

Lecture to Sea of Faith , May 7th 2004

Introduction

I heard about the meeting from the Sea of Faith magazine
I agreed with the comments of the editor of the magazine that a large number of “stars” were on the programme and may never be assembled again.
The meeting was organised by the WestStar Institute and took place at the Marriott Marquis Hotel in Times Square in the first week in March. It was at a spectacular venue and our room was on the 42nd floor of the hotel. The lobby was on the six floor with spectacular views of Times Square.

The Westar Institute was formed by Robert Funk a professor of divinity, in California in the 1985. Its chief purpose has been to organise the Jesus Seminar , a committee of experts who were given the task of analysing the Gospels, with a view to separating what Jesus did and said and from what was written- in by the Gospel writers later.

This following the tradition of David Strauss, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Schweitzer and their search for the Historical Jesus. A number of experts chiefly drawn from professors of divinity examined all the 4 Gospels together with a new Coptic gospel of St Thomas discovered about 50 years ago at Nag Hammadi.

The method of voting was a curious one. Each expert voted by putting different coloured beads in a box as follows: -

Red :Jesus undoubtedly said this or something like it

Pink: Jesus probably said something like this

Gray:Jesus did not say this, but the ideas close to his own

Black : Jesus did not say this

The result was determined by means of a weighted average :each colour having a different value(3,2,1,0)

The results were published as a book entitled The Five Gospels.In addition numerous other books connected have been published such as” Honest to Jesus” and The Jesus Seminar: It’s critics”.The main criticism was that top experts were not used.Not the same each vote. Apocalyptical sayings of Jesus were voted Black

Robert Funk has visit to the UK and gave several lectures last year, which unfortunately and I could not attend.

A number of members SoF organisation have expressed their interest in what Robert Funk has done and are supportive of the work he is doing.

The title of the meeting was” The Future of the Judeo- Christian religion in the second axial age”. One of the speakers at the meeting Karen Armstrong explained what it all meant: - The Axial ages were defined by a Karl Jaspers after the First World War. The word axial means pivotal or major turnaround

The first age was between 800 BCE and 200 BCE and concerns the time when several religious leaders were alive eg the Buddha, Confucius, Socrates and the Jewish prophets.

The second axial age started then the 16th century when the agrarian society changed

into a technological age and religious views began to change. Karen Armstrong claimed that during this second natural age there were no spiritual Greats compared with the first one. (some might disagree with this view)

As I will explain later, the conference disappointingly did not discuss the future and seemed almost exclusively to deal with the present. This is not surprising since the second axial age has already been in existence for 400 years or more. One of the speakers Bishop Spong talked instead about religion in the 21st century.

The programme

Altogether there were 15 speakers over the three days, each speaking for an hour so so. So it is really quite difficult for me to summarise everything that was said.

However, I was helped by the provision of audio tapes which remarkably appeared about two hours after each of the speakers had given their talk. Also there were on display recent books which the speakers had written.

The speakers

Because of the time available I shall only comment on eight of the speakers. Representing the Westar Institute were Robert Funk, Marcus Borg a professor of Divinity, and Bishop John Selby Spong, who is now retired from being Episcopalian Bishop of Newark USA.

Representing the views of the Sea of Faith were, Don Cupitt of Emmanuel College Cambridge, Lloyd Geering a Presbyterian minister from New Zealand and Richard Holloway, a retired Anglican Bishop of Edinburgh.

In addition, Karen Armstrong, who is a well-known TV broadcaster and author of The history of God.

A US scientist Eugenia Scott, who stated she was in humanist.

Publication

Robert Funk established that the Polebridge press so that religious books relating to his interests to be published. There was a similar meeting in California 1999, which was published under the title of: -

I imagine the proceedings of this meeting will be also published and available later this year or early next year. I would certainly recommend that you buy the book when it comes out.

Robert Funk opened the meeting on the Wednesday evening for the welcoming reception. He dealt with the statements which the Jesus Seminar agreed had been made by Jesus and which were counter intuitive (different to what you might expect): - for instance: "Love Your enemies". "If you hang on to your life you will lose it, if you lose your life you will gain it"

He then went on to describe the progress of science in the since 1600 (which I am sure you are all well aware) indicating that many recent scientific theories were also a counter intuitive including Einstein's theory of relativity, quantum mechanics and the current String theory.

Bishop Spong started the meeting proper the next morning with a stirring presentation. His lecturing style is a mixture of that of Billy Graham and Martin Luther King. One almost expected the audience to stand up and shout Hallelujah at the end.

He started his talk by emphasising that he was still a committed Christian and that his views on the nature of God' were different to those of Don Cupitt. He is a realist. A believer in an imminent God, the ground of all been being, and the ideas elaborated by Paul Tillich, who he states was his mentor

He believes

You cannot step outside theology
God is in the person of Jesus.
God is in Christ.
Spong is a child the 21st century. God is a real presence.
He traced the development of Christianity from Plato to St Augustine to the Reformation.
Truth is delineated by the reality and the age in which we live.
Christianity is reformulated in every generation.
Spong's ideas are well-known and are expressed in his book entitled "Christianity must change or die". At the end of his book he has appendix in giving his 12 principles. So this was what he believes
We should abandon theism
We should abandon the idea that Jesus is incarnation of the deity.
The skies are empty: and there is no heaven
There was no wandering star
No Ascension
There is no God who acts as a judge
No miracles
No original sin
No Virgin Birth
No resurrection
Jesus did not die for your sins
No ultimate truths
No ethical norms

To believe otherwise than this is post Darwinian nonsense

God is real
Spong is not non-realist or a humanist
God is the source of life but does not meddle in life
Part of what I am but not all
God is a force
God is love
Love is God
Jesus was the experience of love and an ultimate symbol of love. God was in Christ .
The Jesus is a source of love and the ultimate symbol of love

Relation to the Jesus Seminar

The quest for the historical Jesus is not his priority, he does not believe it is essential
.God is not about supernatural power
God is not theist and not human.

Marcus Borg

A popular member of the Jesus Seminar

Christians are deeply divided over a number of different topics especially today in what the status of gays/lesbians and the role of women.

He then went along to discuss his two paradigms

A paradigm is described as a way of seeing a whole (eg go solar system before and after Copernicus). I personally think it should be “ the generally accepted or common view”

He defined the earlier paradigm and the later paradigm.

The earlier paradigm

Inerrancy of the Bible : ie the bible is literally true

The Virgin Birth

The atonement

The resurrection

Authenticity of miracles

Belief in the second coming

The deity of Christ

Belief in an afterlife

Sin, guilt and forgiveness of sins

The emerging paradigm

The bible: not how it happened: metaphysical/metaphorical:a human product not divine: fresh meaning according the age in which it is read.

Thomas Mann: definition of a myth: story about the way things never were but always are. Bible is true and some of it happened.

Centrality of the Bible :Foundation Document :wisdom tradition

Reality of god: in his book entitled :- he states he is a pan-en- theist(God is in everything).If God does not exist there is no sense but doesn't believe in God out there. Faith means radical trust in God/loyalty allegiance and commitment to god

Centrality of Jesus: the divine revelation of God: Jesus more important than the bible .

Sacraments mediation of the spirit

Relationship with God as known in Jesus

For his theology a new name isrequired: Neo traditional or Neo Clasical Christianity

Conclusions

Marcus Borg's View are very similar to Bishop Spong(and presumably Robert Funk)

I will deal next with the views of those corresponding to many members of the Sea of Faith.

Lloyd Geering

There is a major difference between Spong and Borg versus Geering and Cupitt in their concept of god

The latter believe God is a human construct, an entity which has no independence of human beings. In other words, if humankind had disappeared from the world because of some catastrophe, God would not exist. For Spong and Borg, God still exists.

Main Points

The world has reached a critical point: future is global: we live in a global world.

There has to be a common future or no future end at all

He discussed culture. The evolution of cultures is based on symbols.

Culture/language discriminates us from the other animals.

Geering is a humanist: everything is human and this worldly

Today's World is secular not religious.

He equates religion with the supernatural (in this his definition disagreed with Cupitt)

The secular is this worldly

The second axial age has led to the modern global secular world. It emerged out of the JC tradition: William of Ockham: the renaissance humanists: Erasmus: Luther, John Locke.

He is a follower of Schliermacher: Humankind has grown up by becoming secular and abandoning the supernatural

However we must remember The post-Christian era has its legacy in the rules and customs of Christianity

In the first axial age god and spirits were symbols. The Jews developed monotheism, circumcision, observance of the Sabbath day.

The second axial age is different: -

Divine revelation has now gone

God in heaven has lost reality

There is a new kind of God: the values we live by

Love, compassion, justice are human values

Truth has made us free

The Kingdom of God will exist in the secular world

Humankind has come of age

Purgatory hell have been abolished

A Study of the past illuminates the present good but does not dictate the future

Important concepts

Faith: to heed a voice within yourself: Saying Yes to Life

Hope :original intention of the Kingdom of God: peace

Love: central to JC tradition

Original dictum of Christ: Love Your enemies: Christians find this most difficult

Love does not arise as a result of a reward but it is now spontaneous

The secular tradition tells you to exercise values, to live more abundantly shedding symbols and living life to the full

Cupitt

Response to Spong

Spong believes there is something called god which is real

Cupitt believes there's nothing outside our experience, our language, and our world.

He illustrated this by a talking about an Atlas: if you take everything away there is nothing left

There's no absolute truth and no absolute right and wrong eg controversy over gay marriage.

Cupitt's creed

True religion is:-

Your own voice

Living your own life; having a personal style

Living like the Sun -solar living(His book written in 1995

Creative productive activity

Faith ; floating free:having personal freedom.

Other remarks: -

The new religion is about enjoying life. Tolstoy is said life is everything: life is God: god is life. The modern version is: Get a life!

The UK Quakers have an excellent way, they believe in kingdom Christianity and are ethical Pioneers.

Another admirable religion is Japanese Buddhism

This is the age of Common speech not of great men eg Shakespeare any more.

Believes in Democratic theology / religious democracy.

End of ecclesiastical Christianity

God is a secular humanist: he agrees with the philosophy of Feuerbach: God is now man

Religion is made for man and not man for religion.

Christianity is not the only way and Christians should go up their privileged status

Karen Armstrong

Her theme was what tips can we learn from the first axial age to help us in for the second winningly

Plato proposed the two concept: -

Myth=meaning: leads to religion: life has ultimate meaning

Locals=practical, logical, rational, mathematics, medicine .

In the second axial age, logos has increased and myth decreased

In the first axial age, God was not defined.

It was not necessary to define God.

It was difficult to define God

Jesus did not talk about God, but doing good, healing the sick, having rules and leading a good life.

She is very much taken with Buddhism eg
How to live a good life
Living ethically will change you
Speak truth within yourself
Feeling better when you do right

She is Eumenical eg

Confucius was the first to say “do to others as you would do to yourself”
This was echoed by Jesus and Rabbi Hilliel.

Her Tips:-

Don't try and define God: accept it is something you cannot understand
Christianity is not the only religion which has a message for us today
More important Live ethically. Live a good life.

In the discussion Armstrong stated that she disagreed with the views of both Borg/Spong and Cupitt/ Geering as to the nature of God

Holloway

He is the author of “Godless Morality”.

His main points: -

The public must be in a position to give consent eg: donation of organs and going to war.

A discussion of Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory: the way science operates :the structure of Scientific Revolution.

Difference between science and religion: science accepts paradigm shifts immediately but religious paradigms hang around because there is a need need for human continuity

Power Systems produces victims. Mentioned the importance of Marx and Nietzsche. Victims must make alliance with heretics for reform and freedom eg as occurred in the freedom of women

Emerging cultural paradigm.

Radical suspicion of authority

Consent is fundamental

Pleasure is good. Don't wait until after death

Celebrate ethical plurality. Good people can disagree

He compared the organist with a jazz pianist.

The organist plays music to a score: this is equivalent to a Fixed ethical commitment eg Roman Catholics

Jazz pianist: life as a jazz session: change always happens: therefore it is necessary do improvise

Bishops are best before they are installed and after they have retired. During their office they are cowardly because they have to create unity. This is why bishops replicate bishops. He is disappointed with Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury who he thought has changed since his enthronement: he sacrifices everything to unity.

In the discussion Holloway stated he has changed his views on God from being a critical realist to that of a non-realist and agrees with the views of Cupitt and Geering.

Other general Comments

- 1) **Mel Gibson film: don't see it . Chaplain in Cannes : see it**
- 2) **300 in audience** sympathetic to Westar The Danish pastor vote. A Bishop in Denmark has fired one of his priests for stating that he does not believe in the virgin birth, resurrection, or life after death. Red/pink . Would you have kept the priest on . Black /grey agreed with the bishop. 85% R/P

Summary of meeting

This was a good meeting because frank views were expressed between members of the Westar Institute and The Sea of Faith.

They agreed that the supernatural God everything associated with it, which I have detailed in a lecture, is now defunct and has to be replaced by something else.

In the case of the Westar Institute, God is now real, imminent, Pan-en-theistic, the ground of all being, a life force .

In the case of the Sea of Faith Contributors God is non-real, secular, the values we live life, there's nothing except human experience and a language.

All members expressed their allegiance to Christianity and the sayings of Jesus as quoted were the Jesus Seminar in general acceptable. In the case of the WI, Jesus was still equated with God. In the case of Sea of Faith, the contribution of Jesus to modern-day secular life was acknowledged and he might be considered as a Guru . Other religions such as Buddhism could also make a contribution.

The decline in church attendance.

I have left this topic until the last because I wished to address it myself. Marcus Borg stated that the attendance in the US had declined by 40 per cent in the mainline churches since 1960s, particularly from non-Fundamentalists. As you aware all church attendance in Europe has declined drastically in the last 50-100 years so that in the UK there are now more Muslims attending mosques than people attending church

In the US, fundamentalist means something different to what it does in Europe. The US fundamentalist believes the inerrancy of the Bible, and does not acknowledge the truth of evolution. Eugene Scott spent most of her lecture in talking about this problem in terms of the school education system in the United States. Parents who of fundamentalist are afraid of having their children taught evolution because they will feel that they will lose faith and in consequence will not achieve forgiveness of sins and everlasting life.

In Europe, almost everybody believes in evolution and does not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible.

Don Cupitt in his talk here drew attention to the TV programme about the Simpsons and in an ironical way it described life in the US. Although the Simpsons attend a church, they found religion rather boring and irrelevant to their life but nevertheless they still went.

On the other hand, if theology changed in the direction of the Sea of Faith, namely towards Christian humanism, I am not certain ipso facto that the congregations would increase.

One has to look at the reasons why people go to church.

The story of two churches: Trumpington and Cannes.

The Mormon Church. My brother's Church

People go to church because they need Christian fellowship

To attract people to church, it is necessary to stimulate them in living in a community. This means much more than just attending a church service.

A major disappointment for me was that the NY seminar did not discuss the future, all was about the present. Perhaps in view of the divergence of opinion between the WI and SF, it was not appropriate. However, there was sufficient common ground for this to be the topic for the next all next big meeting in five years' time. After all, both organisations have now come of age after almost 20 years of being established. It is time to consider what next? Otherwise the two institutions become little more than esoteric debating societies.