who disagree with his ideas or oppose his initiatives are portrayed as fearful, ignorant, and often rude and dishonest as well.

In debate, Spong repeatedly plays the man rather than the ball. There is no evidence of serious engagement with the ideas of his opponents. He is remarkably inconsistent on this point, for this is precisely what he accuses his opponents of doing. Evangelicals in particular are often the targets of his most intemperate remarks. He speaks of rattling 'the security cages of the evangelical troops' when he questioned traditional Christology in the midst of a Jewish-Christian dialogue. He boldly questions John Stott's integrity, and labels Tom Wright 'a propagandist rather than an educator'. Opposition to his consecration in 1976 is in his words simply a manifestation of 'the same religious mentality that fed the horror of the religious wars, the Inquisition, and church splits. His conclusion about evangelical religion is that it 'appears to breed dishonesty and that the more overtly pious people attempt to be, the more they must hide their

anger and lack of character, not just from others, but from themselves’.

He is inconsistent in action as well. While he describes his action to force the hand Church of England on the ordination of women (he ordained an Englishwoman himself) as a ‘cheeky attack upon the English church’s decision-making processes’, he labels opposition to his own ideas on homosexuality in the official forum of Lambeth ‘98 as both dishonest and hostile. He reports that Lambeth ‘98 ‘reminded me of a mental institution where people lived inside many different realities’.

The issue of homosexuality and in particular homosexual clergy is the dominant theme of the latter part of the book. Spong will not accept ‘the evangelical party line about the Bible condemning homosexuality’. Instead he repeatedly appeals to the now quite discredited notion that sexual orientation is determined by the level of testosterone in the pregnant female. He claims that this indisputable medical evidence requires us to advance beyond the position that regards homosexuality as ‘a sin that cannot be accepted’ to one which recognises it as ‘an aspect of our humanity that needs to be affirmed’.

Jack Spong clearly believes he has been involved in an honest search for the truth God. He insists that throughout his entire career he has sought ‘to give a credible voice to Christianity that was in dialogue with the real world’. He belittles ‘those who act as if there is something called “the faith once delivered to the Saints”’. Yet the sad truth is that he has so immersed himself in the world broken and distorted by sin that he has become a part of it, unable to see the answer any longer and unable to bring anything other than the chimera of false comfort. Our world does not need to be confirmed in rebellion but rather called to faith and repentance in the light of the incredible mercy of the living God.

Dr Mark Thompson is a lecturer at Moore Theological College, Sydney.

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