

Prepare for head-spinning, rage-causing evening

BY FRANK KING
Staff Writer

If you have even the slightest interest in Christianity, then John Shelby Spong will either make your head spin or cause you to boil with rage.

You can hear him speak when Mr. Spong comes to York Region to help open a new, definitely liberal faith movement. "I'm incredibly impressed the United Church would do this," said the 74-year-old retired Episcopal (Anglican) bishop.

He's referring to Pathways Faith Community, a United Church-sponsored initiative kicking off with Mr. Spong Monday at 7 p.m. at Markham Theatre for Performing Arts.

"The United Church is saying the old way of communicating the Christian story is not working anymore," he added.

Best known for his controversial book *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, the New Jersey-based Mr. Spong has caused outrage among many orthodox, traditional Christians for assertions such as:

- Jesus was not the result of a virgin birth;
- Jesus is not God in the flesh;
- The resurrection of Jesus is hardly a verifiable fact;
- Parts of the Bible are sexist and anti-Semitic and;

• Many of the miracles described in the Bible didn't happen.

None of these points are new. Books have been published for decades challenging basic Christian beliefs, some by notable Canadians such as Tom Harpur and Charles Templeton.

But Mr. Spong's in-your-face titles (the latest is *The Sins of Scripture*) and his credentials as a church leader have made him a target of books, speakers and websites whose mission is exposing what they say is shoddy scholarship and wrong conclusions.

"Spong portrays 'fundamentalists' as bigoted ignoramuses, whereas those

who agree with him are highly learned and intellectual," wrote Michael Bott and Jonathan Sarfati on the website www.answersingenesis.org

"However, how solid and credible are Spong's arguments? Is the Bible really littered with the problems and contradictions that Spong claims it is?"

Pathways Faith Community founder Mary Joseph is aware of these opinions, but notes the United Church wants to be more vital and relevant in Canadian society.

"You can be both liberal thinking, tolerant and not demand any prescribed tenets or dogma and still be deeply,

deeply grounded in the essence of Jesus Christ and the divine," she said.

"I think that's what Bishop Spong knows better than any of the other contemporary writers. There is a humility about this man in his faith that is important to carry over into this new community."

The kickoff evening for Pathways Faith Community includes performances by Alana Bridgewater, Billy Newton-Davis and Emilio Zarris. Tickets are \$21 and available by calling 905-305-7469. Markham Theatre for Performing Arts is on Town Centre Boulevard in the Warden Avenue-Hwy. 7 area. For more information, call Ms Joseph at 416-616-5539.

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