

# John Shelby Spong. AUTHOR OF 'Why Christianity Must Change or Die' **Unbelievable.** Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today

## **BACK COVER:**

### **Why Christianity Is No Longer Believable – And How We Can Change That**

Five hundred years after the Reformation of 1517, Christianity is once again adapt to advances in crisis. In failing to adapt to advances in our thinking and spiritual perspectives.it has clung to outdated concepts and has tenaciously defended dogmas formed before major advances in human thought had occurred. For John Shelby Spong the creeds have become simply unbelievable. In this, his final book twelve "theses" to help today's believers contemplate and reshape their faith at a far deeper level.

## **Praise for John Shelby Spong**

'One of the church's most outspoken, boat-rocking leaders in modern times, a vocal champion of gay rights, a supporter of assisted suicide and a theologian who has questioned the most fundamental tenets of Christian theology." **NEW YORK TIMES**

'Spong shows how Christianity is not simply a received faith but one which constantly grows in interaction with the world; he demonstrates how it is possible to make faith a force against the injustice and lack of compassion.' **Karen Armstrong, author of A History of God**

Maverick, reformer, revolutionary and, of course, heretic ... on a range of issues. Spong can point to advancements that he helped push during a long and remarkable career.... During that time, he became an unabashed provocateur." **THE WASHINGTON POST**

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## *Final Chapter:*

### **MY MANTRA: THIS I DO BELIEVE**

Prior to his death in 2009, Forrest Church was the senior minister of the famous All Souls Unitarian-Universalist Church in New York City. He was also the son of a Dormer Democratic senator from Idaho who sought the nomination of his party for the presidency of the United States in 1976. Forrest Church had an amazing gift with words. For example the title of one of his books was *God and Other Famous Liberals*. I always wished I could have thought of that title before he did.

He also once said: "God is not God's name. God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each." I had that definition in mind when I began to draw together my thoughts into one coherent statement that would sum up the content of these twelve theses. I needed to be clear about what it is that I do believe, about why I insist on identifying myself without apology as a Christian and about why I think that a radical theological transformation is essential to a Christian future.

I call this statement "My Mantra." It is not designed to be an incipient form of a new Christian creed which might be imposed on tomorrow's Christianity. The days for believing that anyone can ever reduce the experience of the Holy to a set of propositions that can be recited and believed are over. I do not want to go back to that world of traditional religion. I live rather in time and space, where there is not, nor ever can there be, something that might be called a "timeless creed" or a set of beliefs that might endure forever. So my mantra is intended to be only a statement of where I am today, the place at which I have arrived in my journey at this moment. I want to state positively something about the conclusion that I presently hold and to bear witness to why I continue to see in the Christian story something that compels me into discipleship.

I long ago walked beyond a literal interpretation of the Bible, but I do not therefore feel a need to abandon the Bible or to suggest that this book no longer has great worth for me. Instead, I journey deeply into the Bible's content, moving far beyond the literal surface, and discover there both meaning and insights to which I continue to feel a deep allegiance. I long ago moved beyond what I call creedal theology, which as we saw was developed in the fourth century, but I have not moved beyond the hope that I can place the insights of Christianity into a coherent form, at least for my generation. I long ago moved away from the worship patterns of the thirteenth century, which portray God as a parent figure who needs to be flattered or a judge before whom I am compelled to grovel on my knees in penitence while I beg this God to "have mercy." I have not moved, however, beyond that sense of the reality and that holiness of what I call the "infinite Other."

Human language is woefully inadequate when one seeks to speak of that which cannot be embraced inside the human boundaries that mark the edges of the world of existence. I must, however, continue to use human words since I have no other way to communicate thought. So I do, but with the caveat that words might point to but cannot ever capture or hold that truth of which I seek to speak. With that warning clearly stated, I bring these chapters to a close by sharing my mantra, my current statement of belief.

I cannot tell you who God is or what God is. No one can do that. That is not within the capability of any human mind. All I can do is tell you how I believe I have experienced God. God and my experience of God are not the same. I also must face the fact that I may be delusional; I may be referring to something that does not exist except in my deluded mind. Many people have had delusional experiences in which God has been otherwise perceived. I do not believe that this is the case with me, but I must always be aware of that possibility. So under the rubric of full disclosure, I file this acknowledged possibility and continue to press on.

I believe I have experienced God as the Source of Life. Life was born as a single cell and, as such, began its journey in time until it arrived at its present stage, which includes the self-conscious complexity of human beings, producing for the first time, so far as we know, a creature who can define life, contemplate its beginnings, anticipate its termination and raise the question of its meaning. If God is the Source of Life, then the only way I can appropriately worship God is by living fully. In the process of embracing the fullness of life, I bear witness to the reality of the God who is the Source of Life.

I believe I have experienced God as the Source of Love. Love is the power that enhances life. It flows through the universe, finding expression in the care that nature in all its living forms gives to its young, but love reaches self-consciousness only in human beings. If God is the Source of Love, then the only way I can worship God is by loving "wastefully," a phrase that I like. By

"wasteful" love I mean the kind of love that never stops to calculate whether the object of its love is worthy to be its recipient. It is love that never stops to calculate deserving. It is love that loves not because love has been earned. It is in the act of loving "wastefully" that I believe I make God visible.

Finally, I believe I experience God, in the words of my greatest theological mentor, Reformed German theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965), as the Ground of Being. That is a difficult phrase to embrace. It was borrowed and refined by Tillich from the philosopher Plotinus, an early-third-century-CE Greek philosopher, who was himself not a Christian. If God is the Ground of Being, then the only way I can worship God is by having the courage to be all that I can be; and the more deeply I can be all that I can be, the more I can and do make God visible. So the reality of God to me is discovered in the experience which compels me to "live fully, to love wastefully and to have the courage to be all that I can be."

The mission into which this understanding of God drives me is not to build a religious institution or to help people become religious people. Indeed, if the truth were known, I am more repelled by those attracted to what people might call religion than I am drawn to them. No, the mission to which my mantra calls me is the task of building or transforming the world so that every person living will have a better opportunity to live fully, love wastefully and be all that each of them was created to be in the infinite variety of our humanity. There can be no outcast; there can be no one regarded as "unclean." There can be no prejudices which are allowed to operate in this vision of Christianity. The essence of Christianity, as I now understand it, is that everyone is to be accepted "just as I am, without one plea" and that everyone is called into the task of growing into all that each of us can be. The first stage of this process is what traditional Christianity once called "justification"; the second stage of this process is what traditional Christianity called "sanctification."

To this mantra I add one thing more. I am a Christian. I am a disciple of Jesus. Why? Because when I look at the life of Jesus, as that life has been refracted to me through both scripture and tradition, I see a person who was so fully alive that I perceive in him the infinite Source of Life. I see one who loves so totally, so wastefully, that I perceive in him the infinite Source of Love. I see one who was profoundly capable of being all that he could be, whether it was on Palm Sunday when he was hailed as a king—there is nothing so seductive as the sweet narcotic of human praise—or on Good Friday when he was being put to death, when even the threat of non-being did not alter his humanity. In both experiences, Jesus was and is what he was and is. He was not changed by flattery, nor was his being diminished by the imminence of his death. So I join with St. Paul in the affirmation of faith, "God was in Christ," bringing oneness out of diversity, wholeness out of brokenness and eternity out of time.

This is the God to whom I am drawn and worship. This is the Christ that points me toward the fullness of God. This is the faith I seek to share with the world. To embrace life, to increase love, to have the courage to be—these, for me, are the doorways through which I walk into the mystery of God. This God is real to me and Jesus is still my doorway into this reality. In this Jesus the future of Christianity becomes visible once again. I walk eagerly into this life-centered God experience. I welcome the Christianity to which this vision beckons me. I bear witness to the faith that leads me and the whole world to live fully, love wastefully and be all that we can be. Shalom.

**John Shelby Spong**