

John Shelby Spong

“Celebrating Post-Theistic Christian Faith”

Episode 10 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



John Shelby (Jack) Spong is a prolific best-selling author and perhaps the best known proponent of a liberal, inclusive, culturally relevant Christian faith. Prior to retirement he was an Episcopal Bishop in the United States, who helped lead his denomination toward the ordination of women and acceptance of openly homosexual clergy.

HIGHLIGHTS

In this conversation, John Shelby Spong does a magnificent job of sharing his **theologically progressive ideas**, and **the passions underlying them**, while also teaching important points about **the history of Christendom**—and of the Western world more generally. When one steps into such a historically rich perspective, the sense that change *must* occur in the expression of Christianity today and onward into the future transforms into the *least* radical path to follow. He says, “**Christianity has been an ever-changing movement throughout its entire history**. Anybody who doesn’t understand that doesn’t understand history.” Key faith concepts include a “**post-theistic**” **understanding of God**, the power of **love** as a divine principle, **service to others as the “Christ principle”**, and **religious doubt as a good thing**.

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

Many people have experienced substantial faith shifts as a result of exposure to John Spong’s passionate intellect and prophetic words. If your discussion members or students are not completely solid in their faith walk, be advised that this conversation might be a stretch for them—or perhaps it might provide a long-awaited boost to a next stage. Few theologically conservative church leaders will likely want to expose their membership to this dialogue. But seminarians and students of theology—of whatever Christian denomination—will be well served to gain some sense of what this most popular and provocative liberal Christian thinker has to say. His extraordinary skill in storytelling, evocative language, and rich imagery is well worth studying by all clergy, of whatever faith perspective. In the dialogue itself, Bishop Spong identifies his audience this way:

I see my audience as the people who are still hanging on to their religious convictions but feeling very shaky about them. Or people who have given up religious convictions but still miss them. I call these people **'believers in exile.'** They want to believe; they feel a sense of transcendence and wonder and awe in their lives. But the old symbols simply don't work.

BLOG COMMENTS

Tim Muench says:

I really enjoyed this conversation. As a member of "the church alumni association" for 30 years, I appreciate what Rev. Spong is trying to do. Perhaps if I had heard him 30 years ago, I would have stayed in the fold. It all seems like such a stretch to me now! As much as I still admire the Christian tradition and love its history, to suggest that it is still a relevant faith makes my brain feel like it's being twisted into a pretzel.

Carol Staton says:

I am so excited about Spong's interview with Michael that while listening to it alone I was clapping my hands and exclaiming agreement out loud! Thank "god" for your life, love, and being, Bishop Spong, that you express so well. Your facility with language to clarify is amazing. Thank "you". How grateful I am to you, Michael Dowd, for bringing this series about! I am looking forward to having friends over to listen, especially to Spong, as I have downloaded the dialogues.

KEYWORD TOPICS

Prejudices (biblical support for), **homosexuality** (recent prejudices against), **women's equality** (how recent a cultural norm), **Bible** (problems of unchanging, outdated ideas and norms), **creeds** (history of their development), **worship** (structures of as 13th century), **Harvey Cox**, **"the Church alumni association"**, **Original Sin and the Fall** (arguments against), **Jesus** (as born into Jewish context), **Gospel of Mark**, **neo-Platonic** (influences on Christianity), **Renaissance**, **Protestant Reformation**, **Thomas Aquinas**, **Copernicus**, **Kepler**, **Galileo**, **Isaac Newton**, **Charles Darwin** (why his theory is difficult for religious people), **Scopes Trial**, **"creation science"**, **Intelligent Design**, **fundamentalism** (birth of), **self-conscious humanity** (as goal of evolution), **Jesus story** (traditional interpretation as inoperative in post-Darwinian world), **teaching evolution** (why necessary), **Billy Graham**, **life after death** (possibility of), **biological survival** (need to transcend that drive), **Augustine**, **Heaven and Hell**, **limbo** (for "noble pagans" and unbaptized children), **love** (as cosmic principle), **God as "ground of being"**, **Paul Tillich**, **biblical scholarship** (not widely shared with lay Christians), **bible stories as mythic**, **Jerry Falwell**, **birth narratives of Jesus**, **Church history** (importance of knowing), **hope**, **progress in human rights**, **life purpose**, **post-theistic** (as distinct from atheistic), **John**

A.T. Robinson, experience of God (distinct from theological description of), **truth** (no final, inerrant), **Matthew Fox, mystical experience** (importance of), **human self-consciousness** (as unique and sometimes frightening), **Einstein, Niels Bohr, religious doubt/anxiety** (as a good thing)

BIOGRAPHY

John Shelby Spong, whose books have sold more than a million copies, was bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark for 24 years before his retirement in 2001. His admirers acclaim him as a teaching bishop who makes contemporary theology accessible to the ordinary layperson—he’s considered the champion of an inclusive faith by many, both inside and outside the Christian church. In one of his recent books, *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible’s Texts of Hate to Discover the God of Love* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2005), this visionary thinker seeks to introduce readers to a healthy way to engage the holy book of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

A devout Christian who has spent a lifetime studying the Bible and whose life has been deeply shaped by it, Spong says he is not interested in Bible bashing. “I come to this interpretive task not as an enemy of Christianity,” he says. “I am not even a disillusioned former Christian, as some of my scholar-friends identify themselves. I am a believer who knows and loves the Bible deeply. But I also recognize that parts of it have been used to undergird prejudices and to mask violence.”

A visiting lecturer at Harvard and at universities and churches worldwide, Spong delivers more than 200 public lectures each year to standing-room-only crowds. His bestselling books include *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*; *A New Christianity for a New World*; *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*; *Jesus for the Nonreligious*; and *Here I Stand*.

His website is: <http://johnshelbyspong.com/about-bishop-spong/>

SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEOS

Two short videos of Bishop Spong presenting “Jesus for the Non-Religious”:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XL8LvaJ9Rc>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJICIGQI0JU>

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found (and new ones posted) at the following url:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/john-shelby-spong-christianity-continuing-to-evolve/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **Growing beyond common prejudices.** John Shelby Spong briefly, yet powerfully, talks about the prejudices he grew up with — and that it was not always easy to move beyond them. He says,

I was raised in an evangelical Episcopal church in the Bible Belt of the South in Charlotte, North Carolina, where I was taught that **men were by nature superior to females**, that it was okay to **hate Jews**, that **homosexuals were either mentally sick or morally depraved**, and that **segregation was the will of God**. The Bible was quoted to prove that all of those things were true. It took me a long time to get a different kind of reality and walk through some of those prejudices.

Question 1A: *Reflect on the power and poignancy of a much-respected theological and social liberal telling of **how he once held the prejudices** that were the norm for his time and place.*

Question 1B: *What prejudices have you moved through in your life? Did you have to push through them on your own, or was there a cultural shift happening in which you were carried along, with little strain and effort on your own part?*

Question 1C: *Do you have a sense, even now, of **wrestling with a long-held assumption** (or prejudice) that you may (or may not) eventually move beyond?*

Question 1D: *Was there a time in your life when **an elder told you the story** of their own once-unquestioned assumptions of a bygone time — and did you find this helpful for reflecting on your own time and struggles? If yes, how so? If no, how could it have been helpful if you had heard such a story?*

Question 1E: *Is there a **younger person in your life** who might benefit from hearing your candid story of having to change with the times? of having to reckon with and forgive the thoughts or deeds of a former self, shaped by a vastly different time or place?*

2. **Difficulties when the Bible is read by modern minds.** John Shelby Spong succinctly states the challenges facing modern minds when the Bible is actually read. He says,

I've always wanted to be a priest or a pastor, and yet I found myself regularly conflicted because **the Bible that I treasure** and that I've read extensively in my life was written between 1,000 BCE and 135 AD, or between two- and three-thousand years ago. **It makes assumptions I cannot make.** It assumes that the **Earth is the center of the universe**. It assumes that human life was created perfect, only to fall into **sin**—and that it needs some sort of divine rescue. It assumes that **sickness** is divine punishment because nobody in that era knew anything about germs or viruses, leukemia or tumors. It assumes that **mental illness** is demon possession and epilepsy is demon possession. It assumes things that are impossible for me to assume. I either have to reject the Bible, as many of my contemporaries do, as simply irrelevant to the world in which I live, or **I've got to find a different way to read the Bible** and to see it as a pointer to a truth that it cannot fully embrace.

Question 2A: Does this passage help explain why theologically trained (that is, biblically literate) pastors and priests tend to be **more theologically liberal** than their congregations? What, if any, is your experience of this phenomenon?

Question 2B: Do you recall an instance when you were shocked to read (or be told of) a passage in the **Bible that you found offensive**? What feelings ensued? If you experienced emotional or rational discomfort, how did you move through it?

3. **When 4th century creeds are recited by 21st century peoples.** John Spong succinctly states the challenges facing modern minds when creeds are recited and reflected upon:

As a Christian, I live in a world and in a tradition that has **creeds that were basically shaped in the 4th century**. And, again, the 4th century made all kinds of assumptions that I cannot make today as a 21st century thinking human being. Most of the worship in the Christian Church is shaped and formed, sometimes even defined, by the mentality of the 13th century. **We still are 13th-century people in the way we relate to worship**. And, again, I cannot think as a 13th-century person. So my choices are either to **close my mind** to the realities of the modern world and to the learning of the last, say, 500 years, in order to be a Christian—that would make me a **fundamentalist**, where I do not want to engage the new thought of the new world—or I reject everything about my religious heritage and join what Harvey Cox called “the secular city,” and what I call “**the Church alumni association**,” and be free of this religious superstition that we call Church or Christianity or God. So I’ve tried to find a way to live within **the tension of being a 21st century thinking person and a believing Christian**. Sometimes that tension’s enough to tear you apart, but I find in that tension a whole different way to approach both my religious background and the knowledge of my generation.

Question 3A: Does it make a difference to you to know (or to have learned here) that the **creeds** typically recited in Christian settings were established long ago?

Question 3B: Are you part of a faith tradition that either **regularly recites** the Apostle’s Creed or the Nicene Creed or some other statement of belief in worship services, or that requires giving assent to the **creed in order to qualify for membership** or to complete confirmation classes? If so, how do you feel about this aspect of your faith tradition? If not, do you recall ever having recited a creed in your childhood or youth? And if **creedal recitation** has never been part of your life, what is your reaction to learning about or listening to others reciting such creeds?

Question 3C: Is there an **emotional difference** for you when the same concept is conveyed in different modes? For example, do you have different levels of confusion or distress when you encounter a Bible passage that confronts your sense of morality or your beliefs if you are **reading silently** to yourself, versus **listening to that passage be read as scripture** during a worship service, versus **singing** a hymn that contains beliefs or values you do not share, versus **unison recitation** of a creed you do not agree with (or have to massively translate in your own mind)?

4. **Learning history; seeing Christianity as “an ever-changing movement.”** Of all the dialogues in this series, this one with John Shelby Spong is by far the richest in its presentation of the history of Christian faith. Spong says,

Christianity has been an ever-changing movement through its entire history. Anybody who doesn't understand that doesn't understand history. **We were born as a Jewish faith** community. Jesus was a Jew; the disciples were Jews. The experience of Jesus was interpreted within a Jewish framework. That's why Mark, the first gospel to be written, starts out by saying, “The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the prophets,” and quotes Malachi and Isaiah. That's the way the Christian story formed. By the end of the 2nd century, it had become pretty much a Gentile religion, and it needed to redefine itself in terms of the prevailing thought forms of **the Greek-speaking Gentile world**, which was basically a Neo-Platonic thinking world. **Augustine** rose up in the late 4th century and began to rethink the Christian story in terms of the context of a **Neo-Platonic**, Greek-thinking world. And that lasted for about a thousand years. Then a lot of other elements came into Western civilization: the **Renaissance** and knowledge from **the East** that we had never processed before. So we had to rethink it again. The **Protestant Reformation** was an attempt on the part of the Christian community to rethink that. In between those changes, we had a shift in the Greek world from **Plato to Aristotle**—and Thomas Aquinas rethought the Christian faith in terms of Aristotelian categories.

Question 4A: *To what degree was this historical overview new for you? That is, if your current faith stance doesn't already reflect a historical understanding of how much Christianity has changed through time, what difference does it make to take in and ponder this history now?*

Question 4B: *Which aspects of your personal knowledge of **Christian history** (as distinct from Christian belief) are most important in shaping your faith stance? **Which cause you the most discomfort**, or which you have not yet assimilated?*

Question 4C: *At which point in the **religious education of a child**, youth, or adult should the most troubling aspects of Christian history be introduced?*

5. **Incorporating the fruits of the Scientific Revolution.** John Spong points out how greatly the discoveries of science have shifted our understanding of the universe, disease, and the interconnectedness of life since the time when the scriptures and creeds were recorded. He says,

What is going on in our world today is that we live on the other side of people like **Copernicus**, **Kepler**, and **Galileo**. We have to look at the universe in a way we've never looked at it religiously before and make sense of our God claims within that world. We've got to look at the universe, at the world we live in, on the other side of Isaac **Newton**, who took away the concept of miracle and magic with which the Christian story is so deeply compromised, I would say.

We also have to look on the other side of Charles **Darwin**. The Darwinian revolution has shaken the Christian story to its roots. That's why we have this incredible negativity in our society towards the thinking of Charles Darwin. Ever since the debate with the Bishop of Oxford, within a year after Darwin's book came out, Christianity has resisted Darwin—leading up to the **Scopes**

Trial, to the publication of *The Fundamentals* in the United States between 1910 and 1915, to “**creation science**” to “**Intelligent Design**.” Enormous energy has been spent trying to resist and dispute Darwin.

The fact is that **the religious community has lost that war**. They don’t all realize this, but that war is lost. The medical world, the scientific world assumes Darwinian principles in everything it says and does. The fact that we have to get vaccinated every year for a different strain of influenza means that the influenza virus is evolving and mutating in response to the vaccinations. **Everybody, even the fundamentalists, are being shaped by evolution**, whether they admit it or not, when they get their flu shots.

Throughout history, we’ve constantly had to rethink the Christian symbols in terms of a new worldview. Today, again, we’re trying to think about how we can make sense of the symbols of our religious heritage in a world that is radically different from the world we inherited as the Christian people walking through history.

Question 5A: *What emotional response or responses do you have to these statements? Do they encourage you to dig deeper into the **historical evolution of your own faith tradition**? Or would you rather not think about doctrinal and other religious changes through time, and simply go on believing and worshiping and praying in whatever ways have become comfortable for you? If so, why do you suppose that is, and are you truly okay with it?*

Question 5B: *Among the fruits of the **Scientific Revolution** that Spong mentions and all the newer discoveries that you are aware of today, which, if any, do you find **most troublesome for integrating with your faith**? Where is there unresolved conflict?*

Question 5C: *In whatever ways the discoveries of science may or may not affect your faith walk, take a moment to reflect on **the scientific discoveries** (including their expression in new technologies and medicines) for which you are truly **grateful**. Indeed, are there particular instances in your own life and in the lives of your loved ones when, had it not been for the fruits of science, you or they **would not be alive today**? Overall, can you appreciate the benefits of scientific advances even while you grapple with perhaps some of science’s challenging impacts on your faith and your church community? Please elaborate.*

6. **Does your faith perspective put you in Spong’s “audience.”** John Spong characterizes the kinds of listeners and readers who are most eager for his ideas:

I see my audience as the people who are **still hanging on to their religious convictions**, but feeling very shaky about them, or people who have given them up but still miss them. It’s a particular audience. I call them “**the believers in exile**.” They *want* to believe; they feel a sense of transcendence and wonder and awe in their lives. They want to make some sense of out that, but the old symbols simply don’t work. And they almost need permission to walk away from those old symbols, and **the Church is not really good at giving people permission to think in new ways**, so that there’s a constant tension.

Question 6: *Do you fit the profile of John Spong’s audience? How so, or how not?*

7. **What happens after death?** The one place in this dialogue where Spong and Dowd took issue with one another's thinking was on the question of **what happens after death**.

Question 7: *Did you find this discussion on death interesting? Were you more inclined toward Spong's position or Dowd's—or something else altogether? Or were their perspectives just not made clear enough to understand? Overall, how easy or difficult is it for you to think about death and to have your viewpoint work within your faith perspective?*

8. **The power of love as a divine principle.** Like so many of the other speakers in this series, John Spong chooses to see love as a divine force in the cosmos. He says,

I don't believe anybody can define God, but when I have to define **my experience of God**, which I think I can at least define—I might be delusional, but I can define my experience with God—I define this experience as being part of **the source of life that flows through the universe and that comes to self-consciousness in human beings: this power of love that is also a power that's always present**—watch birds taking care of their young in a nest, a mother cat taking care of its kittens, watch even a lioness holding the neck of a baby lion, and watch a mother take care of a child—there is this power of love that is always creating life, and I see **this source of love ultimately as a definition of who God is**. Because I was trained by **Paul Tillich**, I see God in Tillich's terms as **the ground of being**. I don't see God as *a being* at all, external, above the sky, with **supernatural power**. All of that is **mythological thinking and pre-modern thinking**. I see God as the ground of being in which everything that is, is rooted and lives. In Paul's words, "that within which we live and move and have our being."

Question 8: *This view of "love" as an expression of God or a divine principle in the universe: does it resonate with your own sense of divinity? How so, or how not?*

9. **Service to others as the Christ principle.** Putting the core of his theology into practical terms, John Spong speaks of God and of "the Christ principle" in this way:

God to me is the source of life, and **I worship God by living**. God to me is the source of love, and I worship God by loving. God to me is the ground of being, and I worship God by having the courage to be everything I can be. And this is the God that I believe I see in the description of the life of **Jesus**. The **mission of the Christian Church** is not to convert people, and it's not to make people religious. It's **to help people become deeply and fully human**, and to be able to give their lives away in service to other people. That's the **Christ principle**. The whole story makes sense to me, and it makes far more profound sense when I embrace the modernity of my world and the way my world thinks than to try to pretend that I can take 1st century or 4th century or 13th century categories and **force my brain into a kind of pretzel** that can twist itself around these concepts that no longer make a great deal of sense to modern men and women.

Question 9: *How much of Spong's theological perspective do you share? Where do you differ?*

10. **What pastors do not tell their congregations.** John Spong notes a chasm between what is taught about the Bible in theology classes and what churchgoers sitting in the pew hear. He

says,

I've had sixteen death threats, but no **atheist** has ever threatened my life. Neither has a **Buddhist**. All of my death threats have come from Bible-quoting true believers who felt that their grasp on security of their religion was somehow being undermined by the things I was doing. But it's not just the things I'm doing, it's also the fact that we've got about **300 years of critical biblical scholarship that we've never told the laypeople in our churches much about**. And so they actually think that somebody is attacking the Bible when what you're doing is articulating what is commonplace in the world of **academic biblical scholarship**.

At this point **Michael Dowd** tells a story about *why* trained clergy do not fully share their biblical knowledge. Dowd responds from personal experience the reason that biblical scholarship does not penetrate into worship services and Sunday school. Dowd quips that those clergy who do attempt to share such knowledge, "**They call us ex-pastors.**"

Question 10: *Whether you are one who stands at the pulpit or sits in a pew, what has been your experience on this particular issue?*

11. **An upside of learning that Bible stories are not materially true.** Spong speaks of the delicacy about teaching a mythic understanding of Bible stories while pastoring a church. He recounts this story:

I lived in Lynchburg, Virginia, where I shared that town with a man named **Jerry Falwell**, and it was an interesting milieu. I did a series on the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. I started them in Advent and I didn't finish them until Easter. My congregation was very anxious before the series started, but by the time we got through the **birth narratives**—and all I did was to tell them the commonplace understanding of the birth narratives in the academic circles of Christianity and the world today—and people would come at the end and say, "I can now celebrate **Christmas** so much better than I ever could before, because I'm free to look at the symbols in a very different way."

Question 11: *Is there a particular biblical story or passage that you recall feeling better about, even "free," when an authority figure told you (in person or by way of a book you read) that it was perfectly acceptable to **regard that story or passage as mythic** rather than as materially true? Please elaborate.*

12. **Being "faithful to the transition pressure."** At one point the host, Michael Dowd, asks his guest to speculate, "When you look to the **future** and imagine a Christianity that has deeply integrated Charles Darwin as well as the other scientists that you mentioned earlier, what does that Christianity look like? How would ministry, or church, or religious education be different?" Spong responds, in part,

I think all we've got to do today is to be **faithful to whatever the transition pressure is** so that people a thousand years from now can look back and see us as having paved the way for them to be what they could be—though I could not possibly begin to tell you what the Christian Church is going to look like a thousand years from now.

Bruce Sanguin, who was the guest for an earlier episode of this series, posted a comment on the blog-page pertaining to Spong’s conversation, in which he said, “I really appreciated your take, John, on staying connected to ‘transitional pressures,’ and **allowing the future to emerge** one adjustment at a time—discovering where Spirit is moving, trusting that, rather than feeling like we need to engineer the future into existence.”

Similarly, a listener by the name of **Travis** posted this blog comment: “I really appreciated John’s refusal to entertain questions pertaining to the future and how it might play out. It takes a lot of pressure off my shoulders to think that my only responsibility is to somehow **be faithful in the moment and let the future take care of itself.**”

Question 12A: *How does Spong’s perspective about the future occur to you?*

Question 12B: *If “being faithful to the transitional pressure” is good advice for individuals, is it also good advice for institutions? What about **institutions beyond the Church**?*

Question 12C: *Are there examples today of where troubles abound because **the Church** is not, in fact, “faithful to the transitional pressure” of our time?*

Question 12D: *On his way to answering this question, John Spong brought in quite a bit of historical understanding—as he does throughout the dialogue. How important is it for people in positions of religious and secular authority to not only have **a grasp of history** but to actually consult it when dealing with present issues? And have you, yourself, ever **found wisdom in a historical perspective** when navigating some challenge or decision point in your own life? Please elaborate.*

13. **An elder finds hope in the change he has lived through.** Michael Dowd asks John Spong, “What do you see now in the Church—in our culture, western culture, but also in the Christian expression of that—that gives you hope?” Spong, responds,

That’s easy for me. Again, let me look at it through the lens of the **Episcopal Church**. I grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina in an Episcopal Church, a very evangelical Episcopal Church. A black person would have been arrested if they’d come to that church to try to worship; that’s just the fact. I’m talking about the ‘30s and ‘40s. Today—I’m not yet 80 years old, but I’m getting close—today, the Episcopal Church in North Carolina has one bishop. His name is Michael Curry, and he’s an **African-American**, and he was elected by the people of North Carolina to be their bishop. That’s progress in one lifetime,

Spong then continues with similar stories about how things were for **women** in the church when he was a child, and how things are now. He tells a similar story about the immense shift in how his Church now views **homosexuality**.

Question 13A: *How important is it to have not only a historical perspective—but to have **elders speak from personal experience** and actual stories about the magnitude of positive change that has already taken place?*

Question 13B: *If someone were to ask you where you find “hope”, what would you say? And what perspective or story from your own personal experience could you recount, if any?*

Question 13C: *Overall, can you see the value of reminding ourselves of where we and the previous generations have already witnessed monumental **positive change**?*

14. **Speaking boldly of one’s life purpose.** In a kind of “manifesto” moment, John Spong says,

I want to make sure that in my life, I take the weapon—which is the **Bible**, strangely enough—the weapon that has been used to **denigrate the humanity** of people of color and the humanity of women, the humanity of gay and lesbian people, and I want to transform that weapon into a book of life and not a book of death. **I want to rescue the Bible from Fundamentalism**—to use my title—and I want to **try to build a new Christianity for a new world**, to use another one of my titles. That’s the goal of ministry that I think I’m about, and I see plenty of reason to be encouraged and hopeful about the future.

Question 14A: *What occurs to you when you encounter this bold statement?*

Question 14B: *For whatever in your life (big or small, worldly or intimate) is a profound **priority** for you, can you envision stating that **life purpose boldly**, as a kind of manifesto? How might reviewing that statement be helpful for giving you courage and hope and to keep you in action around your greatest passions and priorities?*

15. **“Celebrating Post-Theistic Christian Faith.”** Late in the dialogue, Michael Dowd asks John Spong to explain what he means by the subtitle of this conversation, “Celebrating a Post-Theistic Christian Faith.” Spong responds,

I think that’s a crucial issue, because I think one of the symbols that I think we’ve finally got to get rid of in order for the Christian faith to *live* is the definition of God as a theistic being. We have traditionally **defined God as a being external to this world**. We usually locate God as above the sky and endowed with **supernatural** power with which he—and it’s usually a male—can intervene in human history to either accomplish the divine will or to answer our prayers. That’s the God that I think has been destroyed by the expansion of knowledge.

People think that that’s the only definition of God there is. Theism is a human definition of God. Theism is not God. I think the language that we use is inadequate. **An atheist is not someone who does not believe that there is a God; an atheist is one who has rejected the theistic definition of God.** Well, so have the mystics, and so have the Buddhists, and so have an awful lot of people in the Christian tradition.

How do you get beyond the theistic definition of God? First of all, you’ve got to recognize that it’s a human definition. And what makes anybody think that the human mind can embrace the reality of God? Can a horse tell you what it means to be human? Can an insect tell you what it means to be a bird? Can a human mind tell you what God is? I think that’s a bit of hubris, of arrogance. And yet, **I think that we can experience God, even though we cannot define what we are experiencing.** I think there is a reality to that experience, and so I want to get beyond that theistic definition.

Later in the interview, Spong says, “Whatever God is, I’m a part of that God. Whatever God is, God is a part of who I am. And I want to embrace those categories with great joy.”

Question 14A: *Whether you are a religious person or not, do you find Spong’s explanation and enthusiasm helpful—perhaps even attractive? Or not? Please elaborate.*

Question 14B: *Have you experienced in your own conversations instances of needless conflict or disharmony simply because the individuals so engaged **were interpreting the same key words in very different ways**? Have you had such an experience in speaking or hearing the word “God”? Please elaborate.*

Question 14C: *One of the people who posted comments on this conversation when it first aired in 2010 suggested a different way of speaking about the same concept. What do you think about the following?...*

Travis says: I’ve since started reading Jack’s book *A New Christianity for a New World* and find it refreshingly challenging. Jack is decidedly for a **post-theistic** embodiment of Christianity, but I’m wondering if it is possible for a person to be a **mature theist**. I know that I’ve met some mature (at least in my view) Christian monastics, but perhaps their theism is a bit more nuanced, mysterious, and deep than is stereotypically portrayed. **Are there different ways of embodying theism that allow for personal maturity and wholeness?**

15. **Speaking boldly, prophetically.** John Shelby Spong is highly regarded for his eloquence and his prophetic way of speaking and writing. For example, near the end of the dialogue he says,

Nobody’s definition of God is perfect. Nobody’s religious system is the only way. We’ve got to get rid of that mentality. There is **no inerrant Bible**. There is **no infallible pope**. There is no one true religion. There is no one true Church. **We’re all pilgrims walking into the mystery and wonder of God.** When religious institutions begin to embrace that, then we’ll get rid of persecutions and religious wars and Catholics hating Protestants, and Protestants hating Catholics, and Jews hating Muslims, and Muslims hating Jews, and Shias hating Sunnis, and Sunnis hating Shias, and all the other dreadful religious divisions that we have inflicted upon the human race.

Question 15A: *Can you recall an occasion when you yourself spoke or wrote boldly, prophetically? What kind of response did that generate? Can you see where it might be useful for you to **cultivate prophetic forms of communication** for use on select occasions?*

Question 15B: *Does one have to reach a certain stature, a high standing, before a prophetic style of communication will serve rather than hinder your message? In other words, is there a danger of **misuse of prophetic-like communication** that would have your listeners regard you as arrogant, self-righteous, even offensive? In fact, did Spong ever tip over that edge for you in this dialogue?*

16. **The use of powerful imagery in communication.** John Spong sets a high bar for prowess in communication. He uses prophetic styles of speech. He illustrates abstract concepts with

anecdotes drawn from his own long experience. And he uses powerful imagery, for example:

I envision **the religious community as walking in a dry riverbed**, and some are so far ahead that they are exploring which way the riverbed turns, and some are so far behind that you can't see them, and everybody else is sort of in between. The only thing that is of concern to me is *not* that some are ahead and some are behind—and those are pejorative words, too—but that **everybody's at least walking in the same direction**. I think that's what's important.

Very soon after this, he mentions his regard for particularly imagery that **Matthew Fox** uses — about **religions all being separate wells** drawing from the same deep source of water. Know that John has written so many books and delivered so many talks that he is not generating his images and stories on the spot in this interview. Nonetheless, he surely makes an effort to have them ready at hand.

Question 16: *What might you do to **ramp up the power of your speaking and writing**? Might you choose to make a commitment to give as much attention to finding **anecdotes**, creating rich **imagery**, and using prophetic language for at least some of the main concepts and ideas that you draw upon regularly in your own communications? What about keeping a notebook handy for jotting words, images, and anecdotes in as they come to mind?*

17. **Religious doubt and anxiety as a good thing.** The very last point that John Shelby Spong makes in this dialogue concerns the positive value of religious doubt and anxiety. (He is not alone in seeing doubt as a good thing. The episode with evangelical Bill Phillips is especially strong in this regard.) Here Spong says,

One of the great weaknesses of religion is that it tries to act as if there is such a thing as **unchanging truth**. There is not, and we need to embrace that. We need to **embrace anxiety**. I don't want peace of mind. I want to embrace the anxiety of what it means to be human. Any religion that takes away my anxiety, I think takes away my humanity—and I'm not going to be a follower of that religion.

Question 17: *Does this passage surprise you, enliven you, trouble you, comfort you? How do you regard religious or worldview **doubt** or anxiety in your own life?*

© Michael Dowd 2012. All rights reserved.