

John Shelby Spong

“Celebrating Post-Theistic Christian Faith”

Episode 10 (transcript of audio) of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity
EvolutionaryChristianity.com

Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 10 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity](#): Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith.” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via [EvolutionaryChristianity.com](#), where you too can add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [John Shelby Spong](#) is our featured guest. [Jack Spong](#) is the [retired Episcopal Bishop](#) of Newark, New Jersey, and a prophetic theologian whose books have sold more than a million copies. He’s the author of [some 20 books](#), including [Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism](#) and [Why Christianity Must Change or Die](#). Here we discuss “Celebrating Post-Theistic Christian Faith.” As you’ll hear, Jack has a passionate commitment to the tradition, and a passionate love of scripture, but also a keen sense of what God’s been revealing through science that the ancients could not have possibly understood or known. (*Editor’s note: Rev. Dowd also interviewed Bishop Spong in May of 2010, the first in his [Evolving Faith podcast series](#), which can be found here: “[Redeeming Christianity in the 21st Century](#)”.*)

Host: Hello John Shelby Spong, and thank you for joining this conversation series on evolutionary Christianity.

John: Thank you, Michael. It’s good to be with you.

Host: It’s good to be with you, too. I enjoyed [our last conversation](#)—close to a year ago now—and I’ve been looking forward to this one because we’re bringing in so many radically diverse thought leaders on this topic of how a science-based evolutionary understanding of reality has made a difference in their life, how they not only tolerate an evolutionary worldview, but most of us wholeheartedly embrace it.

I’d like to ask you at the beginning to share a bit of your own story, as a bestselling author and someone who has been involved in stirring things up for quite some time within the Christian context. So, for those listeners who may not be familiar with you and your work, I’d like to ask you to speak about your own background, your own testimonial. How did you come into this perspective that you now have? What were the main mileposts along the way?

John: I’ll be glad to do that. 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.

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.

Also 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.

Host: That's great, Jack. I'm wondering, could you sum up how you see your own calling in this larger movement?—in this time of helping the Christian tradition and Christians to embrace an evidential understanding of reality without having to reject their tradition to do so. You've played a really vital role. All three churches that I've pastored—[United Church of Christ](#) congregations, one in western Massachusetts, one in southeast Ohio, and the other in Ann Arbor, Michigan—and in each those churches we studied your book [Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism](#). So, you've made a difference in my ministry. How would you describe your ministry, your mission in this larger movement?

John: Let me say first of all that Christianity has been an ever-changing movement through its entire history. Anybody who doesn't quite 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.

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.

Host: That's exactly what I see happening. This series of conversations is part of the larger effort. We ask, What are the different ways that various Christians—liberals, conservatives, radicals, Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals—can appreciate and find deep value and

sustenance in our tradition—and how can we interpret the symbols, the practices, the doctrines, the dogma of our tradition in a way that is in alignment with [what God has been revealing through evidence](#): through cross-cultural evidence, through scientific evidence, and through historical evidence (*also* [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)). It's a terribly exciting time to be alive and be involved in the Church. It doesn't have to be either/or: either you accept a science-based evolutionary understanding of reality and reject all myth, all religion, all meaning systems, or you are Young Earth creationist or a biblical literalist and you reject science.

John: There's a choice. There's no doubt about that. But let me tell you why I think Darwin is so difficult for religious people.

Rightly or wrongly, we have told the Jesus story in terms of an Augustinian pattern that the world was created perfect. Then through human sin we corrupted the perfection of God's Creation and we fell into Original Sin. We had to leave the Garden of Eden. But, we've tended to literalize that as a description of our humanity. That means that human life is lived in "sin" and has to be rescued, because we cannot overcome this sinfulness ourselves. In the depths of our humanity, we are corrupted people, and so we have to postulated God coming to our rescue. We've told the Jesus story in terms of God coming to our rescue to restore us to what we were originally created to be.

That's generally the way we tell the story. Now, people can make it a little more sophisticated, a little less sophisticated—but that's what our hymns say, what the sacrifice of the mass means in the Catholic tradition. That's what Protestants mean when they recite the mantra that "Jesus died for my sins." The fact is that none of that makes sense in a post-Darwinian world. Darwin says that we were not created perfect. You can't fall unless you start out in a perfected state from which you can fall. We have evolved through hundreds of millions—even billions—of years of evolutionary history toward some goal, which I would identify as self-conscious humanity. At least, that's the stage of our evolution that we're in today as the top of the food chain.

So, there is no [Fall](#). The whole concept of [Original Sin](#) is gone. Our hymns that reflect this and the preaching that reflects this and our doctrines that reflect this no longer translate; it's really devastating because we don't know what to do. You cannot fall from a position that you've never possessed, namely perfection. You cannot be rescued unless you fall. You cannot be restored to a status that you've never enjoyed. So, the whole way we've told the Jesus story has now become inoperative. The violence of the response, I think, is not about the seven-day creation and biblical literalism. That may have been so 100 years ago. Now it's about the fact that we no longer know how to sing, in the words of the psalmists, "We no longer know how to sing the Lord's song in this strange world" of post-Darwinian thinking.

Now, the process is that we're going to have to learn how to *do* that—or we're not going to be able to sing that song at all. And that's part of the work that I think you're doing; that's part of the work that I'm doing. 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.

But one of the fascinating things that I experience in my life, I'll go down into the deep south—into Alabama, say, or South Carolina—and do a series of lectures. And you would think that my message would not be particularly popular in the heart of the fundamentalistic Bible Belt. And yet, the biggest crowds that I draw are in places like Mobile and Montgomery, Alabama. The people who come out are not anti-church, but they have tuned out of church. They still go, because there's cultural pressure to be part of a worshipping community. They still go. But it doesn't make sense to them, and they feel an enormous sense of relief when they hear that there might be some other possibilities. I think the Christian community ought to take cognizance of that fact, that even where you *think* the fundamentalistic mentality is the most deeply entrenched, there are people who are yearning for a different possibility.

Host: Exactly. [Connie's](#) and [my](#) ministry ([we've been traveling North America now for ten years](#)) and, like you were just saying, we get a tremendous reception in very conservative parts of the country. Texas has been wonderful for us, Ohio, Tulsa Oklahoma—actually, the whole state of Oklahoma—really conservative places where folks are, in my experience, hungry for a message that just makes a deeper sense than the polarized options they're often given.

John: Well, they know that you can't repress truth forever. To spend all this energy trying to keep evolution from being taught in the public schools of any of the states of this nation—even in the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area. I have a grandson who has now finished high school in Falls Church, Virginia—a pretty sophisticated, pretty highly educated section. I'd ask him about evolution, and he would say, "Well, we just don't talk about it." I don't know how you can *not* talk about it and study biology, but that's another issue. He said, "We just don't talk about it."

I was amazed to discover that [Billy Graham](#), who's a man for whose personal integrity I have a high respect, that Billy Graham graduated from college with a major in anthropology—and he's only about ten years older than I am—and he never once confronted the issue of evolution. I don't know how you can major in anthropology and graduate around 1940, I guess, or '45, somewhere in there, and never confront evolution. Well, he was in a fundamentalist Christian college, and so it simply wasn't allowed to be on the agenda. But you can't repress truth. Nobody can repress truth forever. And I see this in every great cultural shift that we're going through.

A lot of people can't adjust to the changes, whether it's a change in race or the attitudes toward women or the attitudes toward homosexuals, or whether it's biblical fundamentalists. Some people just can't adjust, and so what happens is that they die. I don't mean to wish them ill. But the fact is, that, as the [Isaac Watts](#) hymn says, "Time like an ever-rolling stream bears all its sons and daughters away." And the way we finally deal with the lack of knowledge and with

religious prejudices is that the people who hold them finally die, and the world changes, and their children relate differently, and their grandchildren relate differently. Someone said, where there's death, there's hope.

Host: Yes. It's interesting because, going back to what you were saying before about the vital need of reinterpreting our symbols, one of the things I've found among young people especially is that they're not fighting the same battles that their parents and grandparents fought. And so I developed a program called "[Evolutionize Your Life: Heaven is Coming Home to Reality](#)." The [first half hour](#) is where I deal with evolutionary psychology and evolutionary brain science. I get into what is our best evidential understanding of human nature: the fact that [we're interpreters, we're meaning-makers](#), for example, and that's universal for all humans; the fact that [we're born to be social, that we have a relational nature, that we are group animals](#), and that's where the pro-social feelings and pro-social behaviors—like love and compassion and care and consideration—emerge, because of our group nature. And the fact that we have mismatched instincts—that we have instincts just like all other animals do, yet our instincts didn't evolve to serve us in the world that we today have to live in. Our instincts evolved to serve [the survival and reproduction needs of our ancestors](#) in a very different world.

But today we have to live in a world full of, what Deirdre Barrett calls, "[supernormal stimuli](#)"—that is, concentrated items, food items and feel-good substances, that we are evolutionarily programmed to want once we experience them. Living in a world of supernatural stimuli with mismatched instincts *does* give people the feeling that there's something fundamentally wrong with us. Why is it that we have difficulty living in integrity? So, I've found that young people are just delighted to have this way of reframing traditional mythic concepts, such as the Fall of Adam and Eve, or Original Sin.

John: I think this is true. The last major work that I did, and [the last book that I published](#), was about the possibility of life after death. And I discovered I could not approach that subject through any of the traditional religious symbols. They simply didn't make any sense. So, how do you approach that subject?

I approached it through studying *life*. I went to Galapagos Islands, I went to the Amazon rainforest, I went to Kruger Park in South Africa and studied life in all of its forms. The one universal thing that I find about life is that every living thing is programmed to survive. Every plant turns toward the sun; every plant seeks water. In the rainforest every animal is equipped with a fight-or-flight syndrome. Survival is the nature of all living things. It's not conscious in the world of nature. What happens in human life is that we cross the boundary between consciousness and self-consciousness. So we are *self-conscious* survival oriented people, and that inevitably means that we are self-centered—because if I make my survival the highest value of my life, I always act out of the principle that will support that survival.

And that's what I think that the Christian Church meant when they were talking about Original Sin, because that's universal to the human experience. So, the question is not how you get rescued from this thing which is part of our biology; it's how do you grow into the position

where you can transcend survival as the dominant motive of your life and give yourself away. When I get to *that* place, I can begin to talk about the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and even the possibility of eternal life, in totally different categories. I've found those ideas amazingly, marvelously capable of being communicated to the 21st century thinking people.

Host: Yes, I also get asked this question about how, as [an evangelical naturalist](#)—as a [religious naturalist](#), a [Christian naturalist](#)—[how do I think about death in a way that gives me deep comfort and trust](#)? There's a two-pronged concept that's made the difference for me. One is I know that my sense of self doesn't stop with my skin—what Alan Watts called the “skin-encapsulated ego.” My sense of self, my larger body, my larger self is the planet, and ultimately the Milky Way, and ultimately the universe, and then ultimately whatever that reality is that holds all into being and that we traditionally use God language around. Understanding that allows me to look at the possibility—not just the possibility, the inevitability—of my own death from a place of deep trust, or faith. In fact to my mind, *any so-called faith that doesn't include trusting that whatever happens on the other side of death is just fine really is no faith at all. Fear of a hellish, terrifying after-death scenario, or hope of a blissful, heavenly after-death scenario are just that: fear or hope—not trust, not faith.*

I think about it this way from an evolutionary standpoint: that after we die, I think we go to the same place we *came* from before we were born. And whether you talk about that in terms of “coming from God and returning to God,” or “coming from mystery and returning to mystery,” or “coming from nothingness and returning to nothingness,” I think there's many different ways to talk about that. I can acknowledge and honor night language, or mythic ways of thinking about that—and I have no problem with that. But for me, it's a matter of just standing, looking toward the future, knowing that I'm going to die with ...

John: Let me challenge that a little bit, because I don't know that we ought to try to answer questions that are beyond the scope of our ability to answer. I love the story, apocryphal I'm sure, of the person that went up to Augustine and said, “What was God doing before God created the world?” And Augustine said, “God was creating hell for people who ask questions like that.”

I don't want to have anybody speculate about what happens after life in one way or another, because I think it's all just a waste of our time. But I think if you study life deeply enough, you come to some of the conclusions you were just articulating. For example, when self-consciousness dawned in this world in human beings, *Homo sapiens*, the first thing we felt was a deep sense of separation. That's why in every religion I've ever studied, there's a doctrine of atonement—because part of the human experience is that we feel separated. But in some sense, when we crack the barrier between consciousness and self-consciousness, instead of feeling separated, why did we not feel that we're finally at one with that which is ultimately real? I think that's the mystical approach, and I think that has enormous value for us

to contemplate and begin to think about. But I don't want to get into the position where I try to tell people what happens.

When I look at the history of the Christian concept of life after death, it's almost hilarious. We started out with two places: Heaven for baptized true believers and Hell for everybody else. Then we kept adapting it, because we came across noble pagans. The Church was quoting Aristotle and Plato, yet there was no place in the Church's afterlife for great people like Aristotle and Plato that they were quoting for theological reasons, so they created limbo for noble pagans. Then they got concerned about little children that died before their parents got around to baptizing them, and the idea that these children were going to suffer through all eternity in the fires of hell because their parents didn't baptize them violated their sense of God so deeply that they created limbo for children. After awhile, they began to realize that all sin wasn't equal. That is, Genghis Khan raped thousands and murdered millions, but he was an overtly evil person in terms of human dignity. Maybe somebody as evil as Genghis Khan or Adolf Hitler might deserve punishment—but that's not for me to say.

What about the petty sins? I'd illustrate that with little Johnny O'Malley, if the only thing he did wrong was to eat meat on Friday. All sins are not equal, and so in order to accommodate that, we decided to have purgatory. Once you get purgatory, everybody gets into heaven eventually. Plea bargaining in the afterlife is what that is.

Once you realize we keep changing in order to accommodate our own consciousness, then you realize that all of these things are mythological—and it's not worth much time to debate these things. I think what you suggested is what it is, but trust is that I am part of that which God *is*, and God is eternal, and I think that's the ultimate thing that comes through when you break the barrier between consciousness and move into self-consciousness. We as a human race are still evolving, so I think ultimately, self-consciousness will give way to a recognition that we're part of a universal consciousness. I think we *can* tell our Christian story in terms of those categories, and I try to do that.

Host: Yes, I agree with everything you said—except I would probably also say that, for me, it's not just a matter of consciousness or this profound relatedness and connection to God, Source, Ultimate Reality or Mystery. It's also my profound connectedness and relatedness to this body of life.

John: I think that's all the same thing. 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."

So, 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.

It's also interesting to me, Michael, that the primary people who are hostile and critical to what I try to do are threatened religious people. If I get an audience from the secularized people, if they're willing to engage these ideas, they're certainly not hostile and negative. They just don't want to be deluded by religion again.

I tell people, and this as a fact: 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.

Host: Actually, I'd love for you to say more about that—because it was exactly on that point, Jack, that my congregants in all three churches that I pastored found your book [Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism](#) to be a beacon. In a way, what you were doing—at least my experience of what you were doing in that book—was you were taking what all of us who go to seminary learn, but making it available to the average person in the pews. I remember a couple of years ago I was setting up for a worship service in a [Unitarian Universalist](#) church, and there was an adult study that was happening also in the sanctuary, off in the corner. It was being led by a professor from the local university. I overheard him say to the group—and there were about 30 or 35 people there—he said, "All Protestant ministers, and Catholic priests as well: they learn this stuff when they go to seminary. They just don't tell their congregants about it."

At that point I interrupted, and I said, "I need to respectfully disagree, because some of us do actually share it with our congregants. They call us ex-pastors." *[laughter]* I found your book to be valuable in that regard. So, if you could say a little bit more about how it is that we who

have gone through seminary have not served our parishioners—we haven't shared what we have learned—and yet it's also understandable. If our paycheck, our bread-and-butter, is being supplied by the people that we are preaching and teaching to, then we don't want to upset the applecart.

John: There's a conspiracy of silence, and it's not just among the pastors. It's in many of the seminaries. Sometimes the seminaries will tell you, "This is what we now think, but don't tell this when you go to your congregations, because they'd be upset." I think it differs. When I lived in Richmond, Virginia, I served one of about twenty Episcopal churches, and of course there were hundreds of Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Methodist, United Church of Christ churches, too—so the people had a wide choice. And so, I think you could define the vocation of one particular congregation to be a congregation that's going to deal with some of the intellectual issues. But if you're in a town of 5,000 people in the Midwest and there are three churches in town, you've got to be sensitive to a wide variety of people and responses.

Another thing I've learned is that for most people, religion is not a search for truth. It's a search for security. So you've got to be very careful when you challenge the security by which people live. One of the things that I used to do was that I would teach a Bible class for an hour before church began, and I would say to people, "Please don't come to this class if you don't want to learn everything we can learn in seminary. I don't want to upset anybody. Just go to worship." I'd never perjure myself in worship, but you can also say things in a much more sensitive way in a worship setting than you ought to be able to say to them in a classroom setting where people can talk back, and where they can raise questions, and where they can say, "Will you clarify that?" and "What's the evidence for that?"

So, I think the real lack is that we don't teach the Bible. It's not that we ought to stand up in church on Easter Sunday and say, "Most people don't think the Resurrection has anything to do with physical resuscitation," or that we should stand up at your late service or midnight service on Christmas Eve and say, "Everybody knows that the story of the manger is a myth." That's not the time or the place to say it. But I would suggest to you that a couple weeks later in January, you *can* go back and analyze the birth narratives, and people don't get upset. It's like taking Santa Claus away from a child two weeks before Christmas. You don't want to take Santa Claus away at the midnight service—but two weeks later you can do it.

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."

I think what the birth story says is that we experience something in the life of a man named Jesus of Nazareth that we could not believe that human life alone could have created. And I'm

willing to try to make that case, and make it powerfully, to people—without, again, twisting their brains into a 1st-century pretzel so they can be loyal to Christ in the 21st century. I don't believe that's going to get us anywhere.

Host: That leads me to want to ask, If everything is evolving—if the galaxies are evolving, planets are evolving, solar systems, species, cultures, institutions, and so on—how do you, Jack, see the Christian Church evolving? 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?

John: I don't want to dodge your question, but I don't think that's the right question, and I don't think I can answer it. If I could answer that, we could draw the blueprint out and walk into it, but the fact is, we have to do that step by step, and the step we take today will determine the step we're able to take tomorrow. And sometimes if you take the wrong step today, it's going to take you a long time to get back to the right path.

But let me answer it, Michael, this way. In say the 2nd century, the Christian church was not established. It was under persecution. It lived in secrecy, in fear. It was a crime in parts of the Empire to be a Christian. If you could go back and interview the people living in catacombs in the 2nd century and say, "If I could look into history, I could tell you that by the time we get to the 13th century, Christianity's going to dominate the life of Western civilization; we're going to build cathedrals on the tallest hill in every city of Europe, and people are going to either be inside the Christian Church or they're going to be outside the meaning of the culture of that period of time," I don't believe those people in the 2nd century could possibly have envisioned that possibility.

But if you'd go to the 13th century people, who were living in that era of Christendom where they literally dominated the life of the culture, and say, "I want you to look back at that 2nd century, and see if you could recognize your ancestors in faith in that community," I think that would be easy. So, 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. I have some hints. I can tell you that I think denominationalism will be dead, and I think that'll be good riddance—because what denominations basically mean, at least in America, has little to do with the gospel and has everything to do with whether your ancestors came through Germany or southern Europe or Ireland or England or Scotland or Scandinavia. That's what creates Lutherans and Presbyterians and Roman Catholics and Anglicans or Episcopalians. But who today really is interested in that? I don't know about you, but my ancestry, my mother was Scotch and my grandfather was Welsh and my father was English, so I'm sort of a United Kingdom.

But after you've lived a couple of generations in the United States, the United Kingdom is married into other ethnic groups that have come from every other country in Europe, so we're all mongrels when you get right down to it. And yet, denominational patterns are still tribal. When I served as the bishop in northern New Jersey, we had a great big city called Jersey City, and the Episcopal Church had once been a very strong presence in Jersey City. But the Anglo-Saxon people had long ago moved out of Jersey City, and into Jersey had come every ethnic variety of people from the world.

I ran a hospital over there, and it was an ethnic hospital. My chief of medicine was from the Dominican Republic, my chief of Surgery was from Pakistan, my chief of OBGYN from India, I had a Chinese head of anesthesiology. That was the kind of community it was. And I'd meet with this enclave of white Anglo-Saxons in a church that used to have 2,500 members and now had 15, and I'd say, "What are you going to do? Jersey City's as big today as it was when you had 2,500 members, but none of them want to come here."

Well, they couldn't understand that maybe singing Bach chorales and using the Elizabethan English of *The Book of Common Prayer*, good old 16th century English, and reading out of the *King James Bible* just didn't attract people whose background was Filipino and Chinese and Japanese and Pakistani, and they couldn't embrace that. And so they said, "Hopefully Jersey City's going to come back." And I said, "What do you mean, come back?" They couldn't say it, but what they meant is, it's going to become a white Anglo-Saxon community again. The chances of that are somewhere between slim and none.

I think you take the moment. That's why I don't want to contemplate what a thousand years is going to be like. You take the moment and you live in faithfulness and in dialogue with the realities of that moment, and then you build a pathway into the future—a future that you cannot see. That's why the *Epistle to the Hebrews* says that faith is to walk beyond the level of your vision. It's the substance of things not seen. I have great confidence that my transcendent experience of the presence of God, a God I still see through the lens of Jesus of Nazareth, is going to be a factor in the humanity of a thousand years from now. But what form it's going to take, what shape it's going to take: I don't even want to speculate, because I'm too busy trying to be faithful in *my* moment, which is always a transition moment.

Host: Good response. Let me ask a different question that gets at a little bit of what I was trying to ask before, which is, 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? Where do you see evolution happening with regard to our tradition today?

John: 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.

And when I grew up, women could not do anything. They couldn't be in any decision-making aspect of the Church, from the local vestry to the diocesan convention to the national convention. They were not allowed. Today, my church has, more than 50 percent of its clergy are female, and the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in America is a magnificent woman named [Katharine Jefferts Schori](#). So, in one lifetime we've gone from not even allowing women to participate in worship to having a woman be the head of the entire Episcopal Church. That's real progress.

When I grew up, we didn't have any homosexuals in the south. We just didn't allow them to be there. *[laughter]* I didn't know what a homosexual was until I was a late teenager; that word just didn't occur to me. I'd say to people that if I had awakened at age 12 or 13 to the reality that I might be a gay boy, I wouldn't have had a vocabulary to use to describe what I was feeling, and it's easy for me to understand why that's such a traumatic experience, and why the suicide rate for young gay men is so high. But, we didn't have any homosexuals, and when I finally discovered what a homosexual was, I accepted the definition of my church. The liberal definition was that they were mentally sick, so that we could at least have pity on them, and we ought to try to cure them. And the conservative position was that they were morally depraved who had chosen this depraved lifestyle, and we ought to try to convert them, and if that didn't work, it's okay to beat them or to bash them or to even kill them if their name is Matthew Shepard, for example.

Now, when you get that kind of mentality, and then today when I retired as the Bishop of Newark, I had 35 out-of-the-closet gay and lesbian clergy serving openly, and 31 of the 35 lived openly with their partners. That's a major transformation. And today we have two openly gay bishops who live with their partners who are serving in the Episcopal Church—one in New Hampshire, one in Los Angeles. Of course it's a sing of great controversy, but to me it's a sign that if you're faithful to the moment and to the revelation which we believe we see in the image that we call God, and in the human family—that if you're faithful to that, the world does change, and prejudices do die, and a sense of a new humanity can come into being, and the oneness of God and the oneness of God's people can be celebrated.

And so I'm encouraged, and I see hope. I see hope where people see controversy. You know, controversy is a vital sign in the life of the Church. The Christian Church will die of boredom long before it dies of controversy. *[laughter]* Controversy is at least a life sign. Somebody *cares* when you have controversy in the congregation, and particularly if it's controversy about what constitutes being human: Are gay and lesbian people human? Are people of color human? Are women human? Those are battles worthy of fighting. 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.

Host: I do too. It's precisely an evolutionary understanding of [how vital—how absolutely essential—chaos and breakdowns and destruction have been throughout evolutionary history](#). In almost every evolutionary breakthrough in complexity, almost every emergence of some new species has been preceded by some chaos, some breakdown. And so I look at that throughout the entire evolutionary history, and that allows me to have faith, to trust the chaos of my life, the chaos of our time, the chaos of our culture, and see that dissonance, conflict is actually a good thing.

John: It's kind of a wonderful process.

Host: Jack, we titled this conversation, "Celebrating Post-Theistic Christian Faith," and I know for many people that's an oxymoron. They wonder, what do you mean by [post-theistic](#) Christian faith? And I'm wondering if you could speak to that a little bit?

John: 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—from Paul Tillich (who trained me) to some of the contemporary theologians. A second mentor of mine was [John A.T. Robinson](#) in England, and he got beyond this.

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.

And when I do, again, to go back to my Trinitarian phrase, I see God as the source of life calling me to live, I see God as the source of love calling me and empowering me to love, and I see God as the ground of being enabling me to be all that I can be. When I look at the life of

Jesus, I see a life fully free to live, I see a life capable of giving himself away in love, I see a life who is all that he can be—whether he’s being made a promise to be made king at Palm Sunday or being killed on Good Friday. I see in him freedom: the freedom to be. And so I see what I experience as a God presence *in* him. And I see the mission of the Christian Church not to make us religious, but to help us become so deeply and fully human that we can live in a new consciousness, and we can live beyond the limits of our survival mentality, and we can give ourselves away in love to others.

I think falling in love, Michael—to make it concrete—I think falling in love is an ecstatic religious experience, because when you fall in love you escape your own survival mentality because you love the beloved more than you love yourself. That’s why you would die for your beloved, because you value her life—in my case, her life—more than you value your own life. I can give my life away for my wife; I think I can give my life away for my children: and that’s where I experience something of the ecstasy of getting beyond the boundaries of a survival mentality and discovering a humanity that is related to something far beyond itself. It’s into that awakening that I think we are evolving today, and I think it’s a glorious and exciting enterprise.

From self-consciousness, I think we’re inevitably going to move into universal consciousness, where we will discover that we are part of whatever God is, and God is part of whatever we are. The individual is not destroyed in that process, but the individual sees himself or herself as a part of the *whole* in that process. So, I think the future is quite exciting for the religious consciousness. But we’re going to have to get beyond the literal symbols of yesterday, including the theistic definition of God. It simply doesn’t work in our time.

Host: Yeah. I just love the way you said that. The way I’ve been languaging it in recent years is that the concept of theism and the concept of atheism: both of those understandings came into being long before we had any understanding of “nested emergence,” this understanding of [evolutionary emergence](#). So, in many ways, both theism and atheism are outdated, misleading, and unnecessarily divisive concepts.

John: I’ll never forget the time when a woman came up to me and said, “Can I be a Christian without being a theist?” And I thought, “How did you break through that so young in your life?” She was about 30 years of age. It was an ecstatic moment for me. I even wrote a column on it. We’ve got to get beyond our own limited language. We don’t have anything else to use but language, but we’ve got to recognize that language can never be literal. It is only a pointer—that’s all it is. When I say “God,” I am pointing to an experience that I believe is real, but it’s not one that I can define.

When we reach that place, then we have a freedom to approach other religious paths differently from the way we have in the past, because nobody’s got the truth. 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.

Host: Just last week, I had one of the most amazing religious experiences, spiritual experiences of my entire life—and yet also one of the most natural, which is my eldest daughter Sheena, who's 27, gave birth to my first grandchild. And [I held Ayela Rene—basically put a diaper on her and then put her on my naked chest and wrapped her up in a baby wrap](#), and for several hours walked and did the dishes and typed on my computer with this sleeping baby against my chest. Also, I just sat in a chair and breathed with this being—this divine, this incredible being. And I can't put into words what that was like. All I know was that there was a communion experience, a divine—I'm noticing myself getting choked up just even remembering it. It was one of the most natural, and yet one of the most sacred, experiences of my entire life.

John: When grandparents see their first grandchild, they all have intimations of immortality—great ecstatic experiences. Now, as those grandchildren grow up a little bit, some of that intimation will disappear. *[laughter]* But we ought to cling to those moments; they're very special moments. I think that's like falling in love, the ecstasy that goes on.

When I look at the Gospels, I find that what Jesus does, more than anything else, is to break boundaries. He breaks the boundary between the Jew and the Samaritan. He breaks boundaries between the man and the woman. He breaks boundaries between the clean and the unclean. He's a boundary-breaker. What we do in our radical insecurity is that we build fences around ourselves to protect ourselves from threat—and in the process, we diminish our own humanity. And what Jesus does is to break the boundary so that our humanity can rise to what it's capable of doing. That's when I think you have the intimations of immortality and when you have the visions of being one with the universe. And that's when things begin to make sense to me.

Host: Well, Jack, this has been wonderful. I actually have just two other questions to ask. One of them is, we've got so many diverse kinds of Christians involved in this series, and so I'm trying to discern, Is there something we can speak with one voice about? Is there a core commons that we can agree on? The language that so far seems to be working with most, but I just want to check it out with you, is that we all value an *evidential understanding of deep time*. That is, we all value a science-based understanding of reality. And we all have a global heart and a commitment to the good of the larger body of life.

John: I don't worry about the fact that we're all over the lot, because I think truth is so much bigger than any of us can embrace. So, we need to accept the fact that everybody's going to see truth in a little bit different way. I only am concerned that we keep walking the same

direction. 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.

But the fact is that the thing we have in common is our own humanity. When I study the other religions of the world, I discover that we are united in the questions we ask, because they're deeply human questions. They're questions of meaning, they're questions of mortality, they're questions of transcendence—and everybody asks them. Where we are divided is in our answers, because our answers are always acculturated. We come out of a particular worldview. I love [Matthew Fox](#)'s analogy in one of his last books, where he likened God to the groundwater and he likened the various religions of the world to wells that people had dug to access the groundwater. And the wells looked very different because they reflect the culture of the builders, but if you go deep enough, the groundwater is the same. I think that's a powerful analogy.

But it's our humanity that we have in common. If we can concentrate on our humanity—that's why when Paul says that "In Christ there's neither Jew nor Gentile, neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, bond or free," I'd like to expand it to say there's neither gay nor straight, there's neither Protestant nor Catholic, there's neither Jew nor Muslim, there's neither Sunni nor Shia—but one human family. If the Christ experience is to lift us to a new understanding of our humanity, then the barriers fade away. The Pentecost story in the second chapter of *Acts* is so important, because when the spirit comes on the gathered community, it doesn't make them religious. They don't want to go out and missionize so that everybody can be baptized and be Episcopalians. What happens is they become a whole unified community. They're lifted out of their tribal boundaries, and they're able to communicate across the barrier of language, which is a tribal boundary.

And that's a pretty great vision. That's not a literal story; that's a vision of what the experience that they were having led them to see about their own humanity. So, if we concentrate on our humanity and try to bring humanity to a deeper level of consciousness and a deeper understanding of what it means to be human, then I think we can find enormous unity. Of course, the biological sciences are all a part of seeing how common our humanity is—and not just our humanity but how we're related to everything else in the world: the wonderful DNA evidence that shows that we're not just kin to the great apes—we share about 99.9 percent DNA identity with the great apes and the orangutans and the chimpanzees—we're also kin to the cabbages, kin to the seaweed. *[laughter]* Everything that's living is part of the unfolding drama of life. The only difference is that you and I can *contemplate* it. Seaweed doesn't contemplate what it means to be seaweed, and a cabbage doesn't contemplate what it means to be a cabbage, and even a horse or a cat doesn't spend any time contemplating what it means to be a horse or a cat—but human beings do. That's what we have in common, that's what's unique, and that means it's frightful. It's scary to be human; it's scary to be self-

conscious. That's why we erect the barriers that we erect of tribe and prejudice and gender superiority and religious superiority: to try to overcome the anxiety of self-consciousness.

But we need to accept self-consciousness, and transcend its limits, and discover a new kind of humanity. And we'll discover a new kind of unity. I think it's a unity that winds up in a mystical experience that, 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.

Host: Yes. Amen. Me, too. Well, Jack, the last question I have is, What would you say to a young person who is struggling, grappling with how to be both a Christian and to fully embrace an evidential, science-based, evolutionary understanding? What word of advice or counsel would you offer?

John: I would congratulate them on recognizing the tension. I think that's where you live. I don't want to take the tension away. I live in it, and I don't think anybody can escape it. I think what you do is to journey into the mystery of truth. I don't want to worship any God that I have to defend against the insight from any discipline. That's an amazing idea that I have to defend God. What a pitiful God it would be if Jack Spong was his primary defense! That doesn't make any sense to me. *[laughter]*

So, I'd say that if you have a young person who is really articulating that, the first thing you do is to congratulate them. The second thing you do is to put all the resources that you can at that person's disposal: scientific resources and theological resources. Give them the freedom to say "Yes" to this and "No" to that. Science changes, Michael, all the time! You know, when Darwin came out with his theory, he was not universally applauded in the scientific world. When [Einstein](#) confronted quantum weirdness, he couldn't make the transition from his kind of physics into quantum weirdness. [Niels Bohr](#) would say, "The king is dead, long live the king." Science had to move on.

Nobody's going to embrace the truth; so everything is going to change. 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.

Host: *[laughter]* That's great... Well, Jack, thank you so much for sharing your experience, your wisdom, your ideas and perspectives with us here on the leading edge of faith.

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