

# *Spong's Fundamental Flaws-*

*James S Murray - staff writer for 'The Age', Melbourne*

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*Australia is often the happy hunting ground of aspiring overseas authors upon whom publishers expend a good deal more promotion than on most local writers.*

*Of churchmen - and I mean church "men" - the same may often be said. A supposedly prophetic voice from elsewhere will carry more weight than the prophet "without honour in his own country"*

*So when the World Council of Churches held its General Assembly in Canberra this year (19xx) there were prophets galore; instant authorities on the Aborigines and everything else Australian.*

*Now we have Bishop John Shelby Spong from the United States, whose book *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (Harper Collins, \$14.95) has just been published.*

*Matter it not at all that the supposedly radical contents are mostly old hat, having been paraded before by some with 'real' scholarly pretensions.*

*Bishop Spong's claims to fame or notoriety tend to be in his pastoral emphasis on shepherding lesbians and gay men and arguing for total acceptance, as they are, within the church.*

*I suppose this is radical in its opposition to almost universal church teaching that while it is no sin to be homosexual, to commit overt sexual acts deriving from this orientation is a sin.*

*That position has made it possible for many Christians to support decriminalisation of homosexual acts, without compromising the Church's traditional position.*

*The bishop, however, has put his money where his mouth is, and must be admired for a certain sort of courage. He ordained an active homosexual to the priesthood, only to have the newly ordained gentleman to make public utterances impugning the status of marriage and justifying promiscuity.*

*Be it in Spong's favour that he is no radical about monogamy. One has the uneasy feeling that what we have in the bishop's apparent crusade against what he is pleased to call "fundamentalism" may really be a late reaction against his own pietistic upbringing in the Deep South.*

*But there are some aspects to Spong's arguments which need to be challenged, especially his habit of accusing other Christians of misusing Scripture to justify untenable positions while he erects speculative structures not all that difficult to overthrow.*

*The most speculative is that St. Paul was a repressed homosexual, basing this on the enigmatic statement made by the apostle that he had suffered from "a thorn ... in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated".*

*Spong's expose is entirely speculative, making assumptions as broad as those of which he accuses his opponents.*

*These opponents are the fundamentalists, whom he designates as all literalists, that is believers in the inerrancy of Holy Scripture.*

*How unfair this is only needs an examination of the origin of the word "fundamentalism".*

*Of course it has become a word with an entirely unfavourable connotation and is now applied willy-nilly to adherents of any religious faith whose zeal and fanaticism appalls others.*

*Yet fundamentalism began as a religious movement rather than a religious mentality. It was motivated by anxieties about two things in the latter part of the 19th Century; the theory of evolution and some trends in biblical criticism.*

***In 1895 a conference at Niagara issued what became to be known as the "Five Points of Fundamentalism"***

***The Verbal Inerrancy of Scripture***

***The Divinity of Jesus Christ***

***The Virgin Birth***

***the Substitutionary theory of the Atonement***

***The Physical Resurrection and Bodily return of Christ***

*Yet all of these are subject to interpretation and it is inevitable that debate will continue. With Bishop Spong, however, it is not debate with which we are confronted, but condemnation.*

*Orthodoxy in Christian belief is virtually held up to ridicule, and one has the feeling that the bishop has a heightened view of his own role, vis a vis the church.*

*The problem is that much he writes reveals a man devoted, in his own way, to the Scriptures, a debt to his own upbringing, and the "thorn in his flesh" which certainly seems to harass him is a kind of anger that faith requires a supernatural trust.*

*I detect no perception that God is ever active, or that there is any such thing as a divine initiative, and while it may seem unkind to suggest that what the bishop offers is yet another variety of secular humanism, I think that secular humanists will find him congenial.*

*As with many others in the Spong liberal mould, he seems to want a bet both ways so that there is a resurrection of sorts, but the Bible misrepresents it.*

*He makes much of what he calls "contradiction" in the narrative accounts of the witnesses upon whom Christians have ever relied, and we are confronted with a strange choice: are we to believe Bishop Spong's updated speculations, or the testimony of those who heard and saw and recorded the events upon which the Christian faith has based its integrity?*

*Another thing Bishop Spong ignores is the wide variety of fundamentalism. As I have commented before, while the term may seem to apply only to what look like religious extremists, most religious believers accept some form of "fundamentalism".*

*There are beliefs for which they might even be willing to die.*

*The fruits of fundamentalism are not all bitter, and the profundity which Bishop Spong admits is to be found even in the infancy narratives in Matthew's and Luke's gospels is a profundity born of faith.*

*Grappling with religious language has always been a problem, but Spong wants to make it a problem of something like scientific probity when, in fact, the Scriptures never set out to propose such an analysis.*

*Comparisons are now being made with the late Bishop John Robinson whose book *Honest to God* caused such a furore in the 1960s. But Robinson was a biblical scholar of real prescience, and had already done substantial work on the Scriptures to which many were indebted.*

*In spite of being claimed as a sort of populist, much of what he wrote - even in *Honest to God* - needed some theological background.*

*But Bishop Spong seeks to be the populist par excellence, and even if he is somewhat patronising at times in seeking to inform what he sees as a public constituency of faith entirely ignorant of what its religion actually claims.*

*It is the obsessive attack on literalism which undermines much of what he says, for many a fundamentalist is not a literalist, taking every word of Scripture as demonstrably the truth from every angle, but fundamentally believes that Jesus is the image of God.*

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