

Why Christianity Must Change or Die

by Bishop John Shelby Spong

notes by Doug Muder

Sometimes the dead wood of the past needs to be cleared out so that new life has a chance to grow. -- p 83¹

Before one is able to raise new theological questions, one must become convinced enough of the bankruptcy of old theological solutions. -- p 137

These two quotes tell you a lot about how this book is structured. Each chapter begins by raising a blunt and difficult question. Spong then recounts how traditional Christianity has answered this question. He critiques this answer and ultimately rejects it, showing how it is based on a premodern worldview that is no longer credible. Then he faces the other side of the question: Does rejection of the traditional answer mean that we are left without hope of an answer? Or are we stuck with answers that are in no way religious? He responds that he has found answers that satisfy him as a religious person, and concludes by attempting to communicate his answers in words, while admitting the inadequacy of words to capture the ultimacy of religion.

He begins the book with a critique of the Apostles' Creed, and ends it with a belief statement of his own that echoes much of the wording of the Apostles' Creed. In the meantime, however, the words have been redefined. His religion centers on God, but a God who is found within us, not an external presence with whom we can negotiate for favor. He believes in Jesus not as the divine hero of the story of sin and salvation, but as a man who found the God presence in himself and manifested it in his life.

The book can be broken into four parts: Chapters 1 and 2 lay out the problem of trying to apply the premodern words and concepts of traditional Christianity to a postmodern world. Chapters 3 and 4 deconstruct and reconstruct the idea of God. Chapters 5-8 deconstruct and reconstruct the role of Jesus. Chapters 9-13 show how these conceptions allow him to reconceive the everyday life of religion: prayer, morality, worship, and the hope of eternal life. The book ends with an epilogue that is essentially a new Christian creed.

Preface

The preface is Bishop Spong's story of how the word "controversial" came to be associated with his name. Its purpose seems to be to reassure the reader that he has never tried to destroy Christianity, and that he has not been seeking controversy for its own sake.

This book ... is a work of faith and conviction. It is my witness as one who desires to worship as a citizen of the modern world and to be able to think as I worship. -- p ix

Actually, I am grateful to each of my critics. What they unwittingly did was to identify me as a resource for the religious seekers of our world who yearn to believe in God but who are also repelled by the premodern literalizations that so frequently masquerade as Christianity. -- p xvii

¹ Page numbers are from the Harper-Collins paperback edition of 1999.

Surprisingly, to some of my mentors ... I am a hopeless conservative for remaining committed to the church and the Christian faith. -- p xviii

When all is said and done, I write out of a faith commitment as a Christian and not in an attempt to create controversy. But where this faith has been corrupted into literalized propositional statements, I have become its exposé and its critic. I have come to see the controversy that ensues not as negative and not even as destructive to the church. ... It reveals that any god who is threatened by new truth from any source is clearly dead already. Such a deceased god needs to be snatched away from threatened believers so that the anxiety of "a god vacuum" at the heart of some peoples' lives will drive them into honesty and integrity as either believers or non-believers. There is no hope for the revival of worship so long as an idol lives undisturbed in the place reserved for a living God. -- p xix

1. On Saying the Christian Creed With Honesty

Spong uses the Apostles' Creed as a way to outline his differences with traditional Christianity. He goes through phrase-by-phrase and explains his difficulties saying the creed. UUs may not remember the creed word-by-word, so I reproduce it : *I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.*

God is the ultimate reality in my life. ... Yet, when I seek to put my understanding of this God into human words, my certainty all but disappears. Human words always contract and diminish my God awareness. They never expand it.

The God I know is not concrete or specific. This God is rather shrouded in mystery, wonder, and awe. The deeper I journey into this divine presence, the less any literalized phrases, including the phrases of the Christian creed, seem relevant. The God I know can only be pointed to; this God can never be enclosed by propositional statements.

The words of the Apostles' Creed ... were fashioned inside a worldview that no longer exists. Indeed, it is quite alien to the world in which I live. ... If the God I worship must be identified with these ancient creedal words in any literal sense, God would become for me not just unbelievable, but in fact no longer worthy of being the subject of my devotion. -- p 3-4

Spong objects to the following:

Father -- the masculinity of God has led to the subjugation of women

Almighty -- if God is all-powerful and good, then how can bad things happen?

creator of heaven and earth -- our current understanding of the origin of the Earth has little to do

with the Biblical account

only Son -- denies that other religions can provide a channel to divinity

conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary -- inconsistent with what we have since learned about biology

ascended into Heaven -- based on a primitive understanding of God as up

rose again from the dead -- Spong puts a placeholder here, raising questions he will address later. "This creedal phrase becomes the great divide for the modern man or woman who yearns to be a believer. Where each of us stands in relation to this issue will determine more than most any other whether or not we can still be defined as Christians." -- p 15

judge the living and the dead -- "Postmodern people who know the depths of human interconnectedness, who understand psychological wounding and blessing, cannot be moralistic in the way that these creedal images of judgment have always assumed." -- p 16

the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints -- the church and its members have a long history of being neither holy nor saintly

the life everlasting -- Spong puts this off to Chapter 13.

What I am requesting, however, is that modern believers be allowed, and even encouraged, to recognize that the words employed in the theological debate that formed the creeds so long ago have become empty and meaningless to this generation because the way we perceive the shape of reality has changed so dramatically. Our task is neither to literalize nor to worship the words of yesterday's theological consensus. It is, rather, to return to the experience that created these creedal words in the first place and then to seek to incorporate that experience in the words that we today can use, without compromising its truth or our integrity as citizens of this century. -- p 20

2. The Meaning of Exile and How We Got There

While claiming to be a believer, and still asserting my deeply held commitment to Jesus as Lord and Christ, I also recognize that I live in a state of exile from the presuppositions of my own religious past. -- p 20

Spong uses the image of exile, which for Christians and Jews has the historical association of the exile of the Jews to Babylon in the sixth century before Christ. He tells this story in some detail. (p 23-29)

They could not sing the Lord's song again, for they were in a strange and devastating exile, and in that exile the God they had once served lost all meaning. This God, quite frankly, could no longer be God for them. It is traumatic to watch the God who has given shape, definition, and meaning to life be removed from a people's awareness. There are but two alternatives for such a displaced deity. This God must either grow or die. That is what being in a spiritual exile is all about. ... In this postmodern world, those who still claim allegiance to the Christian religion find themselves, I believe, living in a similar kind of exile. Our God has also been taken away from

us. For us, however, that removal of God did not occur in a single moment of violent defeat. It rather happened over a period of centuries as the steady and relentless advances in knowledge altered forever our ability to believe in the God content that stood at the heart of our sacred tradition -- p 29

He then goes on to describe (p 29-39) that process, beginning with the cosmology of the time of Christ. He describes how that cosmology was chipped away by Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and others.

The understanding of God as a theistic supernatural parent figure in the sky was finally rendered no longer operative. God was simply drained out of existence as a working premise in our society. Rewards and punishments, either in this life or in the life to come, ceased to be the primary motivators of our behavior. The exile was complete. The God of our traditional past, who was the source of our values, the definer of our sense of right and wrong, was simply no more. We, like the Jews of old, had been forcefully removed from all that had previously given life meaning. -- p 40

3. In Search of God: Is Atheism the Only Alternative to Theism?

We must discover whether or not the death of the God we worshipped yesterday is the same thing as the death of God. -- p 41

For the purposes of this book I will define *theism* as belief in an external, personal, supernatural, and potentially invasive Being. -- p 46

It becomes so clear that the God most of us have worshiped during human history has looked and acted in a very human manner. In view of this fact, my first discovery in the exile is that I can no longer approach this subject by asking, "Who is God?" Nor can I be limited to personal images for God. ... But to reach this conclusion means that I must be prepared to dismiss most of the God content of the ages.-- p 48

When we unravel the theological tomes of the ages, the makeup of God becomes quite clear. God is a human being without human limitations who is read into the heavens. We disguised this process by suggesting that the reason God was so much like a human being was that the human beings were in fact created in God's image. However, we now recognize that it was the other way around. The God of theism came into being as a human creation. As such, this God, too, was mortal and is now dying. -- p 49

In pages 50-54 Spong recounts the theory Freud developed in *The Future of an Illusion*: that theistic religion developed as a response to self-consciousness, as a way of keeping anxiety and hysteria at bay.

Only when we recognize this defense mechanism in religion can we grasp the meaning of the constant presence in primitive religion, and certainly still present in Western religion, of an

intense, even killing, anger. Irrational hostility is a symptom of hysteria. Anger has always marked the religious establishment. -- p 53

Today this theism is collapsing. The theistic God has no work to do. The power once assigned to this God is now explained in countless other ways. ... Human beings have evolved to the place where the theistic God concept can be and must be cast aside. -- p 54

It was when I reached this conclusion but still could not dismiss what seemed to me to be an experience of something other, transcendent, and beyond all of my limits that I knew I had to find another God language. -- p 55

4. Beyond Theism to New God Images

Buddhists clearly believe in God, but not in a deity who is defined in theistic terms. Exploring the levels of meaning that can be found in an Eastern faith tradition can help us learn to see through such limited words as *theism*. It also reveals that our ancient Western definitions of God do not exhaust the reality of God. -- p 58

The God worshiped by the Jews before their Babylonian exile was not the same God who emerged from the exile. Much later a longer-range view of Jewish history reconnected the two, but that was not the sense of the people who lived at the time of the exile. Similarly, the God worshiped in the Christian West will not survive the thought revolution that has produced our exile, though we, too, might hope for some future reconnection. The Jews came out of Babylon as a people of faith with a God who had been transformed from the tribal deity of Israel's past. Can we come out of our exile with a God who has been transformed from the theistic concepts of antiquity? -- p 59

To get beyond these definitions, it is necessary to pose the religious questions not by pretending we have a source of divine revelation, but by looking at the human experience in a different way. ... Is there, we now inquire, a depth dimension to life that is ultimately spiritual? If so, what is it? Is there a core to both our life and the life of the world that somehow links us to a presence that we call "transcendent" and "beyond" and that yet is never apart from who we are or what the world is? If so, what is it? Is there a presence in the heart of our life that could never be invoked as a being but nonetheless might be entered as a divine and infinite reality? If so, what is it? If we could open ourselves to such a reality, become intensely aware of it, and have both our being and our consciousness expanded by it, could we use the word *God* to describe that state of being? -- p 59-60

Pages 60-65 give evidence that this is not a completely new idea in the Christian tradition. Spang begins with the non-personal images of God in the Hebrew scriptures: the *ruach* which means both *wind* and *spirit*; the human *nephesh*, which is literally *breath* but also *life*; God as a *rock*. He mentions the Jewish taboo against saying the name of God and the Islamic taboo against creating images of God as evidence that the personhood of God was never meant to be taken

literally.

The mystics of every religious tradition have always cried out against every specific definition of God. The Western mystics appear to have assumed that a personal God was only a stage, and an inferior one at that, in human religious development. ... This wondrous, mystical God experience did not reduce human beings to the status of powerless, dependent children, subject to the will of an external authoritative deity. Rather, it called human life beyond every boundary until that life itself was seen as a revelation of the God who emerged out of life's very depths. ... Each person is called to journey into the mystery of God along the pathway of his or her own expanding personhood. Every person is thus believed to be capable of being a theophany, a sign of God's presence, but no one person, institution, or way of life can exhaust this revelation. -- p 62-62

Pages 63-65 describe the academic theologians who Spong considers precursors: Whitehead's process theology, Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity", and Tillich.

For Tillich there was no imploring an external power to serve our needs. One rather experienced a growing awareness of the Ground of Being and of one's relationship with all those who also shared that infinite and inexhaustible ground. -- p 64

So the call of this internal God found in our depths becomes primarily a call into being. It is a call that has nothing to do with religion per se. It is a call that refocuses what has been known as the religious dimension. The task of the church, for example, becomes less that of indoctrinating or relating people to an external divine power and more that of providing opportunities for people to touch the infinite center of all things and to grow into all that they are destined to be. -- p 66

The realization is dawning that we human beings are alone and therefore are responsible for ourselves, that there is no appeal to a higher power for protection. We are learning that meaning is not external to life but must be discovered in our own depths and imposed on life by an act of will. We are being made aware that life is not fair and will not necessarily be made fair either in this life or in any other. So we have to decide how we will live now with this reality. -- p 69

So I start here. There is no God external to life. God, rather, is the inescapable depth and center of all that is. God is not a being superior to all other beings. God is the Ground of Being itself. And much flows from this starting place. -- p 70

5. Discovering Anew the Jesus of the New Testament

Can Jesus be lifted out of this ancient theological context and still be Lord or Christ for anyone? ... Is there some other way to understand these Jesus stories and the doctrines that are said to have been based on them? Can any postmodern person take these literal, premodern claims seriously? Can Christianity continue without them?-- p 71-72

Spong prefaces his look at Jesus by observing that the gospels are not the word of God, that they contain contradictions and biases, that they are not eye-witness accounts, not contemporary to Jesus, and they were written in historical contexts that shaped their content. He asserts that the virgin birth and resurrection stories are later additions, and that the identification of Jesus with God also developed later.

The earliest Christian writings (Paul's) were ecstatic and mystical. Only later did explanation become necessary.

If one asserts that "God was in this Christ" as Paul does, then the question inevitably arises as to how the holy and distant God happened to be present in that finite and particular life. If that question cannot be answered adequately, the experience comes to be regarded only as a kind of private delusion. So explanation always follows proclamation, but not quite immediately. The ecstasy, early on, defies explanation. The very moment we move from ecstatic proclamation to explanation, the presuppositions, definitions, and stereotypes of the ages begin to shape our words. That is inescapable. That is also why theological explanations can never be literally true or eternally applicable. Despite institutional religious claims to the contrary, creeds and theology are nothing but explanations. So they are inevitably distorted versions of truth warped by the time in which they were articulated. -- p 74-75

The rest of this chapter traces the course of Jesus' deification. It begins with Paul's claim that Jesus was adopted by God at the time of his resurrection. When Mark writes the first gospel, the Spirit descends on Jesus earlier, at his baptism. Matthew's later gospel moves the proclamation of Jesus' divine nature into the story of his birth. John pushed it back further, to the beginning of time.

Once we can establish that biblical interpretations are different from people's original experience of Jesus, then we can begin to explore the deeper question: What was the nature of that experience? What was there about Jesus of Nazareth that made his first-century disciples assert the astonishing claim that "God was in this Christ"? Can we separate the experience from the explanation? -- p 82

6. Jesus as Rescuer: An Image That Has to Go

Chapter 6 gives the history of the doctrine that Jesus is the savior who was crucified as a sacrifice to atone for all human sin. In this doctrine, the perfection of creation was marred by the first sin of Adam and Eve. The guilt of this sin has been passed down to all people, and the sacrifice of a sinless being was necessary to take this guilt from us.

It was the conviction that humans were sinful and in need of redemption that enabled guilt and religion to be so closely tied together in the history of the Western world. The power of Western religion has always rested on the ability of religious people to understand and to manipulate that sense of human inadequacy that expresses itself as guilt. -- p 90

This view of Christianity is increasingly difficult for many of us to accept or believe. I would choose to loathe rather than to worship a deity who required the sacrifice of his son. But on many other levels as well, this entire theological system, with these strange presuppositions, has completely unraveled in our postmodern world. It now needs to be removed quite consciously from Christianity. -- p 95

Spong outlines the unraveling of this doctrine with the same care that he gave to its development. First, evolution removed the concept of a first pair of humans, as well as the notion of an original perfection. Finally, the notion of blood sacrifice has become distant to us, and when we are forced to conceive of it, it seems barbaric.

We human beings do not live in sin. We are not born in sin. We do not need to have the stain of our original sin washed away in baptism. We are not fallen creatures who will lose salvation if we are not baptized. We have rather emerged out of our evolutionary past, and we are still being formed. Our lack of wholeness is a sign of the baggage we carry as survivors of that long, difficult past. ... When any of us gets caught in a battle for survival, even now our higher instincts still collapse and our radical self-centeredness causes us to engage in a tooth-and-claw struggle all over again. That is quite simply a description of our being. That is what it means to be human.

A savior who restores us to our prefallen status is therefore a pre-Darwinian superstition and post-Darwinian nonsense. A supernatural redeemer who enters our fallen world to restore creation is a theistic myth. So we must free Jesus from the rescuer role. Yet so totally has he been captured by this understanding that most of us know of no other way to speak of him except to reduce him to a good teacher or a good example. Had the Christ experience been no more than that, I doubt seriously if it would have survived. -- p 99

7. The Christ as Spirit Person

Spong begins with the earliest known Christian writings, those of Paul. Paul frequently uses the word *spirit* in connection with Jesus, and Spong attempts to grasp what that might have meant. The answers he comes up with are very much like the nontheistic God images of Chapter 4.

Spirit was the depth dimension of human life, Paul was arguing [in 1 Corinthians], and even more, spirit was the depth dimension of God's divine life. It was a breathtaking concept. The same spirit, which is of God, is also within us. -- p 103

[By describing the body as the temple of the holy spirit] Paul was now suggesting that a new dwelling place for God might be not beyond the sky, but within each of us. In these words Paul

was groping for a way to make rational sense out of his experience that in the human Jesus, God had been perceived to be dwelling on this earth in a dramatically new way, and the God in this Jesus had somehow made contact with the God who was within Paul. ... It was Paul's radical suggestion that in Jesus, God and human life were now seen to flow together. This startling conclusion revealed how deeply Paul was struggling to find a nontheistic definition for God that would account for what he believed he had met in the Christ. -- p 103-104

Pages 107-116 cover how the gospel writers used symbolic religious language to convey this new experience of God.

This point must be heard: the Gospels are first-century narrations based on first-century interpretations. Therefore they are a first-century filtering of the experience of Jesus. They have never been other than that. We must read them today not to discover the literal truth about Jesus, but rather to be led into the Jesus experience they were seeking to convey. That experience always lies behind the distortions, which are inevitable because words are limited. ... Let it be clearly stated, the Gospels are not in any literal sense holy, they are not accurate, and they are not to be confused with reality. They are rather beautiful portraits painted by first-century Jewish artists, designed to point the reader toward that which is in fact holy, accurate, and real. -- p 107-108

By drawing on their sacred history, these first-century Jewish folk found the words to talk about the God presence they had met in Jesus. They knew no God except a God defined as an external being with supernatural power, and so they described the God presence they met in Jesus in the only God language they knew how to use. God had come down by spiritual conception or by an outpouring of heavenly spirit upon him. Jesus was a spirit person, a window into the holy, an incarnation of the divine. -- p 112

So I start with that insight. I assert that Jesus is a spirit person, a God presence, and this assertion becomes my point of entry into his meaning. Beyond the boundaries of theism, which have limited us for so long, we discover a startling revelation of God at the very center of human life, and Jesus, the spirit person, stands at the heart of that revelation. ... With this nontheistic clue ... we now are ready to enter the Gospel stories anew and to roam within them beneath their literalness. We are not looking for the external descriptions, the signs of a God who has come down. Instead we are searching for a humanity through which the meaning of God, who is in the midst of life, might be revealed. -- p 117

8. What Think Ye of Him? Where the Human Enters the Divine

Is anything left by which to commend this Jesus, not just his teaching, to our postmodern world?
-- p 119

Why, [my critics] ask, would I or anyone else engage in this tortuous process of recasting,

rethinking, reinterpreting, and revisioning? ... I enter this process because I can neither dismiss this Christ nor live comfortably with the way he has been traditionally interpreted. ... I still find the power of the Christ compelling. -- p 119

When the theological structures of antiquity, which were wrapped so tightly around him, collapse, as I believe they are doing in this generation, these questions will still force us to search amid the wreckage for the meaning of this Jesus. We will continue to look for that revelatory moment that people experienced in him, for that flash of wonder that drove them to their God language, and for that substance upon which the whole theistic theological superstructure of doctrine, dogma, and creeds would later be erected. -- p 121

Pages 122-125 list examples from the gospels in which Jesus breaks the boundaries that separate people from each other.

Beneath the God claims made for this Jesus was a person who lived a message announcing that there was no status defined by religion, by tribe, by culture, by cult, by ritual, or by illness that could separate any person from the love of God. ... It was as if his source of love lay beyond every human boundary. It was inexhaustible. It was life giving. Finally, when it was noticed, it was thought to be so deeply the meaning of God that the assumption was made that the love present in the life of this Jesus was the result of an external deity who had somehow entered into him. -- p 125

He possessed an unearthly capacity to be present, totally present, to another person. ... His humanity was also portrayed as able to manifest that essential, but rare, quality of true freedom, the freedom to be oneself under every set of circumstances. ... He was free to forgive, free to endure, free to be, and free to die. His being was not distorted by his external circumstances. -- p 125-127

It matters not whether any of these portrayals were literally accurate. They, in fact, recorded people's impressions of this person, and when the Gospel writers wrote them, they constituted riveting, unforgettable, rare glimpses into the depths of the humanity of this Jesus. There was clearly an enormous power present in his life. -- p 127

Here was a whole human being who lived fully, who loved wastefully, and who had the courage to be himself under every set of circumstances. He was thus a human portrait of the meaning of God, understood as the source of life, the source of love, and the ground of being. -- p 128-129

Human life is capable of entering the infinity of God because the infinity of God can be found in the heart of every human life. The two are not distinct. Humanity and divinity flow together. ... In the being of Jesus we see a revelation of the Ground of Being. In his life we see a revelation of the Source of Life. In his love we see a revelation of the Source of Love. These were the aspects of his human presence that made his life so awesome and so compelling that people were driven to speak about him in terms of the theistic images of antiquity. -- p 131

If transcendence can be translated as infinite depth, if immanence can be seen as the point of access to those depths, and if the Christ figure can be interpreted as the life where transcendence and immanence come together, then we have a new way of understanding the meaning of the Trinity. -- p 132

Jesus is for me the life who has made known to us all what the meaning of life is. So I call him "Lord," I call him "Christ," and I assert that this is where God is met for me. -- p 133

9. The Meaning of Prayer in a World With No External Deity

Can we still pray if there is no theistic deity who can respond personally to our prayers? -- p 135

Spong describes his personal struggle with the idea of prayer, going back to his seminary days, and continuing into his career as a priest and then a bishop.

Yet, despite this sometimes frenzied, but at least persistent, effort, I could not make prayer, as it has been traditionally understood, have meaning for me. The real reason, I now believe, was not my spiritual ineptitude, but rather than the God to whom I had been taught to pray was in fact fading from my view. -- p 137

He points out that the nature of prayer has always been changing, and that in fact the Lord's Prayer was Jesus' attempt to redefine prayer for his day.

The definition of God implicit in the Lord's Prayer cannot be the operative definition for us today. -- p 140

When his wife had cancer, the churches in their diocese began praying for her, and some people gave those prayers credit for the fact that she lived longer (6 1/2 years) than expected. But Spong realized at some point that these prayers were directed at her because he had the social status of being a bishop. Did he want to believe in a God whose actions were influenced by human social status? He describes this as a "final nail in the coffin" of his old beliefs about prayer.

In my attempt to rebuild and to recreate the experience of prayer, I begin by asserting that there is something deep inside me, and I suspect deep inside every other person, that requires us to commune with the source of life. -- p 142

[The presence of God] calls me into wholeness. It is something powerful that impinges on my consciousness and seems to invite me beyond the barriers of my security and even beyond the barriers of my humanity. It is something that nudges me into community and into caring for others. I address this presence as a Thou, not because it is a personal being, but because it seems always to call me into a deeper sense of personhood. -- p 143

"This is what God is," I want to say, "and prayer is that experience of meeting God." -- p 143

So praying and living deeply, richly, and fully have become for me almost indistinguishable. -- p 144

I can only imagine, I could never guarantee, that when life is lived this way, an enormous amount of spiritual energy is loosed into the body politic of the whole society. I can imagine that this energy is an agent in bringing wholeness and even healing. But I do not trust anyone's effort to explain exactly how it works or to take credit for its effectiveness. -- p 144

The deity I worship is rather part of who I am individually and corporately. So praying can never be separated from acting. -- p 147

Prayer is the recognition that holiness is found in the center of life and that it involves the deliberate decision to seek to live into that holiness by modeling it and by giving it away. -- p 148

Is that enough to justify my self-identity as a person of prayer? I can respond only by saying that it is for me. I invite others to test it by trying it, living it, risking it, for that is the only way that I now know that one can learn how to pray. But my conviction is that holiness is there to be found. God is the presence in whom my being comes alive. -- p 148

10. A New Basis for Ethics in a New Age

If we can no longer conceive of God as the one who ... metes out rewards and punishments either temporal or eternal, then does any basis for ethics remain? -- p 149

My search for the basis of ethics to guide me beyond the exile drives me back to the same arena where a non-theistic God was found and where Christ was redefined. -- p 167

This mythology of a divine source of ethics enforced by the all-seeing God, however, has been revealed by the ancient codes themselves to be utter nonsense. A careful study of these codes reveals nothing less than the tribal prejudices, stereotypes, and limited knowledge of the people who created them. -- p 151

Pages 151-154 apply this claim to the Ten Commandments, demonstrating how the prejudices and misconceptions of its time are embedded in it. Pages 155-158 attack the claim that there is a consistent sexual ethic to be found in the Bible, or that it can be applied to condemn homosexuality without also condemning many practices we take for granted.

No heavenly parent figure sets down and enforces the rules by which life is governed. ... The God who once was perceived as undergirding these primitive assumptions has been taken from us and destroyed by both the march of time and the explosion of knowledge. -- p 159

To build a new basis for ethics, we must learn to look in a different place. We look, I believe, not outside of life for some external and objective authenticating authority, but rather at the very center and core of our humanity. -- p 160

In the process of pursuing the goal of happiness, I discover that my individualism is nothing less than a gift to me from the community in which I live. I cannot achieve my own destiny except as

a part of the destiny of my interdependent world. I am thus both free and bound at the same time. I can seek my own well-being only in terms of the well-being of the community. The conclusion of this humanistic search for ethical norms is that something like ethical objectivity begins to emerge. -- p 160-161

There is, therefore, an objective wrongness in seeking to cause or to increase pain in another life. There is an objective value in seeking knowledge. There is an objective wrongness in continuing to defend or to act on the basis of one's ignorance. Virtue is to be found in wisdom, in knowledge, and in openness to the nature of reality itself. ... If freedom, knowledge, and wisdom are recognized as objective values, then the extension of these values to all becomes an ethical imperative bordering on ultimacy. ... Thus the highest value emerging out of the depths of our humanity is the expansion of the boundaries of the human experience. To enhance the being and deepen the life of every human being and to free the love that emanates from each person become part of the ultimate and objective standard for determining proper human behavior. -- p 162

Does this position give us only a humanistic ethical system? I do not think so. If we can only begin to grasp the possibility that the Holy God is not external to life but is rather the Ground of life itself, the Being in which all being is rooted, then these ostensibly human values can be seen to be eternal and rooted in the ultimacy of God. -- p 164

Was it not these very qualities of selfhood -- the ability to live, to love, and to be -- which were observed in the life of Jesus, that caused people to see the presence of God in him? Is this not what the disciples were trying to say about him when they said, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God"? -- p 166

11. The Emerging Church: Reading the Signs Present Today

Pages 168-173 describe what churches have been and what church attendance has entailed: buildings with steeples that point to heaven, worship services in which prayers are said, scriptures are read, hymns are sung, special services to mark life passages. All these seem tied to the pre-exile theistic God.

If our destiny is to live in a world where people can no longer pretend to relate themselves liturgically to a heavenly parent figure who fixes anything or who rewards and punishes worshipers according to their deservings, then is there a future for those structures we call churches or for those worship activities and liturgical observances that have been conducted inside those structures? -- p 173

Beginning in the 1950s, Tillich and others taught non-theistic images of God to theological students, but did not preach to the people. Their students had to figure out how to be priests and ministers with this new understanding of God. Now this revolution is reaching significant numbers of the congregants. Pages 175-182 collect how the symbols of this change have affected church practice already: Altars now face towards the people rather than away. Kneeling is no longer

common practice. Liturgies are being re-written. Prayer books no longer contain as many requests for changing the weather or other direct intercession. The authority of the clergy is declining. The costumes of the clergy are being toned down.

These are the signs even in the midst of the present religious world that a new consciousness is being born and a new concept of God is evolving. -- p 182

12. The Future Church: A Speculative Dream

Can one really worship in a meaningful way if there is no concept of a theistic deity to receive that worship? ... Some in the religious community are sure that traveling this path will result only in the death of the religious past with no hope of a religious future. I do not agree with that judgment. -- p 184

The world is taking part in a spiritual quest, but many citizens of this century no longer believe that the Church is an asset to their quest. ... Worshipers have already noticed that the traditional words of worship are no longer capable of embodying literal truth. Some have already begun their exodus from Church life. Next, those who remain will struggle to translate these archaic forms into usable concepts. At this task they will ultimately fail. Finally, out of this practice of muttering nonsensical concepts in worship will be created the life-or-death scenario. Substantive changes will be irresistible when the alternative is death. -- p 188

Worship in the future will be marked, rather, by a self-conscious awareness that all of us are or can be God bearers and life givers and that our deepest religious task is to give ourselves away. -
- p 187

The worship of the future is found "by clinging to the essence while allow the forms to wither away." (Page 189) Pages 189-191 apply this idea to the standard church holidays: Christmas, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. Pages 191-193 does the same for the stages-of-life rituals: baptism, coming-of-age, marriage, and funeral.

The various liturgies of the Church surrounding those defining moments continue to call believers to recognize themselves as sharing in the Being of God. We are God bearers, the revealers of the God who is present in all of life. ... Once we refocus these services designed to mark the turning points of life, we will discover that much of their meaning can be preserved. The Church might well come out of the exile with its rites of passage intact, even if they have been redefined. -- p 193

The people beyond the exile who gather to celebrate the God in whom they live and move and have their being must build community around a common meal, for there is no better way to acknowledge the God who can be met, indeed revealed, in the life of the world. -- p 196

Confession is not a peasant sinner groveling before the king, begging for forgiveness in order to escape punishment. This is only the warping of our reality with the images of a theistic god. Confession is my being confronting the Ground of all Being, and forgiveness is my moving

beyond my limits into something more real, more whole, more life giving than I can now contemplate. -- p 197

13. Eternal Life Apart from Heaven and Hell

Will pilgrims in the exile seek God in the ground and depth of their own being if there is no perceived and obvious reward? ... Is there hope for life beyond this world apart from the images of our theistic past? -- p 200

I do believe that there is an eternity that lies beyond the limits of my human finitude and in which I can participate. ... [But] the content of this reality of life beyond the boundaries of death is so radically different from anything that has been proposed by the religious systems of the past that it is all but unrecognizable. -- p 201

I accept as a valid starting point most of those liberal efforts to capture some shred of credibility from the traditional view of life after death. I do not denigrate them because they are not enough. ... I do think that we live through our children, our friends, and our associates far more powerfully than most of us can perceive or admit. ... Yet all of these aspects of an interdependent immortality put together still constitute but the tiniest speck of what I mean by eternal life. If there is not more than this, there is no lasting power, no ultimate truth in the concept itself. -- p 210-213

Spong mentions points in his life where unforeseeable new experiences opened him up to life's possibilities: starting college, starting seminary, entering the priesthood, and becoming a bishop.

Each of these four expanding experiences made me aware that I do not know much about the ultimate size and shape of life and that frequently when I think I have approached life's limits, I am shocked to discover that I have simply reached another security barrier beyond which I must journey in a new and seemingly limitless expanse. I suppose my hope for and confidence in life after death or eternal life is nudged into reality and then fed by this realization. -- p 215

My conviction about eternal life, however, is not just a pious dream standing in hope at what seems to be the ultimate barrier of death. It is also attached to my understanding of God as the Ground of all Being. I know what it means to have my life and my grasp on being shrink in the face of hostility, fear, and abuse. I also know what it means to have my life and my being expand to the place where hostility, fear, and abuse become so insignificant as to be dismissed as nothing. ... That is part, a bigger part if you will, of what life is all about, life that is eternal. -- p 215-216

I am a person who knows what it is to be loved. ... This love emboldens me to press life's edges, to touch the dimensions of life that we call transcendence, to be introduced to that which is both infinite and beyond but that also seems to dwell in the heart of life. ... The God that I define as the Ground of Being seems to meet me in this place, and finitude fades into infinity. -- p 217

I move next to explore my human experience that love is the power giving birth to life. Love enables being to emerge in each of us. When that love is total, or when it reaches toward totality, the journey into being can and does occur. That journey for me also becomes a journey into God, who is without limits. ... When my being is enhanced by love ... then I believe that I have touched that which is timeless, eternal, and real. ... I stand here convinced that there is something real beyond my ultimate limits. I have but tasted it. So I embrace this vision and live in this hope.
-- p 217-218

Epilogue: A Final Word

This epilogue is in essence a summary of Spong's conclusions. With editing, I can pull a new creed out of it:

I believe that there is a transcending reality present in the very heart of life. I name that reality God. I believe that this reality has a bias toward life and wholeness and that its presence is experienced as that which calls us beyond all of our fearful and fragile human limits. I believe that this reality can be found in all that is but that it reaches self-consciousness and the capability of being named, communed with, and recognized only in human life. I believe that heaven ... is not a place but a symbol standing for the limitlessness of Being itself. I believe that this realm of heaven is entered whenever the barriers that seem to bind human life into something less than that for which it is capable are set aside. I believe in Jesus ... I believe that in his life this transcendent reality has been revealed so completely that it caused people to refer to him as God's son. ... I believe that Jesus was a God presence, a powerful experience of the reality of that Ground of Being undergirding us all at the very depths of life. ... I believe in that gift of the Spirit who was called "the giver of life." Once we located God only externally and called this God the Father Almighty. Next, we located this God in Jesus, and we called him the Son Incarnate. Now we locate God in every person, and we call this God the Holy Spirit. I believe that this Spirit inevitably creates a community of faith that will come, in time, to open this world to God as the very Ground of its life and Being. ... I believe ... that being in touch with the Ground of Being creates the universal communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the reality of resurrection, and the doorway into the life that is everlasting. -- p 220-225

Religion is, therefore, not what we have always thought it to be. Religion is not a system of belief. It is not a catalogue of revealed truth. It is not an activity designed to control behavior, to reward virtue, and to punish vice. Religion is, rather, a human attempt to process the God experience, which breaks forth from our own depths and wells up constantly within us. ... The only divine mission in life that the Church of the future could possibly have is to open people to a recognition that the ground of their very being is holy and that when they are in touch with that holy Ground of Being, they can share in God's creation by giving life, love, and being to others. -
- p 225-226

