

## The Humanity (In and Through) of Jesus of Nazareth: An Analysis of the Thought of John Shelby Spong

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### Abstract

This article explores the thoughts of a character namely John Shelby Spong with his radical idea of Jesus of Nazareth. Spong highlights Jesus not from a doctrinal point of view as institutional Christianity continues to echo. The Jesus echoed here is Jesus from a human perspective, a real character who lived in a place and time in the past. His life is more about humanizing humans who bring equality. John Shelby Spong was Bishop of the Episcopal Church of Newark, New Jersey from 1976 to 2000. His radical writings and lectures have challenged Christianity for many years. There are so many thoughts about the Christian faith which of course he criticizes radically, but in this paper, the researcher focuses on Spong's interpretive thoughts about Jesus of Nazareth and his practical actions. This paper uses a qualitative approach to literature that highlights certain figures. Of course, the discussion will center on the context of Spong's thought reconstructing Jesus of Nazareth the Jew. From the results of the discussion, it can be said that Jesus in Spong's thinking is a character who revives, and humanizes humans, destroys ethnic boundaries, and Jewish exclusivity, equalizes men and women, and destroys the racial prejudices and stereotypes of his time. Those who are rejected are accepted by Jesus and see him as a complete human being. That's the Jesus of Nazareth according to Spong that Christianity must live today.

**Keywords:** John Shelby Spong, Jesus from Nazareth, Humanity.

### Abstrak

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi pemikiran seorang tokoh bernama John Shelby Spong dengan ide radikalnya tentang Yesus dari Nazaret. Spong menyoroti Yesus bukan dari sudut pandang doktrinal seperti yang terus digaungkan oleh kekristenan institusional. Yesus yang digaungkan di sini adalah Yesus dari sudut pandang manusia, seorang tokoh nyata yang hidup di suatu tempat dan waktu di masa lalu. Hidupnya lebih kepada memanusiakan manusia yang membawa kesetaraan. John Shelby Spong adalah Uskup Gereja Episkopal Newark, New Jersey dari tahun 1976 hingga 2000. Tulisan dan ceramahnya yang radikal telah menantang kekristenan selama bertahun-tahun. Ada begitu banyak pemikiran tentang iman Kristen yang tentu saja dikritiknya secara radikal, tetapi dalam makalah ini, peneliti berfokus pada pemikiran interpretatif Spong tentang Yesus dari Nazaret dan tindakan praktisnya. Tulisan ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif literatur yang menyoroti tokoh-tokoh tertentu. Tentu saja pembahasan akan berpusat pada konteks pemikiran Spong dalam merekonstruksi Yesus orang Yahudi dari Nazaret. Dari hasil pembahasan, dapat dikatakan bahwa Yesus dalam pemikiran Spong adalah tokoh yang menghidupkan, dan memanusiakan manusia, menghancurkan batas-batas etnis, dan eksklusivitas Yahudi, menyetarakan laki-laki dan perempuan, serta menghancurkan prasangka rasial dan stereotip pada masanya. Mereka yang ditolak diterima oleh Yesus dan melihatnya sebagai manusia seutuhnya. Itulah Yesus dari Nazaret yang menurut Spong harus dihidupi oleh kekristenan saat ini.

**Kata Kunci:** John Shelby Spong, Yesus dari Nazaret, Kemanusiaan.

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## INTRODUCTION

Religion is a necessity in human life. One of the uniqueness that exists in religion is human values, which of course become a common ethic in realizing a better civilization from time to time. This means that religion should have a paradigm and emphasize praxis in upholding humanity as a common basis. Indeed, it has become a reality that religious life becomes a "tool" of power, both economic, political and even does not hesitate to use violence (Siahaan, Harls Evan R. et, 2022). All religions, including Christianity, emphasize peace both in the church and in social life. Presenting humanitarian aspects through church education will confirmatively strengthen that the church, which is a community of believers, is a peacemaking agent by always paying attention to humanity's problems. (Massang et al., 2021).

In Christianity, finding human values can be traced to Jesus, who is called Christ, from Nazareth. Jesus has been the central figure in the Christian community from time to time because He is believed to be God who became human (Butar-butur, 2021). It is called Christ because it is approached through a *fideistic* image that has long existed in Christian life. At least that is the concern of contemporary theologians today. The *fideistic* image emphasizes doctrinal faith as the primary source. But there is also another image that is important to look at in order to explore the nature as well as the human values of Jesus' teachings, namely his image as a teacher. In this image, the *fideistic* image is inevitably "negated" by the doctrinal statements developed by the later Christian tradition (Borg, 2003). Whaling suggests an important idea to summarize the doctrinal and humanity image that Jesus can lead every believer into the human values that are His mission to realize the Kingdom of God for the world (Whaling, 1978).

In order to think about the humanity of Jesus, it is necessary to first look at the view of the specific picture of the historical Jesus, which is entirely different from the most widely accepted picture of Jesus as a divine or semi-divine figure who sees himself as a divine savior, which of course we all know has the purpose of saving, or the Divine Savior, with the task of dying for the sins of the world and so that his life and death open up the possibility of obtaining eternal life. Of course, in developing an analysis of the historical humanity of Jesus, the doctrinal overview of Jesus' divinity needs to be reinterpreted, or criticized from a historical perspective (Eckardt, 2006).

To describe and trace Jesus by emphasizing his human nature and praxis would require a kind of deconstruction such as emphasizing that Jesus did exist and lived in a certain era, culture, and had social interactions and was formed from a certain situation and culture, in this case Judaism and suspending 'temporarily' the reflective theological-religious wrapping of the early church community which was strong with eschatological-messianic expectations because they were a community of "believers" not a community of "historians" (Wibowo, 2021). What might be familiar, at least according to Bock and Wallace's description, is the terminology of Christianity and Yeshuanity. Christianity claims that Jesus was anointed by God the Father, as well as God (the Second Person of the Trinity) to represent God and humanity in order to restore the sin-damaged relationship between the Creator and His creation (Wallace, 2009). Christianity (*Kristianitas*) with its core content of Christian faith is the access to God provided by God through Jesus Christ. The specificity of Jesus is expressed in His crucifixion and resurrection. Whereas Jesusnitas (*Yesusnitas*) is another story about Jesus. This story is of course centered on Jesus, but Jesus with His prophetic voice, as the great teacher who sees others from the side of His human love. This Jesus is Jesus of Nazareth. He shows the way to God and brings people into the journey with God. He is primarily a teacher, a guide, and an example. Jesus' specialty was His understanding of the human condition and the enlightenment He brought. The emphasis on Jesus is on the power of His teachings and example. He was an inspiration to His fellow man or women (Wallace, 2009).

What attracts the attention of researcher is how in the frame of Christian faith, Jesus is not only approached from the side of divinity or spirituality but can also be through humanity, real daily life and experienced by fellow human beings. The problem is that the divinity of Jesus, which has become the standard and measure for Christianity, has become standardized and rigid and ignores His humanity. The consequence is that Christianity through Christian leaders has made Jesus, who in the aspect of the doctrine of divinity has become a model that must be emphasized to the Christian community for centuries until today. The question that arises is whether an assessment through a single-doctrinal approach to Jesus by prioritizing His divinity is appropriate?.

Therefore, through this article, the researcher provides a novel statement argument that the interpretive approach to Jesus who is truly human through His humanity can be an alternative in implementing services to others that are more open and emphasize the human image of God's love. To reaffirm Jesus of Nazareth with the human values that He proclaimed for others in His life of service, it will be traced through one of the thinkers who really paid attention and explored the life of Jesus of Nazareth from his human perspective. The author chooses John Shelby Spong as a figure who emphasizes the historical Jesus, the Nazarene, and the praxis of his love for others. John Shelby Spong is a progressive-liberal Christian theologian and bishop in the Episcopal Church. Through his thoughts, it can be traced critically-reflectively how exactly the role and contribution of Jesus of Nazareth to humanity from the first century and its relevance to the present day, especially for Christianity.

As for the article that discusses both the Humanity of Jesus and Spong's thought, it has been previously described that the understanding of death transcends religion according to Spong's thought. Thus, religion is not an appropriate instrument for understanding the reality of death as part of human existence. So the movement to mix theology and secular-contemporary thought needs to be developed. Everyone must transcend religion in order to find the truth in their own humanity (Simut, 2014). Then a critical examination of Spong's thoughts on his theistic concept (Jackson, 2022). There are also studies that emphasize imitating Jesus' human characteristics as a subject in addition to his divinity. (Sonmez, 2022). The article presents Spong's thoughts which are explored emphasizing that the Gospel did not really happen historically but based on the synagogue liturgical development of the early Christian community and developed into institutional Christianity (Kriel, 2016).

The above research has certainly been good and enriching about Spong's thought and the separate study of Jesus from His human side. However, the above research has not discussed Spong's thought that emphasizes Jesus who is truly human and open to others. Therefore, this article aims to offer a progressive-reflective paradigm that focuses on Jesus in His humanity that humanizes others from Spong's perspective. According to the researcher himself, Spong's thinking can be an alternative wealth in theology in the scope of contemporary theology in the midst of the existence of the doctrinal paradigm of Jesus' divinity. But of course, Spong's thinking is also reviewed with a reflective critical paradigm to be applied in church life both personal and communal.

## **METHODS**

The research method of this article is qualitative with a literature study approach to certain figures that are traced analytically and argumentatively. Figure study is a type of qualitative research conducted to examine in depth, systemically, critically about certain figures which include original ideas as well in the socio-historical context that surrounds the figure being studied (Mustaqim, 2016). Descriptively, it will discuss the background context and thoughts of John Shelby Spong, including his understanding of Christian faith

in academic discursive studies and church services. Analytically-critically, we will explore the focus of Spong's thinking about Jesus from the side of His humanity by removing the doctrinal 'cloak' of Jesus from the struggle and development of dogma of the early church community, and focusing on Jesus of Nazareth, a real historical figure in the Jewish context.

So in elaborating the analysis, the literature review with an argumentative presentation of Spong's thought is the main core of this paper. As described by Zaluchu, the author or researcher collects as many relevant theories and source materials as possible, then summarizes and interprets these theories (Zaluchu, 2021). In this regard, the researcher will describe, analyze argumentatively Spong's own writings because Spong was active in writing books during his lifetime and writing articles that discuss Spong. After that, the researcher will conduct appreciative and critical interpretative arguments in Spong's thought which can certainly be applied to the conceptual and praxis theological way of thinking for the church.

## **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

### ***Results***

#### **About John Shelby Spong**

In academic and church discussions in the 20th century American context, Spong's name is known as a "nightmare" for evangelical and fundamentalist churches, but as a "Savior" for progressive, ecumenical, and liberal churches. It is important to know about Spong's life background, education in tracing his concept of thinking about Christian faith and then conduct a critical appreciative analysis.

John Shelby Spong, was born on June 16, 1931 and died on September 12, 2021. Spong was ordained a Priest or Bishop in 1955 in the Episcopal Church. After his ordination, he served in North Carolina and Virginia until becoming Bishop of Newark, New Jersey from June 1976 until his retirement in 2000. He is known as a liberal Christian theologian who advocates the need for Christians to fundamentally rethink the concept of theology inherited from classical theologians and invites people to abandon the concept of "*conventional theism*" and "*traditional Christian doctrines*" while building a new concept of Christian theology that is more critical and reasonable, and enlightening (Titaley, 2020). Spong graduated from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in 1952 which led to a Master of Divinity degree from Virginia Theological Seminary in 1955 and his ordination as a bishop to serve in the Episcopal church in North Carolina and Virginia, USA (Risen, 2021). In addition, he received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Virginia Theological Seminary in collaboration with St. Paul's College, Virginia. Spong wrote a number of important works critiquing the Bible and the classical doctrinal life of the church tradition. His writings include *The Sins of Scripture*, *Liberating the Gospels*, *A New Christianity for a New World*, *Ressurrection; Myth or Reality*, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, and others. Spong is also an active speaker in churches, universities and seminaries in America such as Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and in England, Magdalen College, Oxford University.

Frequently, his out-of-the-box, liberal-progressive statements, arguments, lectures, and writings have generated debate and controversy from various circles, especially from evangelical circles, so that the emergence of 'war drums' from conservative, fundamentalist, and evangelical circles has become his daily bread (Spong, 1998). Spong realizes that his thoughts have elicited apologetic responses from various quarters. In this regard, Spong

said: “*Actually, I am grateful for each my critics. What they unwittingly did was to identify me as a resource for the religious seekers of our world who yearn to believe in God but who are also repelled by the premodern literalizations that so frequently masquerade as Christianity*” (Spong, 1998).

Spong emphasizes that as a Christian interpreter of the Bible, he does not intend to be an 'enemy' of Christianity. He remains committed to living according to Christian values and remains a serving believer in the church, unlike his fellow scholars who abandoned their faith in Christianity. Spong still recognizes the traditional Christian faith and respects it based on the Bible (Spong, 2005). Spong's theology was strongly influenced by the scholars of the Jesus Seminars, the British theologian John A.T. Robinson, known for his 1963 book *Honest to God*, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Boenhoffer, Joseph Campbell and Michael Donald Goulder, a New Testament Professor at the University of Birmingham.

Barth Ehrman, a liberal NT scholar, argues that Spong in his works is not so much concerned with scholars or the academic world, but he is trying to reach out to non-scholars/lay people (especially people in the church) to urge them to find a better way, a way to defend the Christian faith without having to sacrifice their brains, their ratios, without having to believe what most people think (Ehrman, 2021).

### **Spong's Paradigm of the Christian Faith**

In looking at the Christian faith, Spong seeks to critically examine the truth in biblical myths while rejecting the literal understanding and explanation of myths, which are found permanently in Christianity and liturgy (Spong, 1994). Spong asks questions about God. Who is God? No one can say for sure according to him. Because it is not within human competence/ability. What can be suggested is how every believer is able to experience God deeply and do their best to eliminate the delusion of human limitations. That is what Spong emphasizes. Spong continues to pay attention that he experiences God as the source of life who calls him to live fully and to honor every aspect of life in all forms as the embodiment of the holy. Spong always explains the definition of God as the source of love that he continues to experience, and God is the ultimate reality in his life which then calls him to love others, all creatures that God created. To use Tillich's term, God is the “*Ground of Being*” that calls Him to be all that He can be. (Spong, 2005). Spong deeply respected, admired God, yet he could no longer define his experience of God within the confines of a theistic definition of God. It was this kind of worship of God that Spong continued to echo.

Spong criticized and rejected the concept of God as believed by the first century believing community, who believed God was up there. He explains: *We have looked upward for a God above the sky for centuries, but we now know that this infinite universe is empty of supernatural invasive deities. We need to shift our vision to look within—at life, at love, at being* (Spong, 2005). However, Spong still turned his life towards God. *I define myself above all other things as a believer. I am indeed a passionate believer. God is the ultimate reality in my life* (Spong, 1998). Spong argues that institutional Christianity, or in this case the church as a community, is insecure about investigations into current knowledge that could undermine constitutional Christian faith. The church has historically criticized, marginalized, excommunicated, and even expelled the most creative thinkers. (Spong, 1998). Spong was highly critical of the creeds that have been proclaimed over the centuries. He considered that the words of the creed were no longer relevant. He even states that if the God to be worshipped is to be identified based on the confession of words from past centuries taken literally, then God is no longer trustworthy and incapable of being lived or is no longer worthy of the subject of devotion (Spong, 1998).

The Apostles' Creed begins with the phrase "I Believe in God, the Father Almighty". Spong was irritated by this phrase. Spong's emphasis on the mystery of God that transcends language and culture is supported in certain limited cultures. The word "Father" is so patriarchal, as well as ancient and irrelevant. This is because historical thinking has always anthropomorphized God, gods, deities as figures of Old men living in the sky. Moreover, the concept of masculinity has persisted for thousands of years and indirectly justified the oppression of women by religious institutions (Christianity), relegating women to secondary roles for centuries (Spong, 1998). This view is strongly influenced by the thoughts of John A.T. Robinson who also criticized the traditional orthodoxy. According to Robinson as explained by Hadiwijono, the Bible speaks of God as "above" man, because at that time (in the first century) the world was seen as consisting of three parts (heaven above, earth in the middle, and hell below). In biblical times such a view was acceptable, but today people (critically) no longer believe in such a division of the world". Robinson proposes that God should be seen as God in us, God who is the deepest part of our lives (Hadiwijono, 2004). It's a paradigm that Spong has influenced, embraced, lived and preached in both his writings and lectures.

Regarding the Bible, Spong argues that its stories, words have permeated every culture (whether in the American, European or even Asian context), even infiltrating the human mind/subconscious. Even the stories of the Bible are visualized in the form of economically profitable movies and series. Ultimately all civilizations from the most advanced in the West have been profoundly shaped by the fact that it is the Bible that has washed over civilization for over thousands of years. The concepts written in the Bible have penetrated the psyche of individuals and communities socially, economically, educationally by leaps and bounds (Spong, 2005). Spong also reveals that in the history of the world, the interpreted Bible has left an undeniable trail of pain, horror, bloodshed, and death. However, this fact is often not allowed to rise to the collective consciousness.

### **Jesus for John Shelby Spong**

Spong claims that the Jewish Jesus was a very real figure, a real human being, but also in contact with something that was at once eternal and supernatural and always touched his heart and mind. Spong believes and has struggled for decades that the secret to understanding Jesus must first be found in the Jewish context, which has presented him, nurtured him, and shaped him (Spong, 2008).

Spong revisits the life of the Jewish Jesus, to determine why Jesus' humanity led many first-century Jews (Christians) to claim that it was in Jesus' life that the holy God was in some way found and involved. Radically, Spong seeks to separate the historical Jesus (the Nazarene) from layers of interpretive material, from mythology, and from miraculous claims emanating from a supernaturally oriented world. Spong thus demonstrates that many aspects of the Jesus story were not part of his original intent, but rather additions to later interpretations (Spong, 2008). Spong's Christology, which continues to assert that God is in Christ or when Spong asserts that he encountered God in the man Jesus, means something completely different from the traditional interpretations, theological definitions of the past that created doctrines such as the incarnation, even the trinity, because they depend on a theistic definition of God (Spong, 2008).

### **The Implications of Jesus from Nazareth from Spong's Perspective**

Spong asserts that the four Gospels that contain the story of Jesus cannot be read literally. The Gospels do not contain a biography of a person named Jesus of Nazareth (Spong, 2017). It is emphasized once again that Jesus was a real human being who lived in

a certain place and at a certain time. The man Jesus is not a myth, but a historical figure. His hometown was Nazareth in Galilee, and his life on earth began in the last years of the Gregorian calendar and ended in the first third of the first century of that era. The reason to note regarding the real-life Jesus of Nazareth is that a person created as a mythological character would never be said to be from the village of Nazareth. But in reality Jesus was known as Jesus of Nazareth and, since Nazareth was a village in Galilee, He was called a Galilean. This mention of Jesus' place of origin does not give rise to the honor that can be given to mythological figures. Nazareth was a small town, and did not have any distinguishing features (Spong, 2008). Thus, a fact that Spong continues to emphasize is that Jesus of Nazareth is a part of the memory of Jesus that cannot be erased. Nazareth is where Jesus came from. Jesus was a Galilean.

### ***Discussion***

#### **A Humanizing Jesus According to Spong**

Spong highlights that what is unique about Jesus is that his real humanity is seen as a vehicle for God to enter into life in this world. Just like Spong, Indonesian theologian Bambang Subandrijo first explained that to find the truth that Jesus brought and in Jesus will not be obtained through doctrinal debates about Himself, but by walking in His way (Subandrijo, 2016). He added that rather than disputing doctrinal formulations about God and Christ, it would be better to shift the emphasis not to orthodoxy, but to autopraxy, i.e. the praxis of right living, which is more beneficial to the life of mankind, and which respects and honors human dignity. Human beings must return to a relationship of love, peace and justice with God and each other (Subandrijo, 2016). The nature of the gospel in Spong's thinking must go beyond the ancient theistic definition. Thus, for him the gospel, especially in John 10:10; "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly".

Highlighting Jesus' thoughts on humanizing humanity in Spong's analysis can be seen in several aspects. First, Jesus' critique of tribalism. Spong highlights that in us humans, there is a basic, natural, and great fear of tribes different from our own, a tendency to build up vigilance against them, to attack, and even to kill. This tribal tradition arises from a survival mentality embedded in thought, intuitive in the human subconscious and nurturing something that lies at the core of insecurity in humanity itself (Spong, 2008). It is further argued that the more we humans are immersed in tribalistic attitudes, the more our lives are fueled by hatred; and as a direct result, we become less human. Human beings cannot be fully human as long as they are fueled by hatred towards those who threaten the survival of the common human life. Jesus in his life inevitably had to deal with this tribal mentality. He then dealt with it through empowering his disciples to move beyond all tribal boundaries and into the humanity that his life clearly demonstrated.

The tribal boundaries that Jesus faced are seen in the fundamental rift that divides people that forms the Jewish worldview. Jews divide the world into members of their own little country, who call themselves "us", and Gentiles, who are called "them". The Jews are God's "chosen people"; the Gentiles are not God's "chosen people". The Jews believe that they know God's will because God gave them the Torah on Mount Sinai, which teaches them how to live and how to worship. Pleasing this theistic god was the way to make God pleased, protect and defend them. On the other hand, the Gentiles had no Torah, no revelation of God's will, and no law. Therefore, Gentiles are defined as unclean, uncircumcised, and eaters of unclean foods. Jews do not eat with Gentiles. Jews do not intermarry with Gentiles. Jews don't even interact with Gentiles. At the time Jesus lived on earth, humanity was characterized by such tribal boundaries, and it was such a dilemma that drove Jesus in his humanity to enter the world (Spong, 2007).

Spong emphasizes that there is something about this Jesus that is quite unique, and life-changing, and enables us to feel his call to enter a so-called new stage of humanity. That is, a reality story of someone empowering others to become fully and deeply human. An understanding of a new humanity, one that changes everything, is the essence of what people find in Jesus. This is embedded in people's memories of the experience of Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew 28:19-20 on the Great Commission, Matthew proclaims that Jesus was designed to encourage his Jewish disciples to go to other countries, other nations. Go to all the Gentiles means go beyond the boundaries of your fears, Jesus. Go to others who are different, who you define as unclean, and proclaim to them the boundless love of God. (Spong, 2007). This mission command is an invitation to enter into the experience of a new humanity, a humanity extended beyond national boundaries, and thus beyond the search for one's own survival. It is a call to share with all people the life-giving power of love that always expands human life and that frees us to cross the security barriers that limit people's movements. That is always the content of the experience of Jesus (Spong, 2008).

Second, Prejudice and stereotypes. Jesus, in his way, confronted the racial prejudices that had degraded the human dignity of his day. The unclean and rejectable scum of the first century Jewish world were called Samaritans. They were descendants who were no longer pure Jews, whose bloodline had been corrupted by their Jewish ancestors marrying Gentiles. They were also essentially viewed by the religious establishment as heretics, as true worship of God had been compromised by the non-Jewish side of their ancestors.

Jesus was a person who lived a full life. In 'fighting' prejudice and stereotypes. As a result, Jesus saw humanity from a new perspective. He believed that the humanity in one person could touch the humanity in another and empower the other to step out of fears, tribal security systems, prejudices. That is not something that only He can do: the call of God seen in Jesus, a fully human person, makes the meaning of humanity a gift available to every life. That is why people see what they call God in the human Jesus. Jesus' humanity opens up his life to all the meaning of God. Those who experience Jesus experience this new quality of life. They see it, feel it, and get it. This experience of Jesus is what is sought after and must be lived out. The gospels tell of another way in which Jesus ignored religious and societal definitions in favor of the wholeness of life and humanity: he had women disciples. Another aspect of Jesus' humanitarian ministry is the equality of male and female disciples who are known by their own names. This is the fully human understanding of Jesus, which breaks down barriers and crosses boundaries that hinder full humanity. (Spong, 2008).

Jesus always placed humanity above religious law, and thus challenged the law, in all its forms, to a higher purpose. Jesus also challenged the imposition of religious rules that involved worshipping a theistic god who gave commands from on high. Jesus reversed all religious laws and their priorities by declaring that religious rules can cease to be moral rules unless they are used to build human life. For Jesus, in Spong's interpretation religious laws are designed as a means to help develop human life. If religious rules do not enhance life, they should be abolished in the name of humanity. In the end, Spong in his deep conviction continued to be committed to Jesus as Lord and the future hope of Christianity. However, Spong could not follow the first-century thinking that developed Jesus within the conceptual thinking of the early tradition. Spong rejected a literal reading of the Bible, especially the Old Testament. Spong was critical of the traditional literal understanding of the Bible (Spong, 1996).



## **Critical Evaluation of Spong's Thought**

John Shelby Spong has long been recognized as the "nightmare" of all conservative Christian elements of the Anglican/Episcopal Church in America. He radically embraces liberal-progressive theology and still identifies as a devout Christian (Jackson, 2022).

Criticism of Spong's "radical" take on Christianity has led scholars to respond with "Can a Bishop be Wrong?". Spong's academic critics certainly appreciate Spong's attempt to correlate Christian faith to the modern world as contemporary theologians such as Bultmann, Tilich, and even Karl Barth have done ((ed), 1998). Spong is passionate about historical texts (especially about Jesus) and tends to be considered synonymous with the real world. But this is not the case. A historical text is still a story-world. The historical text or "historical world" within it is a story-world reconstructed with a different "text". The result of this reconstruction is also subjective, and is always in danger of becoming subjectivism when readers, theologians, and historians decide that the result of their reconstruction is purely objective. (Sutama, 2008). It must be recognized that Spong is an excellent speaker, an active writer. His love for Christianity, albeit with a different perspective in general, made him continue to investigate, analyze, and criticize the basis of the Christian faith. His analysis of Christian doctrines held for centuries is deconstructed quite provocatively.

A few notes need to be made on Spong's thought in a critical-reflective manner. Firstly, Spong, like other liberal progressive theologians, emphasizes the conditions for being called "Christian", namely the central emphasis on Jesus of Nazareth, and the humanity rather than Christ the Faith that many Christians live by. Secondly, Spong strongly criticizes fundamentalism with its belief in the authority of the Bible. Spong argues that the Bible is merely a human book with political and power influences that result in theological errors. Spong's mistake is to too sharply criticize the Bible or the foundation of the Christian Faith based on contemporary perspectives. This leads to the third aspect, namely Spong's rationalistic, naturalistic view. The historical approach with social methods is used to describe and summarize the historical Jesus, and rejects supernatural things such as the virgin birth, miracles, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus to heaven. Spong strongly rejected the dogmatic views of the church, but indirectly Spong seemed to try to "force" his views to be dogmatic with this rational approach.

However, regardless of whether the reader agrees or disagrees with the details of Spong's views on Jesus in particular, it must be acknowledged that he has boldly presented a style of theology that challenges and elicits reactions from various circles, both appreciative and sharply critical.

## **CONCLUSION**

Thinking about Jesus, especially in the aspect of His humanity, can be seen from another perspective, as Spong did. Spong broke down the dogmatic thinking of the church or the first-century style of thinking that wrapped Jesus for centuries and then rebuilt the real Jesus, who had lived in the past to the conditions of society, people with a modern style of thinking.

In his thinking, Spong loves and lives Christianity based on Jesus himself, who is filled with God and shares God's love with humans to experience equality in humanity. Spong adds that Jesus of Nazareth was a warrior figure who took care of marginalized people, humanizing people as human beings. The development of research related to Spong and other contemporary thinkers needs to be appreciated as well as criticized to see the richness of Christian theology from various perspectives, from the conventional to the most radical.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The researcher consciously declares that there is no conflict between the researcher and the journal manager in the process of publication of this article.

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