

Question: A Reflection on *Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today* by John Shelby Spong

By Intern Miranda Joebgen

Warning: Do not read this book unless you are ready to be put in an uncomfortable position regarding your faith. That is to say, do not read this book unless you are ready to think deeply and open your mind to new, radical, holy thoughts.

When was the last time you questioned your faith? I don't just mean when was the last time a sermon made you think, or the last time you read a Bible passage differently than you had previously. I mean, when was the last time you took a good long look at what it truly is that makes up your faith in God and asked yourself, "Is this still relevant for who I am today? Is this still relevant for the world in which I live today?"

I don't think it is a secret that the church, as it has historically been known, is becoming increasingly irrelevant in today's society. The reasons for this are vast and complex, yet many of them share the same root: the church's unwillingness to change. This notion lies at the heart of Spong's book. Spong believes that the church as we know it is dying (quite literally) for a new reformation - one that centers not on church politics, but on church doctrine. For too long, the church has clung to words and ways of the past - often at the expense of those who are the most desperately in need of the love of God. In this book, Spong proposes 12 theses, which he believes will help us create a new faith that can have real life in this age. Spong believes that in order for our Christian faith to have real life and purpose today, these 12 theological concepts must be thoroughly reexamined so that they may open us to new possibilities. The topics of the 12 theses are:

1. God
2. Jesus the Christ
3. Original Sin
4. The Virgin Birth
5. Miracles
6. Atonement Theology
7. Easter
8. The Ascension
9. Ethics
10. Prayer
11. Life After Death
12. Universalism

Alright - take a deep breath.

These are deep, heavy topics - ones that are not meant to be taken lightly. To change these theological concepts would be to change what it means to be a Christian. Spong is aware of this, and he approaches these issues with the reverence they deserve. He is proposing radical, deep change in our faith tradition - yet, in a way, he also isn't. If you take the time to read Spong's arguments with an open mind, you will see that the changes he proposes remain true to the original roots of Christianity - the roots that were in the ground long before the "church." Spong spends 41 pages articulating an entirely different way of thinking about God, but in the end he writes, "God is the name by which we call this experience of love. If God is love, the only way we can worship God is by loving others. The more we give love away, the more we make the experience of God visible. ... God is experienced in the presence of love. God is the dimension of transcendence flowing through us," (65). While Spong is asking us to rethink - and perhaps let go of - certain dogmas and doctrines that we have previously held, he is not asking us to let go of the nature of God - that which lies at the center of our faith.

Ultimately, Spong is attempting to help us learn to let go of the need and desire to define God, because this is an impossible task. Spong writes, "The Christianity of the future cannot live inside the doctrines of the past. Doctrines are always a description or definition of our God experience, they are never a definition of God. ... My experience of God and God are not the same. God is not beyond my ability to experience, but the nature of God is beyond my ability to explain," (277). To put our trust in writings, doctrine, and definitions is to put our trust in humans rather than God.

I know this is a lot to take in. And I'm not suggesting we abandon our scriptures, creeds, and theology in favor of the 12 theses laid out in this book. What I am asking is that we take time to ask ourselves what it is that makes up our religion - what lies at the heart of our faith in God? I believe that reading this book is an excellent way to start this discussion with yourself. You might feel uncomfortable - angry - defensive - excited - inspired - upset - exhausted - or all of the above. These responses are good and valid - they will help you ask the hard questions about your faith, and ultimately grow closer to the Divine. We aren't letting go of God - we are letting go of the constraints we have tried to put on God. What new things will we discover about God - and about ourselves and one another - when we learn to open our minds just a little bit more?

As always, I highly encourage each one of you to read this book. When you do, I will be here, ready and willing to talk it through with you. Reach out to me at intern4flestp@gmail.com to set up a time to talk. I'll be waiting.

In Peace,
Intern Miranda