

Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World
Closing October 31, 2016
by Mike Grammer, edited Deb Charnuski

I will admit to some trepidation when the book was announced. Deb and I have talked about my sometime-ambivalence for Bishop Spong and his books. And while I have spent a little time muttering under my breath in this one, where I particularly feel he may be shunting aside the importance of oral tradition, I have also been tremendously intrigued, and impressed, with what he has shown us so far. I have found this book teaching me something new about how I view my religion, my culture and their history. And that can only be a good thing.

For me, when I am in synagogue and praying, when I think about which parts of the service have the most meaning to me, they are often not the parts that are straight historical word-of-God “old testament” liturgy. Two prayers that I consider for myself to be the “most holy prayers” form no part of the Torah, Haftorah or Mishna, but were instead allegedly composed in the middle ages or after. All this speaks to what I believe he is saying, which is this.

The words of God are not what is holy. It is the PROCESS of writing the words down, of expanding on the text, of listening and speaking and learning all the additions, prophecies and everything that comes after, and perhaps of communicating the words, which is holy. In a way, that conclusion reaches much outside religion and into spirituality. I’ll repeat for emphasis---religion is, for me, fundamentally nothing more than a methodology for organizing human behaviour. I believe that spirituality, of which religion is only a component part (if an important one) integrates culture, morality and something intangible and possibly indefinable which one might term “personal belief”. All that we have read about the authors of Isaiah, of the other prophets, of proverbs and Ecclesiastes, all of this represents an

expansion of and infusion of morality and the mores of society into what I might term the “elemental skeletal construct” of pure religious writing.

It brings forward a question (one that I’m sure has been asked)---was Jesus as much or more a product of his time, an avatar for a critical point in socio-moral development, than anything else? Charismatic by Circumstance? It may be that the “mores of society” (or laxity thereof) had so taken over the religious and observant side of things that the original elemental precepts had been completely subsumed. Thus I give Jesus his presumed aboriginal name, “tree-shaker”, and his message could only be heard because there were (morally) starving listeners who needed to hear.

In hewing strictly to ancient words, though, we’re throwing the bathwater out with the baby. Balance is a lot of what religion should be about, at least for me, and at its core, that can only be found by giving a measure of respect to the “original word” but keep it living and healthy by questioning, by interpreting, by *thinking* about it instead of taking it as, pardon the phraseology, “God’s Gospel”, and most of all by infusing those words with our own individually spiritual and moral code. Spirituality and religion....they have to have a two-way conversation with each other if religion is to have relevance in today’s world—although Deb’s comments on this closing prodded me to think of whether Christianity itself would have ever been born if people hadn’t chosen to disregard the existing texts while finding new roots for their spirituality. It’s also worth noting that a religion that survives is a religion that can be flexible and merge itself into its society, yet still be relevant. How that dynamic will work as we move through the 21st century is TBD---to be determined.

I am most interested to see where Bishop Spong will take this exposition as he moves into the New Testament and beyond. But to evolve has been human for all

of our existence. Why should religion, at the end of the day a small aspect of humanity, be any different? For now, he has provided a book which encourages us to question, cajoles us to question and finally, demands that we question. In this, he has written a very Jewish book and I applaud the writing and the effort.

Deb asked me “do you believe then that the Old Testament is still relevant today?” and also asks what some of the Jewish viewpoints on this are. I only have time to speak for myself in the night before shipping this out to all of you, but I will try.

I will be the first to say I am a long way from the person that observes all the commandments and fulfills all the mitzvot---nor, candidly, do I want to be. I will be the first to say that plenty of people slavishly observe the word of the book without doing any thinking about it---even expanding it where it doesn't belong. My personal bugaboo is “thou shalt not eat the calf in its mother's milk” and trying to understand how my fellow Jew is, by this statement, unable to enjoy a chicken parmigiana---since the milk-producing chicken is a marvel of the world I would pay good money to see.

In my day-to-day life, I will admit that the Old Testament has very little purview or impact. But when I **am** in shul, listening to and reading the Torah portion, it **does** mean something. What it means is a combination of things---it means that a written way of thinking has survived any number of catastrophes and slaughter to be heard by me today. It means that I am associating myself with an ancient tradition and culture and that somewhere in my makeup are markers of that tradition and culture. It means there are words still worth thinking about.

Maybe, then, the Old Testament is kind of like a lighthouse for me. Comforting to know the beacon of light is there and will be a constant, if unchanging feature. Easily drowned out or minimized by all the other interesting things around me.

Not something I want to get too close to lest I founder on the rocks. And a signal that a part of me has a home base that I can come back to.....if I choose, but that I also *have* that choice. The fact that I do still go to synagogue on occasion and that I immerse myself in what is being read and said while I'm there is enough indication to me that the lighthouse has its purpose in my life. All recognizing that my own orientation to the lighthouse will change on a constant basis.