

THE NECESSITY OF HERESY

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University Congregational Church

Reading: Bishop John Spong's Twelve Thesis

- 1. Theism, as a way of defining God, is dead. So most theological God-talk is today meaningless. A new way to speak about God must be found.**
- 2. Since God can no longer be conceived in theist terms, it becomes nonsensical to seek to understand Jesus as the incarnation of the theistic deity. So the Christology of the ages is bankrupt.**
- 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, understood as literal biology, makes Christ's divinity, as traditionally understood, impossible.**
- 5. The miracle stories of the New Testament can no longer be interpreted in post-Newtonian world 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 based on primitive concepts of God and must be dismissed.**
- 7. Resurrection is an action of God. Jesus was raised into the meaning of God. It therefore cannot be a physical resuscitation occurring in human history.**
- 8. The story of the Ascension assumed a three-tiered universe and is therefore not capable of being translated into the concepts of a post-Copernican space age.**
- 9. There is no external, objective, revealed standard writ in scripture or on tablets of stone that will govern our ethical behavior for all time.**
- 10. Prayer cannot be a request made to a theistic deity to act in human history in a particular way.**
- 11. The hope for life after death must be separated forever from the behavior control mentality of reward and punishment. The Church must abandon, therefore, its reliance on guilt as a motivator of behavior.**
- 12. All human beings bear God's image and must be respected for what each person is. Therefore, no external description of one's being, whether based on race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, can properly be used as the basis for either rejection or discrimination.**

So I set these theses today before the Christian world and I stand ready to debate each of them as we prepare to enter the third millennium.

The word that is often uttered when people hear Bishop Spong's theses is heresy. Trust me when I tell you that heresy is one of the kinder words that have met Bishop Spong. Some people have actually threatened his life. I want to return to this charge of heresy a little bit later. For now, I propose that we take Bishop Spong's words seriously. Not by any means do I suggest that his twelve theses are the new articles of religion. He certainly did not intend that. Nor do I mean to suggest that the twelve theses define this congregation or what we believe. As Congregationalists we do not subscribe to creed or doctrine but affirm each individual's right of conscience in all matters of faith.

If Bishop Spong was one solitary voice in the desert, he would not command much attention. But Bishop Spong is one of many religious leaders, Biblical scholars, theologians, clergy and laity who find the ancient world view and all of the theological premises that flow from it to be inadequate for contemporary faith. Such a world view has yet to take science seriously. Indeed, it has created a hostility between science and religion and generated absurd political and social conflicts such as "creationism." It has robbed many people of an authentic faith that is trustworthy and that one need not abandon in adolescence.

I want to re-enforce that last sentence by making it quite clear that neither Bishop Spong nor I have any interest or intention of debasing or belittling anyone's

faith. Actually, quite the opposite. University Congregational Church claims that we are a religious community “where head and heart are equal partners in faith.” I certainly hunger for an experience of the sacred that not only inspires me, but also engages my intellect. I hunger for religious language that is at home in my world of science, technology, logic, and moral reason. I do not mean that my world of science, technology, logic, and moral reason is beyond the scope of religious criticism. It must always be so. And, it must be a religious criticism that converts science, technology, logic and moral reason into wisdom. New ways of speaking about God must be found if we are going to have a living and dynamic faith.

I also understand that new ways of speaking about God is a movement that is only in its infancy. Scholars like to call it a paradigm shift. The problem with such a major shift in thought is that while you are in the midst of it you do not know exactly what the outcome is going to be. In fact, it is likely to be something that will not come into maturity in our lifetime. It is something like the global economy. The old American capitalist system of economics that had a greater reliance on manufacturing is now a system that relies more on financial services. New economic super-powers have emerged, along with free trade agreements. How this is all going to affect the American economy, and quite specifically our standard of living, is not yet fully understood. Can we even really call it an American economy anymore?

A new understanding of God that reflects the realities of Newtonian and quantum physics is not fully grasped. A post-modern Christianity that is embraced by the diversity of human races, cultures, and ethnicities is not fully understood. But I wonder why we ever thought that faith was supposed to be a finished product, a done deal. Isn't faith supposed to be alive and vibrant? Isn't it possible that God is capable of adapting, expanding, and growing with the human experience; just as we might adapt, expand, and grow with God? We must find new ways to speak about God. That is a very different thing than demythologizing and debunking religious faith for the sole purpose of destroying it.

Now let us return to the question of heresy. Doesn't a new way of speaking about God become heresy? The answer is yes, absolutely. Thank God! Andre Soares declared, "Heresy is the lifeblood of religions. It is faith that begets heretics. There are no heresies in a dead religion." In ancient philosophy heresy was a matter of course. Heresy, from the Greek word, *airesis*, meant a choice and the thing chosen. Very often these choices were distinguished from the mainstream and signified that which was not assimilated. In Hellenic Greece heresy was an objective denotation of a doctrine or a school, such as schools of philosophy and their derivatives. Josephus applied *airesis* to the three major sects of Judaism, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes.

By the second century of the Common Era, heresy was defined as an inauthentic or illegitimate doctrine. Heresies and sects were religious groups

whose beliefs did not meet the approval of the religious authorities. In general English usage, heresy is a negative term indicating a belief that is contrary to the faith community's essential teachings. What we have lost in this transition is the idea that there are choices of meaning, interpretation, and translation.

There is a difference between heresy and apostasy. Apostasy is the rejection or renunciation of the community's faith. There could be some gathered here this morning that are heretics and some who are apostates. You know who you are. There are many Congregationalists who elevate Jesus above the common masses but do not give to Jesus the same divine nature of God. You are known as Arian heretics. But there just might be other heretics in our circle who are Gnostics, Docitists, Montanists, Manicheists, and so on. The church has spent a lot of time naming heretics through the centuries. The Inquisition censored, tortured, and murdered many heretics such as Galileo, Joan of Arc, and Miguel Servetus. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. once quipped, "Those who are convinced they have a monopoly on "the truth" always feel that they are only saving the world when they slaughter the heretics."

The Enlightenment had a tremendous impact on the power of heresy in the life of the church. Throughout the Middle Ages the state had been the enforcer of the church's charge of heresy. Fueled by the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment forced the separation of church and state and the church no longer controlled the military powers of the state. The Enlightenment elevated the power

of reason and individual conscience eroding the church's authority in matters of faith and practice. Dogmatic formulations increasingly came under the scrutiny of science and reason. Pluralism and religious tolerance became religious, social, and political realities during the Enlightenment. Heresy has become an internal matter in the life of the church that might prohibit a person from Holy Communion or result in excommunication. The church no longer burns heretics at the stake.

As Congregationalists in the twenty-first century we are reminded of the words of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "A heretic is a man who sees with his own eyes." We gather together in this sanctuary bound not by doctrine but by covenant; not by creed but the freedom of conscience. That is to say that each person is responsible for his or her own faith stance. We do not ask conformity to a statement of faith. We do encourage the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We expect the minister to preach the truth as he or she understands it. We expect our membership to hold fast to that which they believe is true. That is to say, we affirm the options - the interpretations and meanings of faith - the heresies - that are unique to each one of us. As Graham Greene said, "Heresy is only another word for freedom of thought."

I believe that part of the mission of a Congregationalist church is to maintain the freedom of thought. You might be orthodox in your beliefs, or neo-orthodox, or liberal, or agnostic. But wherever we are on the theological spectrum it is critical that Congregationalists honor the right of conscience, however different it

might be from our own belief. I believe this is so important for two reasons. First I believe that we must safe-guard the freedom of thought because truth is not known to us absolutely. No matter what field you are talking about our knowledge is incomplete. Regardless of the comprehensiveness of our religious or philosophical education, our wisdom is incomplete. Indeed, our faith tradition has insisted that we cannot ever know the breadth and depth of God's mind. If you compiled all of the sacred scriptures of the world - the Vedas of Hinduism, the Dhammapada of Buddha and all of the sutras, the Torah of Judaism including all of the midrash and haggadah that has followed, the New Testament of Christianity and all of her sacred writings, and you put all of these words about God together you would only have a mere glimpse of the the Holy One. The truth that is God cannot ever be fully known and it is the height of arrogance for any religion, denomination, sect or religious leader to presume to have the final and only truth about God.

The second reason why Congregationalist must maintain our historical tradition of freedom of thought is because we live in such frightening times. Fear frequently drives people to extremes, and reason is often the first victim. The temptation is for people to rush and cling to the formulations and even cliches of childhood faith. The words are comforting and nostalgic, reminding us of more simple times. We hunger for the security and assurance of Mother Church and we resent the possibility that life in the 21st century is complicated. We find ourselves

in the midst of competing moral or value systems and flounder in many ethical choices that struggle for relevance. It is so tempting for us to hide behind that “Old time religion,” and turn our minds away from the challenges of our day.

A Roman Catholic Cardinal, Robert Bellarmine, lived between 1542 and 1621. He was a great defender of the Catholic faith, an antagonist to Protestantism, which he believed was heretical. He also condemned the works of the Copernicus and Galileo. Of the later Bellarmine wrote, “To assert that the earth revolves around the sun is as erroneous to claim that Jesus was not born of a virgin.” It seems laughable to us today. But you must understand that the church had no problem with science as long as science upheld and defended the theology and teachings of the church. It was when science called into question the church’s cosmology and moved the earth away from the center of God’s universe that the church began to censure science. Since Scholasticism of the 13th century it has been the position of the Roman Catholic Church that all knowledge is meant to serve the church’s theological and moral teachings. Such belief was recently invigorated by Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, i.e., *Faith and Reason* (1998).

If it is true that the truth will make you free, we cannot entwine truth to one religion or religious figure. We cannot make the search for truth the bondsman of ecclesiastical power and influence. We cannot enslave God to institutional survival. The free and open discussion of ideas and beliefs is essential for the

discovery of truth. We need heretics to keep open the possibilities that God is greater than all of our theologies and systems of thought. We need heresy to crack open those layers of religious conditioning that shine like a Japanese lacquered box but is ever so brittle. Heresy is necessary if God is to be free to work among God's people.

You see, I don't want anybody to put God in a word box and declare that word to be the one true apostolic faith. I don't think God wants to be put into a word box. The Spirit, both human and Holy, must rebel against it. Heresy is necessary because she calls us back from words into renewed experience. She calls us back from old formulas, the rote catechism, the religious cliches, the sacred solipsism, into a fresh search for God. She challenges us to re-open hearts and minds to the living presence that beats through human hearts and flows through the currents of life.

As you know, I am proposing to spend several weeks with Bishop Spong's ideas. I do not intend to write a sermon for every one of his twelve theses. I have found that serial sermons are often quite deadly. But I hope to take him seriously and to raise the possibility that there are new ways to talk about God - ways that will not destroy faith but give faith a vibrant meaning to our lives. I do not believe that human beings will ever achieve a faith that is indisputable. I do believe that faith can be veracious and that the search for God can be both invigorating and

credible. Heresy invites us to re-think and re-appropriate vital religious conversation.

I close with the wonderful poem of Edwin Markham:

He drew a circle to shut me out:

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But love and I had the wit to win.

We drew a circle that brought him in.

May University Congregational Church draw ever larger circles of love and tolerance, wisdom and inclusion.

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