

A New Christianity for a New World,

by John Shelby Spong

reviewed by [Gilbert H. Vieira](#) in the [October 23, 2002](#) issue

For many who share the liberal perspective, Spong certainly champions the right causes. What comes through clearly and forcibly in his most recent book is his open spirit and vision of universality. He trounces dogmatism, sterile creedalism, narrow biblicism and Christian triumphalism. Expelled from Spong's universe is the idea of a personal God existing outside of humanity and the world and demanding a sacrificial death and the subservience of the faithful. Spong opposes all forms of religious authoritarianism and exclusivism. He wants Christianity to be freed from outdated myths, made resonant with scientific knowledge and stripped of moralistic notions and enfeebling, guilt-producing beliefs and rituals.

Despite Spong's high motives, his argument unfolds with weary redundancy and culminates in a formless vision of the future church. When he condemns the church for its "imperialistic ecclesiastical violence," enjoins us to "leave the God of miracle and magic" and reminds us that "we can speak of God only in human words," he is saying things that we have all heard before. Spong echoes all the radical diatribes, both scholarly and popular, of earlier eras, going back much further than J. A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God*. I hear in many of these pages the beating of a dead horse to the accompaniment of the favorite trumpet calls of "prophetic preaching."

This is not to say that Spong doesn't push the envelope. His many strong denials of traditional doctrine might make some wonder, as he himself reflects, why he doesn't take one more easy step and simply declare himself totally emancipated from the body of the faithful. But even his response to his own reflection doesn't make a convincing case for staying. At the same time, he fails to make a compelling case for leaving.

Additionally, Spong fails to connect with the realities of our world, and he speaks with the kind of sermonic rhetoric with which preachers are all too familiar. It is a style of speaking that suggests something profound is being said, but the thoughts

slip through our fingers as we try to grasp them. And his nebulous image of the new church leaves one puzzled and dissatisfied.

Spong's failure to connect with the realities of our world is not immediately apparent. He certainly is in step with science and modern rationality. He argues against a church still caught in some of the trappings of power inherited from the age of "Christendom." He notes that important shifts are going on in regard to our understanding of the Bible, our language about God and our notions about human nature and morality. He pleads for a more compassionate, gracious, "life-affirming" form of Christianity.

Yet he misses much of what is actually going on, especially in the religious dimensions of our times. He seems oblivious of the entangling forces driving the faith of millions. Ours is not a neat and rational world in which people spend much time worrying about the nuanced meanings of theism. Most Christians do not fret over whether God is "outside" or "inside," or whether or not God is theistically dying. There are deep emotional and social components to belief that Spong appears to ignore. Humans are driven by tormenting and unreasoning fears as well as by compelling hopes.

In his recent article "Oh, Gods!" in the *Atlantic Monthly* Toby Lester observes that contrary to the predictions of some academic experts, religion isn't withering away. In fact, the new century "will probably see religion explode--in both intensity and variety." Lester rejects the view that the last stronghold of irrationality in human culture--religion--will fade and succumb to advancing knowledge. On the contrary, the world is as "awash in religious novelty, flux and dynamism as it has ever been." Lester points out that hundreds of widely divergent forms of Christianity are being practiced around the world. Islam is similarly varied, and Buddhism is made up of 200 distinct bodies, many in sharp disagreement with each other. Spong's book gives no sense of this complexity.

And while Spong gives the impression that the secular world encircles and challenges Christianity, Lester speaks of the "secularization myth." For at least three centuries secular voices have been telling us that humans will eventually outgrow belief in the supernatural, but religion has refused to be left behind. Peter Berger's 1968 prediction that by "the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture," has not come true. In light of all this, Spong's case against the present state of Christianity is

unconvincing. He is pushing a thesis that doesn't incorporate a wide enough view of the enormous religious forces at work today.

Spong readily admits that moving from the church he considers unlivable to something new is like going into exile. There are no comforting promises, no bright prospects except the knowledge that Christians will at last be unshackled from the past and set free to worship unbounded by a creed, the notion of a theistic God and the ecclesiastical scaffolding traditionally built around that idea of God.

Yet, despite everything, I am glad Spong is among us. He prods us persistently to look at our ailing and groaning institution. He speaks forthrightly about where he sees us still holding on to outmoded habits of thought inherited from past traditions. He pleads that we move beyond all the narrow and limiting prejudices and "tribal fears" that keep us distant from present realities and from vast portions of humanity who express their faith in ways other than our own.