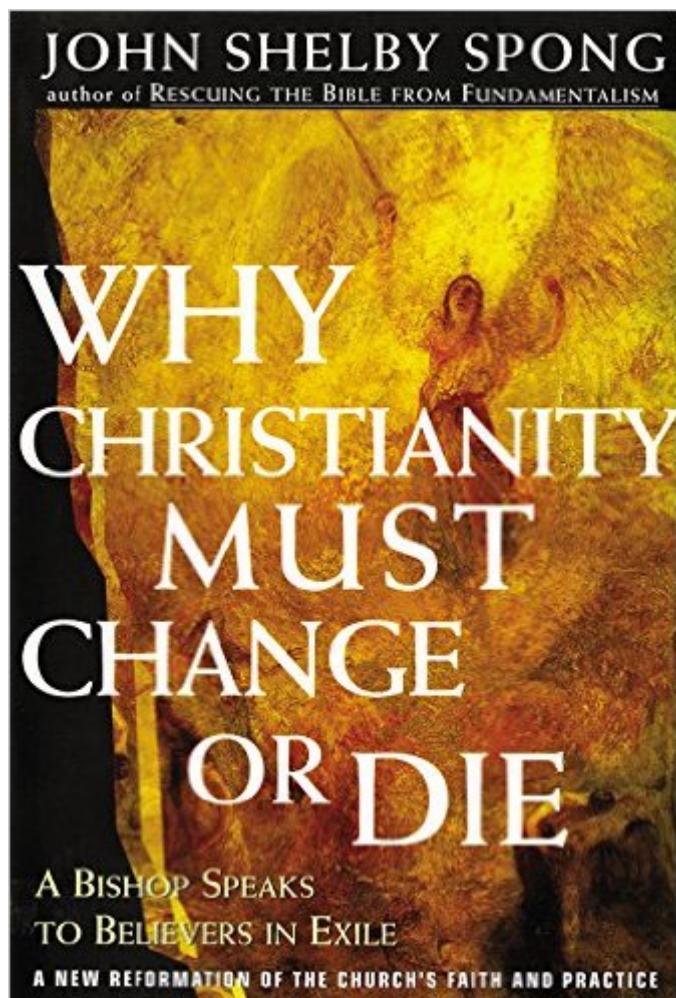


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Why Christianity Must Change Or Die: A Bishop Speaks To Believers In Exile



Synopsis

An important and respected voice for liberal American Christianity for the past twenty years, Bishop John Shelby Spong integrates his often controversial stands on the Bible, Jesus, theism, and morality into an intelligible creed that speaks to today's thinking Christian. In this compelling and heartfelt book, he sounds a rousing call for a Christianity based on critical thought rather than blind faith, on love rather than judgment, and that focuses on life more than religion.

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Customer Reviews

In this, his latest theological work, Bishop John Spong systematically delves into contradictions and conflicts between biblical literalism and modern society. He spotlights the uneasy mix between traditional Christian faith and a modern world-view: contrasting the seven-day creation story with fossils dating back billions of years: the understanding of Earth as but one planet in one galaxy of millions are just two examples of the major shifts in the world view that have taken place since the birth and death of Christ. For those espousing Biblical literalism and fundamentalism, this book will read like utter heresy. For the true atheist, perhaps, it will seem like goody-goody wishful thinking. Yet, throughout it all, Spong clings to the notion that God is Love, God is Life, God as the ultimate Source of All, and urges people, Christians or not, to examine their beliefs and enter into discussion and dialogue about what Christianity and religion mean in the world today, and for the next millennium. Even when I disagree with Bishop Spong's conclusions, he makes me reevaluate my own faith, and thus both stimulates and refreshes it. I am grateful for this book, even as it disturbs

me.

As one who has read Bishop Jack Spong's writings for years, I am continually amazed at the lack of understanding accorded his books. This latest work is a prime example. If the critic goes back and READS the book, he or she will soon catch on that Spong is not attacking historic Christianity...but is questioning its cliches. He is, in a sense, nailing his own Theses on the Cathedral door for DISCUSSION, not slavish acceptance. I have disagreed with Jack Spong on much, if not most of what he has written over the years. He has always made me think, often gets my blood pressure up a bit (but rarely as much as most of those Christian authors we find on the shelves in the local "Bible Bookstore" who haven't printed a new idea in decades, but still manage to pump out their quick reading, simplistic, royalty grabbing tomes). I have no doubt of Spong's individual and unique relationship with Christ. I have no doubt as to his compassion, and desire to work with the tough questions so that the Christian life NEVER fears to ask, and attempt to answer ANY question. Good man, good book. Read carefully, thoughtfully and prayerfully!

This book is awesome! I had only gotten a few pages into it and already I felt like Spong must have somehow tapped directly into my brain! He speaks to the many, many people out there who feel disenfranchised by a Christianity that keeps serving up ancient fairy stories that are impossible for anyone with a critical (no, make that functioning) intellect to accept. He asks a lot of the questions we are asking; dares to speak the truth about the anger, defensiveness, and politicism that have characterized the Church; and liberates Jesus from the doctrinal straightjacket the Church has encased him in. No, Spong doesn't really provide *answers*--but I think that's the point. So often people who question are told, basically, to shut up and believe because shutting up and believing is what faith is all about. Spong replies that questioning and reformulating is healthy. I agree with him wholeheartedly that unless Christianity wakes up and starts reexamining itself, it is going to die. Thinking people will dismiss it as a useless relic because it will be so inadequate for their everyday lives. It's happening that way now. I highly recommend that anybody with any spiritual life whatsoever read this book! It is extremely thought-provoking (which is probably why the fundies can't stand it), and no matter what belief system you arrive at, you need to arrive there informed.

Spong must have been reading my mind. He clearly articulates all the doubts I have long felt and lets me know that I am not alone in this. Many churches seem to only reluctantly discard outdated doctrine - one example given is that it wasn't until 1991 that the Catholic church officially

acknowledged that Galileo was right (and the Bible is clearly wrong) regarding the nature of the earth and solar system! (some fundamentalists still don't seem to accept that!) I have often thought - as Spong suggests - that most churches expect me to "check in my brain at the front door". I cannot do this, so I sit through church services thinking "are they for real?" Spong encourages those of us just starting down the path to go to the next level. He lets us know that it ok to use our God given power of reason to question everything and anything that the church traditionally teaches. He provides historical context to show us where the current teachings came from, then presents alternative views. Some point out that his teachings are really not that new - and they may be right for those well read on liberal "theology" - but they were new and refreshing ideas to me. An example of how he takes it to the next level: I have long ago dismissed the idea of a theistic God sitting like a king in heaven somewhere. But still the church teaches the doctrine of Trinity as a core concept that must not be questioned. But as Spong points out - of what good is the concept if God is "3 persons" once you have discarded the idea of God as a personal being. What of virgin births and physical resurrections from the dead? Who hasn't sat in the pews at Christmastime and felt a little like the kid who still wants to believe in Santa Claus, but deep down knows it's make believe! Spong assures us that these questions are not only ok, but are essential for healthy spiritual growth. He offers a useful alternative context in which to consider these biblical accounts. He raises the same questions I have asked myself often about worship and prayer. Is God so vain that he sits around basking in the adulation of his "subjects". Of course not - but our hymns and prayers tend to do just this. He could do better to address the subject of prayer a little more deeply. I believe Spong gets a little too skeptical when discussing miracles - he dismisses them all as implausible. I tend to believe that there is some power deep within us where the human and divine touch and mingle that has the power to bend the "rules" of nature and result in miracles. I believe there is some evidence of this in real life. But this is his book and his belief - I do not need to agree with him 100% to be able to learn and enjoy. He does get a little bitter at times when describing the institution of the church - but his anger is not directed at any individual - just the institution itself.

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