



Change or Die!

IN THE TRADITION of Martin Luther, John Shelby Spong, Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, announced a “new Reformation” of the Christian church’s faith and practice.^{1,2} Bishop Spong declares:

. . . [O]nly one thing will save this venerable faith tradition at this critical time in Christian history, and that is a new Reformation far more radical than Christianity has ever before known. . . .

. . . [T]his Reformation . . . will not be concerned about authority, ecclesiastical polity, valid ordinations, and valid sacraments. It will be rather a Reformation that will examine the very nature of the Christian faith itself.³

The bishop furthered this call for reformation by posting 12 theses on the internet. In these theses he contends:

1. “Theism [“belief in a personal God as creator and ruler of the world”⁴], as a way of defining God, is dead.”
2. “Since God can no longer be conceived in theistic [personal] terms, it becomes nonsensical to understand Jesus as the incarnation of the theistic deity [personal God].”
3. “The biblical story of the perfect and finished creation from which human beings fell into sin is pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense.”
4. “The virgin birth . . . makes Christ’s divinity, as traditionally understood, impossible.”
5. “The miracle stories [of Jesus] . . . can no longer be interpreted . . . as supernatural events performed by an incarnate deity.”
6. “The view of the cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world is a barbarian idea . . . [that] must be dismissed.”
7. “. . . [The] resurrection [of Jesus] . . . cannot be a physical resuscitation occurring inside human history.”

8. “The . . . ascension [of Jesus into heaven cannot be] translated into the concepts of a post-Copernican space age.”
9. “. . . [N]o external, objective . . . standard . . . on tablets of stone . . . [can] govern our ethical behavior for all time.”
10. “Prayer cannot be . . . made to a theistic [personal] deity to act . . . in a particular way.”
11. “. . . [H]ope for life after death must be separated . . . from the . . . mentality of reward and punishment.”
12. “All human beings . . . must be respected . . . [regardless of] race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation . . . ”^{5,6}

Bishop Spong then offers to debate these theses “as we prepare to enter the third millennium.”⁷

Christianity “From Above”

Neither in his theses nor in his treatise does Bishop Spong mention the fact that most “conservative” Christians have already abandoned orthodox Christianity for a Christian Gnosticism. The term *Gnosticism* is from the Greek *gnostikos*, meaning one who has *gnosis* or secret knowledge. Ancient

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Gnosticism contended that Adam was actually the true God imprisoned in flesh by the fallen creator god. Only revelation from above could disclose this inner secret of the self to human consciousness, thus liberating (an elite portion) of mankind (male and female). Adapting this ancient worldview, Christian Gnosticism sees Jesus Christ, the second Adam, as the forerunner or pioneer of divine liberation through his Spirit-possession of the secret knowledge of his divinity. “Knowing” that through the Spirit their inner selves also possess God or are possessed by God, Gnostic “conservatives” contend that they, too, have become the revelation of the true God “from above.” With this divinized self-image, they are determined to dominate world culture and civilization until they are “raptured” to the destiny of their fully disclosed divinity in heaven.⁸

However, unknown to these Gnostic “knowers,” their movement is in profound jeopardy. Because they are only an elite few, they do not represent the common many. Since their inner divinity is “from above,” it can only be deity in its lowest rather than its highest form. Because they view Creation as “fallen,” they are led to despise embodied life — individual and collective. And since a “fallen” Creation is ultimately irrelevant, they deny the true reality and significance of history — and are therefore condemned to repeat it. Finally, a powerful panentheistic (God is in everything) Christianity “from below” is today challenging Gnostic (God is in the “knowing” man) Christianity “from above.”

Christianity “From Below”

“Liberal” Christians intuitively reject both orthodox and Gnostic Christianity. They demand a Christianity that is all-inclusive, that promises the highest deification of mankind, that acknowledges Creation, and that is egalitarian. Liberal Christians are therefore rapidly adopting a Christianity “from below.” Theology “from below” claims that God is not a person “out there” but is the “ground” or essence of all being “down here.”

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This theology is the same panentheism that has recurred down through the ages.⁹ In his book, *Tomorrow’s Catholic*, Michael Morwood issued a plea that the world embrace this panentheism and the omnipresent god in all.¹⁰ Meanwhile, in his call for radical reformation, Bishop Spong disclosed his own panentheistic roots:

One of the great mentors of my life was an English bishop and New Testament scholar named John Albert Thomas Robinson. . . . In 1962 . . . he wrote a little book called *Honest to God*. . . . An advance story in London’s *Sunday Observer* trumpeted the headline, “Bishop says the God up there or out there will have to go.” Thus, the Church was launched into what came to be known as the Honest to God Debate. . . .

I remember the day I first opened this book. Vacationing on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, I sat on the beach one afternoon with *Honest to God*. I did not put it down until I had read it through three times. I knew from that moment that my life would never be the same. . . .

. . . In 1973 I first met John Robinson. . . . I thanked him for what his writing had meant to me. . . . Five years later in 1978 John and I met again at the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Bishops of the world. . . .

In . . . [subsequent] years John and I both continued to write books which addressed the theme of bringing the church into dialogue with today’s reality. I read everything he wrote. John Robinson’s echoes were heard in me every time I spoke and certainly every time I wrote. When one reviewer referred to me as the American Bishop Robinson, I was deeply touched. . . .

. . . [By 1988] I was the most controversial bishop in the Anglican Communion. My vocation clearly was to transform Christianity so that it could be lived out appropriately today. . . . I could not walk away from the role for which everything in life had equipped me. I have lived this role with vigor, yearning more than once to have had John’s counsel. . . .

. . . Today I can see the horizon of my career and wonder who the next John Robinson will be.¹¹

Since Bishop Spong was walking in the footsteps of his mentor, Bishop John A. T. Robinson, it is appropriate to identify some of Robinson’s convictions:

1. That “he could no longer subscribe to the old personal God ‘out there.’”¹² “His *Honest to God* introduced . . . the idea that belief in a ‘panentheistic’ God, ‘the

beyond in the midst,' could redeem theism [personal God] in a secular environment . . . ”¹³

2. That “[t]he understanding of the logos . . . is not primarily that of Plato, according to which the logos was a middle being between God and the world. Rather, it is that of Heraclitus, according to whom the logos was conceived panentheistically as grounding the world’s unity . . . ”¹⁴
3. That “divine action . . . [takes] place *within* natural processes rather than impinging upon them from outside.”¹⁵
4. That “Jesus’ full humanity . . . requires . . . [a] disavowal of the virginal conception, on the grounds that it would remove Jesus’ true solidarity with every part of human existence . . . ”¹⁶
5. That Jesus, “rather than [being] a divine man stripping off his attributes to become human, in a metaphysical kenosis . . . [is] a human being uniquely sacrificing his ego in self-giving to God in an obediential, this-worldly kenosis.”¹⁷
6. That “[the resurrection is] a necessary occasion for the birth of a new faith, though it . . . [does not require] any miracle involving Jesus’ body to establish it.”¹⁸
7. That “Jesus actualized the ‘archetype of the self’ which Jung sees as slumbering in the human unconscious awaiting the appearance of someone in history to activate it.”¹⁹

In adopting Bishop Robinson’s theology “from below,” Bishop Spong has expanded his reformational views in *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*.²⁰ Here again Bishop Spong acknowledges his “debt to John Robinson . . . as I continue his honest quest to reconcile authentic Christian faith with knowledge and awareness.”²¹

Like Robinson, Spong basically rejects a theistic, personal God, a fiat (commanded) Creation, an Edenic temptation and fall, an incarnate divine/human Christ, a blood atonement/satisfaction, and an embodied resurrection and ascension. Bishop Spong has perceived fundamental problems in orthodox Christianity that make it increasingly unacceptable to a postmodern world. However, in attempting to surmount these problems, he is promoting a Robinsonian theology known as “adoptionism.”^{22,23} Like Robinson, Spong has extended adoptionism to a

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panentheism that conceives of God as the omnipresent “Ground of Being” capable of filling everyone with divinity.²⁴ Thus:

God is a universal presence undergirding all of life. . . . Those who think that Christianity consists of a supernatural deity who invades the world periodically, who works through a virgin birth, a physical resuscitation, and a cosmic ascension, will find all that I say a threat to their faith.²⁵

This panentheistic theology “from below” promises the highest form of deity to everyone in the “eternal now” while seeming to preserve the integrity of Creation. But panentheistic adoptionism ultimately creates unresolvable problems. Its delusional divinization of man perpetuates a self-existence (as opposed to relational coexistence) that inevitably excludes the “other,” thus breeding evil and violence. It replaces objective ethics and morality by a subjectivism which declares that everything consensual is permitted. It denies the true reality and significance of history by championing a universal present. Finally, panentheism effaces the true self that is essential to human individuality and replaces it with a universal “logos” from below.

This “kenosis” of the self substitutes an omnipresent “overseer” (universal god in all) for unique individuality and personhood. True human consciousness — which involves the threefold presence of a subject (“self” or “addresser”), an object (“other” or “addressee”), and a reference authority (other “Other” or “Superaddressee”) — is destroyed. The fact is that we are conscious selves only in the relational presence of each other and of a reference other Other. Collapsing relational reality into the “black hole” of self-existent inner being would destroy our humanity, throwing us back into a morbidly self-absorbed condition with no distinct human definition of Creator and creature or of one’s own “self” and “other” selves. In the absence of an authentic self, man therefore reverts to an autistic consciousness that regards itself as “god” and recognizes all others as animals.²⁶

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In response to Bishop Robinson’s *Honest to God* and also, derivatively, to Bishop Spong’s theses, Thomas F. Torrance bluntly states that the

real theologian [needs] . . . to leave adolescent preoccupation with self-exploration and self-fulfillment behind and to become . . . [involved with] something beyond the echo of his own thought . . . a Word coming to him from beyond which he could never tell to himself.²⁷

Conclusion

Faced with the terminal collapse of orthodox Christianity, we confront a resurgent Gnosticism among “conservatives” who claim to possess an original and

immediate (inner) divinity “from above.” At the same time, we encounter a resurgent panentheism among “liberals” who claim to possess present, self-intrusive divinity “from the Ground of Being below.” We are therefore

witnesses to a struggle involving so-

called Christian theologies that actually trace their ancestry back to discredited Greek philosophy and long-rejected Egyptian mythology. Yet human survival depends, neither on theologies above us nor on any below us, but on a theology for us, beside us and with us. It is indeed urgent that this issue be addressed, for Christianity must now either change or die!

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Endnotes

1. See *Wikipedia*, s.v. “John Shelby Spong,” at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Shelby_Spong.
2. See John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998).
3. Anonymous, “Bishop Spong Calls for a ‘Renewal of Christianity,’” *Living Church*, 17 May 1998, p. 8.
4. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “theism.”
5. “Renewal of Christianity,” p. 8.
6. See John Shelby Spong, “The Twelve Theses: A Call to a New Reformation,” at servicioskoinonia.org/relat/436e.htm.
7. “Renewal of Christianity,” p. 8.
8. See “A Summary of *The American Religion*,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1998.7).
9. See “A Summary of *Tomorrow’s Catholic*,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1998.8).
10. See Michael Morwood, *Tomorrow’s Catholic: Understanding God and Jesus in a New Millennium* (Melbourne, Australia: Spectrum Publications, 1997).
11. John Shelby Spong, “John A. T. Robinson Remembered,” at www.preteristarchive.com/StudyArchive/r/robinson-john_a-t.html.
12. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 390.
13. Scott Cowdell, *Is Jesus Unique? A Study of Recent Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), pp. 154, 155.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
20. See Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*.
21. *Ibid.*, p. xviii.
22. See Cowdell, *Is Jesus Unique?* pp. 158, 381.
23. “Adoptionist” or “Dynamic Monarchianism held that Christ was a mere man . . . but constituted the Son of God simply by the infinitely high degree in which he had been filled with divine wisdom and power.” — *Britannica Online*, s.v. “Monarchianism,” at www.britannica.com/topic/Monarchianism.

24. “Paul Tillich, my own teacher and himself a refugee from Nazi Germany, writing as far back as the 1930s and 1940s, suggested that we must abandon the external height images in which the theistic God has historically been perceived and replace them with internal depth images of a deity who is not apart from us but who is the very core and ground of all that is.”
— Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p. 64.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
26. See “Somewhere to Stand,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1998.9).
27. Thomas Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 55.

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