

**“Pushing the Envelope”**

A sermon by Lloyd H. Dunham

Reading:

John Shelby Spong

*A New Christianity for A New World, p. 179*

The Sunday evening testimony time in those rural West Virginia churches  
made a deep impression on me  
during my college years.

People would stand before the whole congregation  
and tell the story of their faith journey.

Often tears streamed down their faces  
as they spoke.

For me those years also marked the beginning of serious questioning  
of my own religious roots.

I was trying hard to understand  
and to believe  
all the familiar teachings and creeds of my youth.

There was no way that I could get up  
and offer my testimony at those meetings.  
Instead of tears  
I had growing questions.

The more I learned in dear old Dr. Brown’s college Bible courses  
the more questions I had.

He was a free-thinking scholar  
ahead of his time!

As the years went by,  
I questioned even more the traditional teachings  
of my liberal Methodist upbringing.

Now, fifty-seven years later,  
I can share my searching,  
in a style quite different from what I saw and heard  
in those rural West Virginia churches in 1951!

I offer these thoughts, these resources,  
not because I have arrived,  
but rather as a witness  
to the excitement of “pushing the envelope”.

I hope this is helpful to those of you  
who have come here from a Christian Church  
and I hope it may help the rest of you to understand UU Christians  
and former Christians  
a bit better.

It is obvious that churches in our nation  
are going through a time of major change.

For three decades the mainline denominations have been shrinking.  
At the same time  
    the fundamentalist churches  
    and the conservative evangelical churches  
                                  have been expanding,  
    though the Southern Baptists have reported modest declines  
  for the last three years.

Our small denomination struggles to hold its own.  
It leaves me wondering,  
    where are all the people who want to think for themselves,  
                                  who are seeking a more meaningful spiritual path?  
I would think they would be crowding into religious gatherings like this!

I have found great help  
in the writings of Matthew Fox,  
    a former Dominican monk,  
                                  exiled from his Roman Catholic roots  
  by the one who is now Pope Benedict.

I am also encouraged by the work of the Jesus Seminar,  
    especially scholars Robert Funk and Marcus Borg,  
    freeing the Gospels from dogmatic straightjackets,  
                                  in order to get at an accurate reading  
  of those stories.

But most of all,  
    I have been challenged, shaken and led forward  
  by John Shelby Spong,  
  a retired Episcopal bishop.

My faith journey goes on.  
    During much of it I have been "pushing the envelope"  
  of my earlier years.

For many years I longingly gazed over the fence  
  at Unitarian Universalists,  
    anxious for the theological and intellectual freedom  
  of this religious household.

When I served as pastor in mainline churches,  
    I often stood to lead congregations  
                                  in the celebration of communion  
  as remembrance of the sacrifice of Jesus  
  to atone for our sins,  
    or to celebrate an empty tomb,  
                                  as proof of his physical resurrection,  
    or to regard the Bible as the Word of God.

I became more and more uncomfortable  
    and often rephrased what I said  
                                  to be more honest about my own faith  
  and to move away from the conflict  
  arising out of my own searching and study

and rejection of traditional doctrine.

Thus it was a great celebration for me in 1996  
 to spring free and claim the freedom of this faith!  
 Never before have I been so completely free  
 to speak honestly about my faith  
 and to “push the envelope”  
 on my understandings about the Bible  
 and about Christianity!

But then the challenge began!

I found that Bishop Spong is talking about the demise  
 of a kind of Christianity

that has been my lifeblood for most of my life!

When he speaks of the death of theistic Christianity,  
 he says that theism

*assumes that God is a supernatural being*

*who lives outside this world,*

*but who periodically invades this world in a miraculous way.<sup>1</sup>*

Such a definition profoundly impacts core orthodox doctrine.

I don't believe in that kind of theism either!

Would you?

Bishop Spong does not emphasize the negative.

He will tell the world

that he gladly claims the name “Christian”!

He means by that

that Jesus is his doorway to experiencing God,

to finding the Ground of his Being.

He encourages others

to find their own special doorways to experiencing God.

Those other doorways may be found

in most of the world's religions.

This reminds me of Forrest Church's metaphor

of the cathedral windows,

when he spoke of one light through many windows.<sup>2</sup>

Already in that strong affirmation

he has rejected the doctrine

that one must be Christian to know God.

It is also clear that there is no place in his thinking for a literal belief

in the Trinity,

in the divinity of Jesus,

in the Bible as the inerrant Word of God.

He no longer accepts the idea of a virgin birth,

the physical resurrection,

the idea of Jesus as the Son of God,

the kind of God

<sup>1</sup> Spong, John Shelby, *The Sins of Scripture*, p. 60

<sup>2</sup> Brannon, Barbara A., *UU World*, Nov/Dec 2001, p.21



For many people – Christians, Jews, Muslims and others,  
this is “pushing the envelope”!

– perhaps a bit too far!

Bishop Spong and Matthew Fox are pointing in similar directions.

Fox writes,

*There is one underground river –*

*but there are many wells into that river:*

*an African well,  
a Taoist well,  
a Buddhist well,  
a Jewish well,  
a Muslim well,  
a goddess well.  
a Christian well,  
and aboriginal wells.*

*Many wells but one river.<sup>5</sup>*

Doesn't that sound like Unitarian Universalism?

Matthew Fox goes on to say,

*The third millennium ought to be a time of mixing,*

*not of conquering,*

*mixing,*

*not converting.<sup>6</sup>*

For many Christians,

this, too, is “pushing the envelope”!

The Dalai Lama warns

*that the biggest obstacle to interfaith sharing*

*is people's unhealthy relationships to their own faith.....*

*So many people I encounter (he says)*

*have been wounded by their own tradition.<sup>7</sup>*

Many Unitarian Universalists give witness to the Dalai Lama's words.

How many of us have been hurt or otherwise alienated

by the church from which we came?

In the transition from a theistic Christianity

to a faith for the new age,

the Bishop says that Christians will not be called on to abandon the Bible

but they will need to remove from the Bible

the tribal claims

and the literalness

that has too long been attached to it.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Spong, *Weekly Essays and Q&A*, June 15, 2005

<sup>5</sup> Fox, Matthew; *One River, Many Wells*, p. 5

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7

<sup>8</sup> Spong, John Shelby, *A New Christianity for a New World*, p. 180

Christianity,  
 like certain other world religions,  
 has too long claimed an exclusive access to Divine favor,  
 to salvation.  
 In a new Christianity that exclusivity must go.<sup>9</sup>

For me,  
 some of the most insightful and refreshing statements  
 come as the Bishop reports on an amazing student sermon  
 given in Harvard Divinity School chapel  
 by a young woman  
 who had her congregation captivated  
 by a powerful story of a devastating flood,  
 a story that fits well  
 in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.  
 She took her hearers by surprise  
 when she suddenly shifted to recite the Apostle's creed.  
 Then she said that the flooded town was like the creed for her.  
 It had become for her an unlivable place.  
 Then she reminded her people  
 that a creed is only a response to arguments.  
 Creeds make no mention of love,  
 no reference to the teachings of Jesus,<sup>10</sup>  
 or any other great spiritual teacher.

So what does this new Christianity look like?  
 The new Christianity will be a center of caring,  
 the Bishop claims.  
 It will be a place of community,  
 where no one walks this way alone.

As he says it,  
*We may not be able to take the sting out of life,  
 but we can take the loneliness out of the sting!*<sup>11</sup>

I welcome the quest for a new shape for Christianity,  
 free of tests of orthodoxy,  
 free of claims that are contrary to nature,  
 open to the fresh air of free thinking and explorations,  
 open to a wide-ranging search for spiritual depth and truth.

Bishop Spong speaks out of the life and tradition

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 172-3

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 235

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 214

that has been his for seven decades.  
He searches for words to describe this new Christianity.

He says,

*Jesus did not write creeds or set rules  
or develop tests of orthodoxy  
to determine who the true believers were  
He only suggested a criterion  
by which people could recognize his disciples:  
"that you love one another".<sup>12</sup>*

The changes in religious groups are happening.

Surely those churches and denominations that ignore the changes,  
though they enjoy great success today,

will find a rough road ahead.

The future belongs to those who will not only "push the envelope" –

but break out of it into a new universalism.

For some people,

Jesus will continue to be their doorway into an experience of God,  
an experience that others will find through other doorways.

The shape of this new Christianity is only now emerging.

As Bishop Spong attempts his own answer to the question,

"Who is God?"

his words sound much like our UU principles!

He says,

*I experience God as the source of life  
calling me to live fully  
and thus to respect life in every form  
as embodying the holy.*

*I experience God as the source of love  
calling me to love wastefully all that God has made,  
including the earth with its plants and animals.*

*I experience God in the words of Paul Tillich,  
as the "Ground of Being"  
calling me to be all that I can be  
and to affirm the sacred being of all that is.<sup>13</sup>*

There are many scholars that I have not named

who are also "pushing the envelope",

looking for new ways to express their changing faith.

Some have been rejected and fired by their church authorities

for speaking new and unapproved views ---

for pushing the envelope too far.

For too long the best Biblical and theological scholarship

has been stifled and buried.

Hopefully that time is fast coming to an end.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 229

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.66

Bishop Spong and Matthew Fox are two among many  
who are speaking up  
even when others have tried to silence them.  
They are giving birth to a new integrity among religious scholars,  
giving birth to a faith that enhances life  
without the exclusive claims  
that have burdened western religion for centuries.

It is amazing to me to watch and listen  
as these and other theologians  
sound more and more like Unitarian Universalists!  
I, for one,  
eagerly watch and listen  
for what comes next on this spiritual journey!

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