

Jesus for The Non-Religious

Recovering the Divine at the Heart of the Human

John Shelby Spong

Retired Episcopalian Bishop of Newark, New Jersey.

There was no handout for Bishop Spong's address which drew heavily on his recent book of the same title. As with the addresses of Colin Gibson and Raymond Bradley, his address is available on CD.

On page xiv of his book *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, Bishop John Shelby Spong identifies his target audience as:

"People who are no longer committed to traditional Christian patterns, but who, nonetheless, still seek the 'transcendent' and the 'holy', and who just might be willing to look anew at a reformulated Christianity ... who know themselves to be living with the emptiness of .. a 'God-shaped hole' that nothing else quite fills."

While John Spong may be positioned at the conservative end of Sea of Faith sympathies ("I insist that there must be a way to be both a believer and a citizen of the 21st century." [p54]), he does not back away from criticism (in both senses) of Christian orthodoxy and practice. He has been writing in this vein now for some time — see especially *Rescuing The Bible from Fundamentalism*, *Liberating The Gospels* and *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* — and throughout this book he forcefully argues for a deconstruction of much of what is familiar in the Christian story. See especially:

- p15: Birth Narratives
- p25: Fictional parents for Jesus
- p37: Historicity of Disciples
- p44: Was Judas a manufactured character?
- p49: Miracles are unnecessary
- p65: Nature miracles as signs
- p75: Healing miracles as preview of Kingdom
- p87: Raising the dead
- p97: Crucifixion
- p107: Theology of the Cross
- p117: Resurrection/Ascension

His is not an attempt to eradicate Christianity (though many will feel that this would be the effect of such deconstruction) but rather to "reform the way [in which we] understand the Christ story." (p134)

In common with all of the "SoF-friendly" authors quoted in our literature, Spong takes the

view (p150) that "it was not ... to *record* the details of the life of Jesus that the gospels were written, but to *interpret* the Jesus experience." [emphasis added].

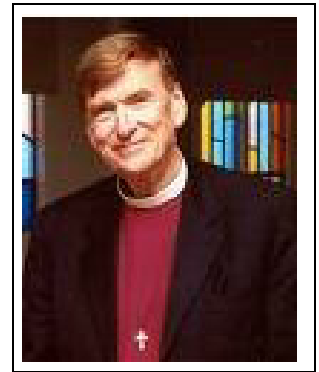
One such interpretive scheme that has come into prominence in recent years and which is set out in Spong's book is that the Gospel writers consciously or unconsciously used the events of the Jewish liturgical year to frame narratives about Jesus. Such analyses appear in both this book and on the CD.

Despite the non-literalness of the NT record, Spong follows his mentor John A. T. Robinson in seeing Jesus as "the human face of God" and he commends this Jesus to the non-religious.

This helps us in our journey to become human:

"It is an act of enormous courage to embrace what it means to be a self-conscious human being. It is not easy to live with the awareness of the unrelieved anxiety that is the mark of a human life. That is why human beings are almost inevitably religious creatures. Religion meets a desperate and chronic need in the human psyche and has, therefore, a tenacious hold on human life itself. Self-created security is, however, never real.

The fact is that religion as it has been traditionally practiced has never provided genuine security, but only its illusion. Most religion has, in fact, served as an opiate for the people." [p266]



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Part 3. Jesus for the non-religious. Introduction: Jesus Really Lived. Who Is the God Met in Jesus? Recognizing the Sources of Religious Anger. Jesus: The Breaker of Tribal Boundaries. Jesus: The Breaker of Prejudices and Stereotypes. Jesus: The Breaker of Religious Boundaries. The Cross: A Human Portrait of the Love of God. Epilogue: Christpower. His books, which have sold well over a million copies, include Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy; The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic; Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World; Eternal Life: A New Vision; Jesus for the Non-Religious, The Sins of Scripture, Resurrection: Myth or Reality?; Why Christianity Must Change or Die; and his autobiography, Here I Stand. He writes a weekly column on the web that reaches thousands of people all over the world. To join his online audience, go to www.JohnShelbySpong.com. He lives with his wife, Christine, in New Jersey. Read more. Collaps The religious perspectives on Jesus vary among world religions. Jesus' teachings and the retelling of his life story have significantly influenced the course of human history, and have directly or indirectly affected the lives of billions of people, even non-Christians. He is considered to be the most influential person to have ever lived by many, finding a significant place in numerous cultural contexts.