

Course Assessment - Fall 2016 -
Reclaiming the Bible for the Non-Religious - John Spong
Ken Kittridge 28 Nov 16

John Shelby Spong, in my opinion, has effectively dealt with a major concern of many practicing Christians. These, often called, non-religious Christians don't believe in a supernatural theistic God. They do not see God as being a person-like being who continues to intervene, especially in response to prayer. Instead, they see God as an encompassing Spirit which is everywhere.

In examining the laws and teachings of the prophets, in the Hebrew Bible, Spong has portrayed how the Jews survived cycles of: conquering, being conquered and living in exile. They developed unique cultural practices - sabbath, diet and circumcision - which buttressed them in defining their values.

The prophets frequently updated the Laws as they faced the crises they lived in. The accuracy of the prophets was enhanced as their teachings were recognized retrospectively and usually post-humously - time tested.

Mike, our Jewish friend, wrote the closer for this part of the book and in my view illustrates the progressive nature of Judaism. Here are three of the descriptions he offered: holy = prophets, morality = mythology of the prophets and Jesus = an avatar of contemporary society. He concluded by defending the entrenchment of basic Jewish values so you will not "throw the baby out with the bathwater".

Spong organized his New Testament thoughts chronologically in three sectors - Paul, First 3 Gospels, and the 4th Gospel (John).

I most enjoyed his portrayal of Paul as an "Everyman". Paul thus tells of Jesus teachings through his life experiences. For me, the authenticity of Paul comes from three factors: he was the closest writer to Jesus (12 years older) timewise, his experiences were seen through his own like experiences, and the powerful insights into the teachings of Jesus.

These three insights most impressed me:
"...he knows our heart and still loves us..."
"...divine love is not limited to nationality or religion..."
"...of faith, hope and love, love is the greater..."

I was less impressed by the first three gospels (70-88) which is much involved by meshing together Christian and Jewish liturgy. 70 CE marked the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and 88 CE was when the Jews expelled the Christians from the synagogue. Some theologians feel that the first three gospels offered a minimum of extra insights into the message of Jesus. These gospels were, nonetheless, clearly important in creating and spreading Christian liturgy.

Spong labelled the 4th gospel of John as the "Crown Jewel of the Bible" because of its influence on Christian creeds and doctrines. John also reduced the use of : the virgin birth, parables, and an agonizing death of Jesus, among other changes.

Spong's use of John to overcome the problem of Biblical literalism was, for me, a highlight. A prime example being Jesus statement of "I am he". Spong suggests that Jesus is saying by following my example. This was literalized at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, as meaning "I am God". Spong suggested that the Council may have gone too far.

Spong also suggests that the Council of Nicaea went too far in emphasizing just John over the other gospels. He quotes Isaac Newton who called this action a great mistake which tends to reduce additional insights.

In closing, I will use part of Deb's closure in which she describes the Bible as a preserve of wisdom which enlightens and inspires your personal journey. She concluded by saying you could be a Christian and a 21st century thinker.