Judging by his two most recent books, biblical and theological positions newly taken by Spong are not coming up with any real contemporary social and theological issues. Spong has published twelve books and numerous articles on contemporary social and theological issues. Judging by his two most recent books (the only two available in Australia), Spong is not coming up with any really new biblical or theological directions—he seems to be blithely unaware of textual theory and practice since the early 70s. But he is clearly familiar with, and has taken up, a biblical and theological position which springs up every now and then like a Nightmare on Elm Street sequel.

Spong’s point is that ‘churchy’ people are not the only people who do or ‘are’ good. Rather, he claims, God creates and blesses all people. At their best, the churches are a representation of this. At their worst, they behave as moral (too often defined in exclusively sexual categories) police in a sea of wickedness. Thankfully, the Church in toto can never be reduced to such mean spiritedness. The people of the Church are too diverse and its history of dissent too strong.

Secondly, he senses the urgency of the need for ordinary church people to win back their churches. Knowledge may be power—if you are knowledgeable. But ignorance can give a person a lot of leverage. In the US, Spong laments, it is appallingly apparent that ordinary people, especially people outside the church, simply do not know that reasonable alternatives to fundamentalism exist. Spong writes in fierce opposition to the fundamentalist leaders who benefit from this state of affairs. Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism, his most recent book, is an attempt to disseminate Bible scholarship beyond seminaries and theological institutions to “citizens of the modern world”.

In this melee, Spong serves more as a Prometheus figure than as a trailblazer. To become a Spongian would miss the point—Spong is stealing fire and bringing it to ordinary people, not illuminating a way forward by the brilliance of his own ideas.

Yet, whatever Spong’s limitations as a demigod, his books are revolutionary to the mass of church people. The popular church has received great energy from the debate. Fundamentalism has taken a variety of political shapes in two thousand years but, clearly, the dominant form at the moment is anti-humanist and anti-reform. The incentive for lay people to take theological initiatives themselves and challenge fundamentalism on its own turf is tremendously exciting for our churches and society.

The third aspect is a matter of evangelism. Clearly in conflict with the dreaded televangelists, Spong is far from being a proselytiser. But he has been applauded in some sections of the church as communicating to oppressed and marginalised people: “the kingdom of God belongs to you”. Evangelism, of the style that sections of the church see reflected in Spong’s program, is good news for Australian Christians and for a society at odds with itself.

Can Australian churches shake the colonial stigma and a wowser heritage? Spong may not be the answer but, as Dorothy McMahon, a Uniting Church Minister in Sydney, said of him, “He is, at the very least, asking the right questions.”

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