

1-1-2000

Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile, by John Shelby Spong

Paul J. Fitzgerald S.J.

Fairfield University, pfitzgerald@fairfield.edu

Copyright 2000 Theological Studies
Archived here with permission from the copyright holder.

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

Fitzgerald, Paul J. S.J., "Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile, by John Shelby Spong" (2000). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. Paper 6.
<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs/6>

Published Citation

Fitzgerald, Paul. "Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile, by John Shelby Spong." *Theological Studies* 61.3 (2000): 591-591.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Religious Studies Department at DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

Dogmatics. In 1948 he was cofounder of the famous and influential *Scottish Journal of Theology*. The two most difficult decisions in his life were not to accept a position at Princeton University in 1939 and not to succeed Barth at Basel in 1961. He remained at New College, Edinburgh from 1950–1979 when he retired, a year after receiving the prestigious Templeton Prize. Because he could not lecture on the Trinity at New College, his major works on that doctrine awaited his extraordinarily active retirement, during which he continued to lecture and publish extensively.

M. believes that one of Torrance's most important contributions to contemporary theology is that he restored natural theology to its traditional place in Reformed theology, showing how and why theology and natural science worked within a common (unitary) frame of knowledge. This enabled him to argue, following Athanasius, for scientific theology, i.e., a nondualist knowledge that takes place under the constraint of its unique object; Einstein's method and some of Polanyi's categories helped him develop his position.

While Torrance is correct to argue that natural theology should not function independently of revelation, the question left unresolved is how and why such a transformed understanding could still be called natural theology. Since natural theology must operate in subordination to what is known by faith and grace from revelation, it would seem that Torrance's reconstructed natural theology is more a theology *of* nature than knowledge of God *from* nature.

PAUL D. MOLNAR

St. John's University, Jamaica, N.Y.

WHY CHRISTIANITY MUST CHANGE OR DIE. By John Shelby Spong. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998. Pp. xxiii + 257. \$24; \$14.

Peter Berger thus described the trilemma of contemporary Christians: one can retreat into world-denying fundamentalism, one can embrace science and thoroughly demythify religion, or one can attempt some sort of compromise position. It is clear that Spong rejects the first option and tends toward

the second. Episcopal bishop and prolific author, S. presents here a summa of his nondogmatic, nontheistic faith. He advocates belief in a nonpersonal, non-interventionist God, a belief unsupported by revelation and tradition as these have been understood in the mainline churches through the centuries. Relying heavily on the later exegetical work of J. A. T. Robinson, S. rejects the language and the categories of theism as products of a now untenable world view. Traditional religious language (images of God, miraculous works of Jesus, intercessory prayer, etc.) are "utter nonsense" (151, where traditional religious ethics are dismissed as the tribal prejudices of primitives), yet S. is interested in the religious experience of the ancient authors. Having lost the experience of a personal God in prayer (136), S. embraces the experience of the absence of God.

Some readers will wonder about his generalizations, e.g., that the Church always condemned stealing, even if it were a last resort to feed one's starving family (207), and his observations, e.g., that prayers for healing act directly between persons as a sort of psychic energy transfer (145). Perhaps most controversial is his contention that Jesus of Nazareth was neither God nor redeemer but rather a God bearer, a "spirit person" who revealed to Christians that God is the Ground of Being, the transcendent reality that can be found in the heart of human life through love.

This book of popularized theological ideas may appeal to refugees from mainstream Christianity and to students of postmodern theology.

PAUL J. FITZGERALD, S.J.

Santa Clara University, Calif.

THE GOLD COAST CHURCH AND THE GHETTO: CHRIST AND CULTURE IN MAINLINE PROTESTANTISM. By James K. Wellman. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1999. Pp. xv + 257. \$21.95.

This engaging, richly detailed volume tells the story of one of the nation's best known churches, Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian, and offers a plausible challenge to the "strict-church thesis," according to which liberal values have