

Spong and the New Ecclesia



Address to The Centre for Progressive Religious Thought

The Church of St James Education Centre

Curtin, Australian Capital Territory

Friday September 13th 2002

By Emeritus Professor
Bob Douglas AO



Summary

Bishop John Shelby Spong argues that Christianity as we have known it is moribund and needs to make way for a radically fresh formulation of its central truth. Its creeds and its focus on the notion that God is some kind of heavenly being 'out there' who became human flesh in the person of Jesus, are not sustained by many biblical scholars and they are incompatible with what we now understand of our origins and the world we inhabit. In his most recent book, *A New Christianity for a New World*, Spong, canvasses these issues in depth and talks of the need for a new kind of 'ecclesia' and a reformation that will shake the established church to its core.

The 'new world' of which Spong speaks is a world that has been transformed by massive human population growth, globalisation, proliferation of technology, urbanisation, economic determinism and manipulation of our environment. It is a world deeply divided between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' and divided also on cultural, religious and ethnic grounds. It is a world characterised by profound ethical challenge. The decline of the authority of the church in Australian society has left a vacuum. The old certainties are gone. Yet we all still yearn to understand ourselves and where we belong in the scheme of the expanding cosmos. We all want to connect; we all seek physical and emotional security and most of us would agree that the church, when it is doing Jesus' bidding to 'love our neighbour as ourselves', is a powerful force for good in the world.

How should those of us who are attracted to this new Centre for Progressive Religious Thought respond?

I am suggesting that in order to take Spong's challenge seriously, some of us should explore the formation of a cascading series of 'Search' groups in Canberra. This choice of name is justified by both its meaning and the letters that make up the word.

'S' stands for Spong, support, sharing, social, and spirituality.

'E' stands for ecclesia, experimental, evolving, ecological and eclectic.

'A' stands for affirming, anti-theistic and 'all'.

'R' stands for reaching out, revolutionary, and reconciliation.

'C' stands for Christ and caring.

Finally, 'H' stands for holistic and helping.

These are some of the attributes which the new search groups might seek to build into their activities. The word 'search' rhymes with church but looks beyond it to what lies ahead.

Spong doesn't present a clear view of how the new ecclesia might evolve nor whether it will evolve from within or outside the existing church. I suggest that the formation of our first Search groups doesn't need to confront that issue.

I suggest that Canberrans who share Spong's vision might meet weekly on a Sunday evening in groups no larger than fifty people. The purpose of the meetings would be to share a meal, ideas, concerns and meditation about our world. Group meetings would be open to all; People would be encouraged to bring their friends; and as stable group size increases beyond forty-five persons, a nucleus of fifteen would be encouraged to form a new group. Groups would link by word of mouth, internet and telephone.

They would review their development every six months and appoint a small organising group to keep the group functional. Group meetings should be led by groups of three to five members of the group rostered on a rotating basis. A group meeting could include up to ninety minutes of planned activity and time for social interchange over a meal. The planned activity might include music, readings, meditation, sharing of life situations and consideration of social issues. As a starting point, the groups might agree to the affirmation of the Unitarian Universality Association. (See below.) We might plan a meeting of all groups that are formed by that time to coincide with the visit to Canberra in 2003 of Bishop Spong.

— Bob Douglas.



Spong and the New Ecclesia

Thank you Rex and the management committee for the challenge of opening the batting in this exciting new development by The Centre for Progressive Religious Thought. I warmly applaud St James for this initiative and believe it is very timely.

I would like to use this opportunity to share with you the way my own thinking has been shaped by the recent writings of Bishop John Spong. I will divide my talk into six areas.

- I. My own journey
- II. Spong's *A New Christianity for a New World*
- III. The nature of our new world
- IV. Spong's vision for the new ecclesia
- V. Evolution or revolution?
- VI. A possible framework for moving forwards

I. My Own Journey

Son of the manse

As the son of a congregational clergyman, I grew up, as I suspect did many of you, as a creature of the Australian church scene of the forties and fifties— junior choir, Sunday school, tennis and social clubs in connection with the youth fellowship. My father was a liberal theological thinker, deeply committed to his pastoral role, a social justice ethic, and more interested in the historic Jesus than in the concept of the Trinity. I treasure my early theological discussions with him and the integrity of his belief, which was built on confidence in the essential goodness of man and the humanity of Jesus.

Student Christian Movement

As a university student, I joined the Student Christian Movement and spent a year living in my father's former theological college, where I took a course in church history and also became President of the Adelaide University Student Christian Movement. I embarrassed many of my fellow SCMer's by challenging a Catholic Monsignor who was conducting a Catholic Mission to the university about the divinity of Jesus. His angry reply—'If Christ wasn't God he was a bloody liar'— was intended to silence such heresy. It didn't, but it certainly led to discussions in the SCM about my suitability to remain President.

The most important outcome of SCM for me was that in my search for meaning and purpose I met my wife Rosemary, with whom for forty-two years I have closely shared, an effort to make sense of our faith in the context of the changing world we inhabit.

John Robinson

As a young doctor in the early sixties the writings of John Robinson in his books *Honest to God* and *But That I Can't Believe*, enabled me to reconcile what I was seeing of the secular world with what I had learnt from my father's church and from my student life. I related closely to Robinson's view of an omnipresent 'ground of existence' and to his prime emphasis on Jesus the man.

Robinson's central question was, 'Who is Christ for us today?' His response was to seek him through the door of ordinary human experience and ordinary human relationships, not through a set of assumptions or beliefs about the cosmos that forced him to suspend his reason and intellect. In retrospect, I think that Robinson helped the development of my passion for social justice and enabled me to remain with the church when others of my generation were finding it increasingly irrelevant.

Papua New Guinea

Rosemary and I considered going to Papua New Guinea with the London Missionary Society, but I was pleased that I decided against mission work in favour of working in the hospital system administered by the Australian Government in its dying days as a colonial power. From that vantage I saw at close quarters the work of the missionaries, as they sought to impose their faith and practice on the people of that country. I often shuddered at their arrogance, certainty and absolutism while deeply admiring their love and concern for their parishioners. Many of Papua New Guinea's current leaders owe their education and health to the Christian missions that divided the country into areas of denominational influence.

US sojourns

Two lengthy stays in the United States brought us into contact with interesting variants on the Christian theme. In one church we became involved in the struggle against the Vietnam war, and for racial justice; these took priority over credal concerns; in the other we experienced challenging, earthy, simple preaching of a kind which still inspires us when we replay precious tapes and reread written sermons that we collected during that time.

Gartrell Uniting

Back in Australia, we chose a church that had a strong young people's group in the hope that our three adolescent children would benefit from church links as we had in our youth. They didn't.

For them I believe the chemistry and the underlying theology of the youth group at that time was simply not right. None of our children, all now parents themselves, has found a home in the church. One has certainly found a deeply caring and nurturing Catholic school for her children; another is attracted to Buddhist thought and meditation, and the third still sees the church as a significant institution, but not one that is central or relevant to his daily life.

What Rosemary and I found in the church we had joined for our children however, was a warmly supportive group of about thirty like-minded parishioners and thinkers. The group ran a parallel Sunday service in the hall, separate from the main church service. We took turns in leading worship in our own way. We all found, I think, that the act of planning and leading a worship service with our close friends helped us to distil what was important in our own understanding and belief. Certainly the services differed markedly from what was happening next door in the church. Once a month the minister joined us, but most of the time we were a closely caring and searching group of people who supported each other through a sharing of our concerns, aspirations and uncertainties.

Canberra small group

We came to Canberra fourteen years ago and joined a local church that closed because of declining viability about four years ago. At that church we became members of a subgroup of about ten people which still meets every two or three weeks in a home setting to discuss issues of purpose, faith and meaning.

We have worked together through a large number of books over the years, most, not all of the liberal theological genre, ranging from Morwood's *Tomorrows Catholic* to Holloway's *Godless Morality*, Charles Handy's *The Hungry Spirit* and Spong's *A New Christianity for a New World*. We tried but couldn't relate to John Stott's conservative book, *Issues Facing Christians Today*. Last month we explored *The Gospel of Jesus according to the Jesus Seminar*.

For me our small group has become the driving force for my spiritual journey, complementing as it does my looser involvement in a large caring and sharing diverse congregation where I am usually stimulated by our minister's thoughtful sermons, enjoy singing the hymns many of whose words I do not believe, and remain quiet through 90% of the recitation of the Apostle's creed.

Growing discomfort with institutional church

I have become increasingly dissatisfied with the liturgies and sacraments of my church. I am very aware of the declining influence of the church on our secular world and concerned that we live in a society that seems to have lost its way morally and spiritually. Under Spong's influence I am increasingly asking myself whether what I am doing by continuing to subscribe to the Christian church in its present form, is helping to prop up a body that is past its 'use by' date. Yet I hesitate to bale out of an institution which still partly answers my spiritual hunger and remains a voice of relative sanity in an increasingly threatening world.

Spong and the Jesus Seminar—of which Spong, Borg, Funk and 200 modern biblical scholars are members—have helped me to arrive at a point where I am becoming convinced that I need to move to new ground. I am quite unsure what that new ground will be but have become convinced that we need actively to explore Spong's concept of a 'new ecclesia'

North American Unitarians

In June of 2002, during a visit to Alaska, we participated in a Sunday morning service of the Unitarian church in Sitka. I will come back to that visit, because what I experienced on that occasion seemed to me to be relevant to the exploration that I am suggesting we might begin in Canberra.

II. Spong's *A New Christianity for a New World*

The issues raised by John Shelby Spong in the latest of his increasingly radical books are causing Christians in many parts of the world to rethink their allegiance to a theology and an institution that is substantially out of step with twentieth century cosmology, science, critical biblical scholarship and social need. Spong is now arguing—with passion and conviction—the need for radical reform and a clean break from past concepts and practice. He urges a rethinking of prayer and a reshaping of the purpose, structure and function of the Christian church. While he seeks to reform the church to which he still belongs, he has serious doubts that it will be capable of making the radical transformation that will be needed to align it with his sense of what Christianity is really about.

The death of theism

Spong echoes Robinson, Tillich and a growing chorus of biblical scholars who have argued that the theistic God of much of the Bible and of the conventional Christian church is dead. It does not make sense to think of God as a being, he says. God is being itself—the reality underlying everything that is. The ground of all being, in fact. Not a benign father in the sky, who from time to time suspends the natural law to reward his faithful servants, but the basis of our entire miraculous creation.

Spong says, 'I no longer need nor desire a protective parental God.' Nor does it make sense to ask God for special favours. God is part of who I am and who you are. God, he adds, is the ultimate source of love, and we worship this God by giving love away wastefully without stopping to count the cost and by risking all, abandoning our defences and our self imposed or culturally constructed security systems. Gone with the theistic God are the certainty and security of a hotline to the benign, personal and sometimes judgmental creator. In its place is uncertainty and a challenge to walk beyond our fears into what he describes as a 'transcendent presence' that we cannot see or understand. We can only see where God has been. This God, he says, is so much more than the supernatural being, the divine Santa Claus or the heavenly Mr Fix-it. The post theistic God is a God met not outside of life but at its very core.

Need to focus on Jesus the man

Jesus is Spong's gateway to an understanding of God. But not an exclusive gateway as so many Christians would want to claim. The God of the cosmos and of the electron must surely also be the God of Muslims, Buddhists, meditators and atheists. A Southern US Christian by upbringing, and one who now rejects absolutely his earlier fundamentalist orthodoxy, Spong continues to seek God through a discipleship to Jesus. But he now sees Jesus not as God incarnate, but as an extraordinary human whose example of selfless love and commitment to being, give us special insights into the sacredness of life and the secret of successful living.

Spong believes that in view of the extraordinary variation in emphasis and detail of our available records (which include not only our New Testament but a large series of other actual and hypothesised manuscripts), that what Jesus actually said and did is a legitimate focus for scholarly enquiry. A careful and rigorous enquiry by about 200 biblical scholars of the Jesus Seminar has systematically studied 1500 separate written reports of approximately 500 sayings of Jesus, and 387 reports of 176 of his deeds. These scholars have developed a corporate method for assigning a probability to the validity of each of these reports. They have concluded that a great deal that is in the New Testament is mythology, embellished to fit with Old Testament thought and prediction by the gospel writers whose written records began between forty and seventy years after his death.

The Gospel of Jesus according to the Jesus Seminar is an attempt to present those sayings and doings of Jesus that are considered by the scholars to be, on the available evidence, things that he almost certainly actually said and did.

What emerges from this stripped down, probabilistic version of what happened 2000 years ago is very different from what we learnt at Sunday school and what still passes in our modern world for the authentic Christian story. The gospel according to the Jesus Seminar has no nature miracles, no suggestion of a virgin birth or a bodily resurrection, no last supper, no Palm Sunday, no emphasis on sacrifice and relatively little indication of why Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified. His basic humanity and upending of the inflexible Jewish law, his selfless love and his sense of oneness with the source of all creation remain. He remains a charismatic teacher and healer, but his healing acts are restricted to what we might nowadays regard as more plausible psycho-physiological events. Jesus, in this account, provides us with an affirmation of life, an assurance that we are part of a grand plan: that we are loved and not alone. He displays a deep commitment to the poor and weak. He enjoins us to feed others as God feeds us.

This is the stripped down picture of Jesus which Spong affirms with passion and offers as his gateway to an understanding of God. Much of his latest book is a defence and elaboration of the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar of which he is an enthusiastic member

Incompatible with science and irrelevant to most

Spong asserts that this demythologisation of Jesus and the death of theism make Christianity more, not less relevant to those of us who inhabit the twenty-first century. The church creeds and traditions which date from early Christendom are manifestly incompatible with what scientists now believe about the nature and origin of life and the laws of nature. Their symbolism cuts little ice with those who have not grown up with them, and many of those who did are leaving the church. We need to examine what we know of the events of Jesus' life in the context of modern science, as well as in the context in which his disciples lived and to recognise that their effort to describe him was limited inevitably by their own world view.

We are not congenital sinners but can behave evilly

Humans are not intrinsically evil and they do not need to be saved from their sin by the death of Jesus, says Spong. The notion of the atonement does not accord with either the historic evidence or what we now know about human behaviour. Humans are survivors in an often hostile world. The evil we humans do is not a commentary on our 'fallen nature'. It is a manifestation of our dedication to put ourselves first, because that is what our evolutionary history has required of us. We often behave evilly and our evil can result from a pathologically developed survival instinct, from mental illness, from drug dependence and from radical insecurity.

This change of emphasis from conventional Christian doctrine is revolutionary. Our sacraments are built around the notion of the atonement and the Genesis concept of Adam's fall. If these are false, we need to view evil through an utterly different theological lens.

Paternalistic, arrogant and falsely absolutist

The view of many Christians that they possess absolute truth through the bible is false and arrogant, says Spong, and such views have become inimical to world peace. The church's denial of the validity of the experience of billions of human believers in other faiths, and its paternalistic view of its 'mission' is both insulting and destabilising. Its demeaning approach to women, homosexuality and to contrary human belief runs counter to the outpouring of love which was a defining characteristic of Jesus, and denies people the legitimacy of their own 'being'.

Spong argues that the new Christianity must recognise the legitimacy of other gateways to God and considers the certainty which many Christians proclaim in their superior faith is an inadequate and immature response to natural human insecurity in an uncertain world and a hunger we all have to believe that we belong in the cosmos. The certainty, says Spong, is that life will continue to be full of surprise and challenge. The false certainty of Christian fundamentalism—and indeed of aspects of the liberal church—is no longer tenable, but both will cling tenaciously to what exists, because a dwindling number of true believers are habituated and dependent.

Irrelevancy leaves no middle ground

Christianity as we have known it is moribund, says Spong. Its groundwater is contaminated by irrelevancy and inappropriate mythology. Its power structures are inappropriate to our modern society and it will ultimately disappear without trace unless it is radically reformed and becomes, in the process, something which legitimately addresses our modern human condition.

Prayer a form of meditation

With the death of theism, prayer must cease being a request for God to act in a particular way. Indeed, the notion of prayer has to be completely rethought. The language and postures of Christianity are still riddled with theistic concepts. We must stop thinking of prayer as an adult letter to Santa Claus. Sickness and tragedy are part of the real world. They are not punishments for inadequate servitude to a God 'out there'. There is no theistic God directing these processes of cause and effect to whom we can appeal.

Spong believes that the word 'prayer' is so contaminated by theistic ideas that it should be dropped in favour of 'meditation' or 'contemplation'. He continues to devote one to two hours daily to his devotions, but now they conform more to a process of meditation in which he seeks to become more deeply the person he is, and to give himself more deeply to the needs of others. Meditation and contemplation enable him to draw on the inner strength of his own being. This, he asserts, is the response to the inner restlessness that we all feel until we 'rest in God' and meditation helps us to do just that. In this experience, he discovers a new sense of what it means to be fully human. Spong believes that we need to grasp our own being, all of it, light and darkness, goodness and evil, and practice wholeness. He helps to discover that for himself in times of silent contemplation.

Contemplation of the words and actions of Jesus help him to live to the fullest of his potential and to love wastefully, which he believes is the essence of worship of a non theistic God.

Nurturing wholeness

The New Christianity will focus more on nurturing people into wholeness, and will help us to discover the richness of our own being. It will push us to a new respect for the mystery of creation and for each other. Spang sees God in the miracle of the functioning world, not in a suspension of the laws of that world. In that sense he hopes that his grandchildren will be able to say as he says: "God is real to me and Jesus is my gateway into this reality."

III. The Nature of Our New World

It is easy to forget what a different world we inhabit to that in which Jesus lived and in which the gospels were written. The changes of the past two hundred years are truly stunning. And they are accelerating.

Ruled by new views of the cosmos and the origins of life

Thanks to the sciences of the Enlightenment, physics, astronomy, evolutionary biology, palaeontology, biochemistry, neuroscience and many others we now have just the beginning of an appreciation of our position in the cosmos: 125 billion galaxies each of 50 billion stars of which our sun is but one. We are a speck in the evolutionary river or web of life on earth and cannot pretend any longer to be the final and ultimate flower of God's handiwork.

Are we a meaningless fluke or is our existence something that has meaning and worth? Does it matter what we believe about these issues? Philip Adams suggests that people believe what they want to believe and that we should forget about God and get on with trying to treat each other decently. To a large extent I agree with him. But I need to feel somehow that while I am on the planet that I belong here and that I am a significant part of it however small. Spirituality to me is about connectedness and belonging, and being able to reach into the very depth of my being to discover what my particular speck of DNA can become. My sense is that I am not alone in this need.

Massive population growth

With six billion humans, rising in the next fifty years to eight billion, our numbers and our style of living are changing our habitat, possibly irreversibly. We are only just beginning to recognise the fact.

Globalisation

The communications and transport revolutions have shrunk the world dramatically. We now watch international events like genocide and terrorism in our living rooms. Economic decisions made in the USA immediately influence events here. We can cross the world in a day and access individuals by sight, sound and written word across the globe.

Intrusive evidence of inequality and injustice

The world is increasingly divided into haves and have-nots, and the separation between them is growing. Economic determinism is real and immensely powerful. Our television screens show the differences between those who have and those who don't with increasing starkness. But we are becoming immune to the images and seduced by the propaganda that comes across to us in wave upon wave.

Technology out of hand

Technology, so often the solution to problems, is becoming a problem in its own right as it extends beyond our understanding and our capacity to manage it. Ethical issues are being left to the residual church, which judges them through a theistic lens.

A new sense of our frailty and interdependence

Events of the past year have borne in on us all the frailty of our human species and the interdependence that now operates for every single being on the planet. Many are anxious about the rapid exponential rate of change that is occurring, and the prophets of doom and gloom are all around us.

An epidemic of meaninglessness and search for purpose

In these circumstances it is perhaps unsurprising that many of our younger generation are opting out. Those who work extensively with young people report large numbers of adolescents beset by a lack of purpose and meaning who are making do with mood-altering drugs and taking their lives in large numbers.

Spong's vision for the new ecclesia

What I have just been describing as our 'New World' suggests, to me at least, that there is a need for a renewal of 'the spirit' in our society, a challenge that the Christian Church in its present form seems unable to meet. Could Spong's vision for a new ecclesia do any better? In his book, Spong elaborates on the desirable attributes of the new body which he believes could help it to fill the growing vacuum. If I can paraphrase it in a few headlines it would be a body that:

- ❖ Helps us to understand ourselves and our relationship to the cosmos and the family of man,
- ❖ Enables us to achieve 'connectedness',
- ❖ Assists us to help regulate our chaotic lives,
- ❖ Assists us to meet the challenges and surprises that await us,
- ❖ Is a reservoir of 'wasteful love',
- ❖ Provides community support and validation of the being of all individuals, and
- ❖ Assists us all to be what we can be.

IV. Evolution or Revolution?

There is nothing in any of those points that some parts of the Christian church are not already doing superbly. Many would say, that all we need to do is to tweak the existing institution in ways that de-emphasise the negative aspects of deism and credal impossibility and get on with emphasising these elements. But Spong, who has felt the sharp edge of thousands of his critics—most of whom come from within Christendom itself—clearly doubts that it will all be that easy. Real experimentation with new concepts will be likely to be more vigorous and radical among groups who are not constrained by the power structures of the established organisation

We need some radical new thinking if the new generation is to find a place.

And I take the view that we need to be doing some quite radical surgery on organised Christendom to move it to the point where it will meet the increasingly urgent needs of our grandchildren and their children.

Must change the power and dependency structures

Spong points us also to the enormous power and dependency relationships which now exist in all branches of the organised church. The church has become heavily professionalised. It is a huge property owner and well bureaucratised. Is all that property and bureaucracy necessary to address the objectives?

We need to retain the ‘L factor’

In my experience, churches at their best, bring out the very best in their parishioners. However, not every church achieves this. I think that Spong’s emphasis on the notion of wasteful love is the ingredient that is most essential. I also return to John Robinson’s response to the question ‘Who is Christ for us today?’ He urged us to find him through the door of ordinary human experience and relationships. For me the church of the forties and fifties, with its emphasis on ‘Fellowship’, had a lot of things right. Finding a formula for the new ecclesia which enables the unimpeded flow of wasteful love between people who are lonely, isolated, alienated and despairing is the challenge.

V. A Possible Framework for Moving Forwards

I am suggesting that in order to take Spong’s challenge seriously, some of us should explore the formation of a cascading series of ‘Search’ groups in Canberra. Spong doesn’t present a clear view of how the new ecclesia might evolve nor whether it will evolve from within or outside the existing church. I suggest that the formation of our first search groups doesn’t need to confront that issue.

Cascading series of *Search* groups

This choice of name is justified by both its meaning and the letters that make up the word.

‘S’ stands for Spong, support, sharing, social, and spirituality.

‘E’ stands for ecclesia, experimental, evolving, ecological and eclectic.

‘A’ stands for affirming, anti-theistic and ‘all’.

‘R’ stands for reaching out, revolutionary, and reconciliation.

‘C’ stands for Christ and caring.

Finally, ‘H’ stands for holistic and helping.

These are some of the attributes which the new search groups might seek to build into their activities. The word “search” rhymes with church but looks beyond it to what lies ahead.

Purpose: to share a meal, ideas, concerns, and meditation about our world

I suggest that Canberrans who share Spong’s vision might meet weekly on a Sunday evening in groups no larger than fifty people. The purpose of the meetings would be to share a meal, ideas, concerns and meditation about our world.

- **Groups open to all: bring friends and acquaintances**

Group meetings would be open to all; People would be encouraged to bring their friends.

-
- **As stable group size exceed forty five, fifteen break off to form new group**

As stable group size increases beyond forty-five persons, a nucleus of fifteen would be encouraged to form a new group.

- **Groups linked by word of mouth, internet, telephone**

Groups would link by word of mouth, internet and telephone.

- **Committed to trial for six months at least: small organising group:
rotating session leadership: groups 3-5**

They would review their development every six months and appoint a small organising group to keep the group functional. Group meetings should be led by groups of three to five members of the group rostered on a rotating basis.

- **Group silence, music, sharing and intellectual exploration in about equal quantities**

A group meeting could include up to ninety minutes of planned activity with additional time for social interchange over a meal. The planned activity might include music, readings, meditation, sharing of life situations and consideration of social issues

- **Various settings indoors and outdoors**

Some groups might choose to meet in church buildings, schools, community halls or private homes. Others might plan meetings in the gardens or out in the hills. Diversity and experimentation should be encouraged.

Meeting the needs of the groups

- Helps us to understand ourselves and our relationship to the cosmos and the family of man;
- Enables us to achieve 'connectedness';
- Assists us to help regulate our chaotic lives;
- Assists us to meet the challenges and surprises that await us;
- Is a reservoir of 'wasteful love';
- Provides community support and validation of the being of all individuals; and
- Assists us all to be *what we can be*.

Unitarian affirmation as a starting point

As a starting point, the groups might agree to the affirmation of the **Unitarian Universality Association**.

On the wall of The Unitarian Church Hall in Sitka, Alaska—

We, the Unitarian Universality Association

Covenant to affirm and promote

- ❖ The inherent worth and dignity of every person.
- ❖ Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

-
- ❖ Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.
 - ❖ A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
 - ❖ The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.
 - ❖ The goal of world community, with peace, unity and justice for all.
 - ❖ Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- ❖ Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder affirmed in all cultures which moves us to renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- ❖ Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront poverty and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
- ❖ Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- ❖ Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- ❖ Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

Grateful for the religious pluralism, which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

Review with Spong 2003

We might plan a meeting of all groups that are formed by that time to coincide with the visit to Canberra in 2003 of Bishop Spong.

Debate

I hope I have said enough to provoke you into debate. I have tried to justify what I am suggesting on the basis of what I see to be a convincing argument by Spong and what I have found on my own personal journey. I think it is clearly a good time for those of us who want to experiment with new approaches to begin to do so.

— Bob Douglas.

