

# ***Bishop John Shelby Spong - No apologies for speaking out when faith comes under siege***

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It is not my normal practice to resurrect the subject of a previous week but I feel constrained to do so by ABC Radio's Sunday Night Talk programme compered by John Cleary. It is often compulsive listening.

Last Sunday, Bishop John Spong was a guest for two hours with Father Brendan Byrne the Jesuit biblical scholar and interlocutor, who, however, proved an admirable authenticator of the American bishop's views.

Yet it seemed extraordinary that this programme should have turned into a solid promotion for Bishop Spong's frontal attack on orthodox Christianity, and a heady promulgation of his book. Indeed, the bishop is very contemptuous of the term "orthodoxy".

The Religious Department of the ABC is resentful of criticism of some of its latter-day developments. Perhaps it needs to understand that it sometimes unnecessarily offends the so-called "mainline" churches which have some right to have their views at least represented in programmes such as Sunday Night Talk.

It continues to be attracted by the quirky and way out, which may be justified, but not if it fails to inform what is still the orthodox and majority Christian view.

Not that we heard all of Bishop Spong's views by any means, and it would be easy enough to saddle the good Jesuit, Father Byrne, with opinions which he does not actually hold.

He certainly suggested that Bishop Spong's entirely "intellectual" approach to matters of faith denied large fields of influence in forming faith. But I think a great many Catholics would have been dismayed by the areas of apparent agreement Father Byrne offered in support of the US bishop.

To say it was bland listening would be an understatement; at the late hour of the programme it was something of a soporific.

Occasionally Bishop Spong was challenged to substantiate some of his more outrageous assumptions, though so mildly as to allow this suave operator to lull listeners into the impression that pure reason is his method, and his way the reliable path to faith in a reasonable God.

To give the assent of reason to one's faith has never been denied by orthodox Christians. St Thomas Aquinas is the pre-eminent example of a reasoned faith, still quoted even in the legal fraternity when discussing the problem of natural law.

Bishop Spong had earlier appeared on SBS's Face the Press programme, where his initial training as a sports commentator was much in evidence. He's adept at getting to the finishing post first.

As it was a programme in which I myself featured, I have received a variety of correspondence, some of it accusing me of ad hominem arguments against the bishop.

I am not in the business of tit-for-tat-dom but I can say it was inferred by Bishop Spong that I was to be

lumped in with those he is pleased to call "Santa Claus" believers, and was characterised as a "professional Christian".

Indeed I am. I profess the Christian faith and am quite unashamed to defend its orthodox expression. If that makes me a type of "fundamentalist", then so be it.

I simply want to know how it is that the original eye-witnesses of the events upon which the Christian faith relies could have got it all so wrong. Apparently they were not describing things they actually saw but were articulating experiences in a meta-historical way.

The bishop also makes great store out of the fact that the first Christian documents were not written until 30 years after the events. But is not most history written after the events, and sometimes much longer after them than that?

It is not a good thing to judge peoples' motives but I must say I'm perplexed by Bishop Spong's.

Clearly his visit is mainly to sell his book and he has been given a dream run by interviewers who know nothing or who see in the bishop a good form of entertainment.

Others, with agendas of their own, cannot believe their luck in having the approbation of an American bishop in good standing.

Unfortunately this is the bishop's first visit to these shores and he naturally makes assumptions which may prove without foundation. One of these seems to be that we are an ill-informed lot, just waiting to be enlightened.

But what are we to make of Bishop Spong's assertion that his attack on fundamentalism was written primarily for his three daughters, all of them already grown-up and successful? The argument is clearly specious, especially from a bishop whose ordination oath binds him to the guardianship of the Christian faith as it was delivered to the apostles themselves.

Surely that means adhering to the eye-witness accounts of those apostles? But apparently by some quirk of our own history we are preternaturally much cleverer in the 20th Century - and will be even more astute in the 21st. That concept of automatic human progress existed in the 19th Century but has been blown to smithereens surely in this most destructive period in human history.

Bishop Spong is fond of quoting Teilhard de Chardin as if that Jesuit confirmed his own interpretation of evolution, but the French theologian was no detractor of the original faith, and if he had to suffer for his concepts, they were supremely orthodox and not given to the destruction of what Christians have always believed. Father Byrne seemed aware of this disparity.

Teilhard de Chardin, in the presence of palaeontologists like himself - but unbelievers - on an assignment in China, witnessed his entire faith in the mystery of God, and as he was without "bread or wine or altar", he said "I shall offer Christ upon the altar of the world".

But Bishop Spong's perceptions seem to be more about a unitarian concept of God, neatly hidden under a smokescreen of devotion to a sort of Christian myth. Indeed Bishop Spong's use of "myth" puts him in a school of thought naturally at loggerheads with those who believe that Christianity is quite simply rooted in human history.

Yet it must be asked how he justifies his continued role as a bishop, and his ready reliance upon the authority such a position gives him in the eyes of an ignorant public.

His espousal of the homosexual and lesbian agendas present in so many societies seems, at first sight,

simply a compassionate reaction to what he calls centuries of "ghettoisation" of these sexual minorities. Yet when his argument extends to suggesting that AIDS is partly due to this implicit persecution, compassion becomes a passion and the very fidelity he preaches both within and out of marriage comes unstuck.

There is a judgmental aspect to Bishop Spong which frequently makes itself felt, yet he obviously also feels deeply the opposition to his views.

### **His sincerity is not in question.**

Sadly, some of those seeking to "use" him on his visit to Australia may well make him seem prophetic of the demise of Christianity.

The fact is that accommodating the demands of faith to secular society does not gain that society's respect at all. The communities of faith attracting the alienated are not those diluting the demands of faith and discipline, but those expecting a solid allegiance calling for personal sacrifice.

The Spong exercise, however, highlights another thing - the failure of the churches to work at apologetics and to publish populist material which will inform the army of seekers after faith, of what Christians believe.

There is a plethora of New Age believers' material, and the occult fills the shelves of bookshops where religion is also likely to find a mistaken place. But out of some sort of misguided tolerance, entirely destructive voices are allowed to shout from the rooftops, unchallenged, while the churches remain docile.

Are they afraid to mix it with the detractors of faith? Are they preoccupied with preserving their position vis-a-vis a society which is clearly pagan? Having declared that this is the decade of evangelism, they pussyfoot around as if Judgment Day could be delayed forever.

If Bishop Spong's betrayal of the norms of faith cannot rouse them, what will? And do they not understand that those who sit in the pews are really waiting for the clarion call?

With mostly locked doors out of fear for vandalism, even the role of church buildings as oases of prayer and strength is being betrayed. What does it matter if the "valuables" are carried off? Should the church even have portable valuables at all? Do they not remember the words of Jesus from Nazareth, "Where your treasure is there will your heart be also"?

But I can imagine the correspondence I will now receive. It will all be about "stewardship", and how to to keep the museum safe from burglary.

Or it will accuse me of being too confrontationist, as if apologetics should really be an abject apology for believing in God, and not a spirited defence of power and validity.

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