

# God Beyond Theism at Kairos CoMotion

John Shelby Spong

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MADISON, WI - More than three hundred progressive Christians gathered in Madison, Wisconsin, to celebrate their God-given gifts to the church at an event called Kairos CoMotion.

In a time when there has been a growing exclusiveness within the church, this gathering affirmed creative and open experiences of worship, reflection about God, intentionally inclusive networking between diverse people, and encouragement of "a new Christianity for a new world."

Through worship designed by Philip Cox-Johnson and a presentation on the "God Beyond Theism" by John Shelby Spong, retired Episcopal Bishop, the first day focused on moving out of a false sense of security that the commonly received presence of God has been fully known and codified.

Spong began with two realities in his life: "I am a Christian" and "I live in the twenty-first century."

In keeping with the Kairos CoMotion event, Spong stated, "Our commitment, as progressives, to social issues comes out of a deep commitment to our faith in Jesus Christ." This is one crucial way to keep real being a Christian in the twenty-first century.

Spong developed an understanding that we are always people of our time, just as those who worked on the Bible and earlier creeds were people of their time and Jesus was of his time. Through language, says Spong, "You can't capture God in the human words of a creed; all you can do is point to God through your human experience.... The moment you take an experience of God and wrap it in human language you destroy it; you put it in the language of your tribe; you put it into the way you perceive reality, and that means every time we discover a new way of looking at the world the language in which we have captured our religious experience in the past has to be broken open."

Our human experience has changed through a whole series of understandings which Spong marked by such names as Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo,

Newton, Darwin, Freud and Einstein. The world we experience is different than the world experienced before these shifts and so, as Spong said, "We have been quoting the Bible based on a world view that no longer exists." He concluded, "The task of the Church is to help us learn how to sing the Lord's song in the foreign land of the twenty-first century."

In wrestling with these issues of image and language, Spong reminded his listeners, "You are not letting God go, you are letting ancient explanations of God go."

The first day of Kairos CoMotion was to clarify some of the traps of trying to keep earlier religious formulations going past their time and place. Spong placed the choice before his audience by articulating a basic choice between old Christianity and new Christianity for a new world with encouragement to "relate Jesus to our time" by attending to the "mystery of Christ as told in the language of the twenty-first century."

A challenge to the church, according to Spong, is first to recognize we have made idols out of our words which tried to capture God and then to destabilize the attempts to continue outmoded literalism and fundamentalism based on another time and place. "If you have found security in your religion, you have surely found an idol," said Spong.

In the old language, says Spong, "Christianity has looked at human beings as having been created good, fallen into sin, and needing to be redeemed. We see evil as having come from that fall."

Spong contrasts that with new language, "I see human life as starting simple, emerging into complexity and self-consciousness, and not yet complete."

Tomorrow Spong will "tell the Jesus story as empowering the incomplete to step into a new humanity."