

**Eternal Life: A New Vision**  
**Summer 2010**  
**Pacific School of Religion**  
**Monday-Friday, July 26-30, 9am – 1pm**  
**Bishop John Shelby Spong**

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Do you believe in life after death? As a religious person do you think you have to? How can we approach this subject in a world that has lost the record keeping God above the sky, the miracle-working deity who once filled in the gaps of human knowledge and the post-Darwinian idea that human life is not just a little lower than the angels, but just a little higher than the apes? John Shelby Spong, best known as a radical thinker, turns his attention to this subject and surprisingly finds a way to affirm the afterlife by going not beyond life but through life, not beyond time but through time, not beyond humanity but through humanity.

This course is designed for clergy of all traditions who have to wrestle with these questions professionally with every death they confront, as well as for lay people and skeptics who have dismissed life after death as a pious delusion. Bishop Spong contends that it is a realistic hope. The course will explore the ancient religious claims of life after death and why they have faded so much in the last century that the idea is scarcely mentioned even in religious circles. It will also attempt to open this subject to new possibilities relying on a deep journey into life itself and to make it possible to say yes with integrity to the ancient question of eternal life even in the 21st century.

**Learning Outcome**

After completing this course, students should be aware of why discussing life after death is not easy and to recognize that much of contemporary religious expression still operates on the basis of unsupportable presuppositions. That does not invalidate the search, but it does invalidate traditional methods used to pursue the search. The easy alternatives -- to give up religion altogether, or to separate religious convictions from dialogue with the world of expanded knowledge fades before the difficult alternative of rethinking traditional religious symbols in a total way.

Every student should be able to identify which of these three positions he or she is now in and to defend that choice.

- a) To give up religion: Is that a possibility for human beings? or Does one simply replace one religion with another ideology -- spiritual or secular -- as the ultimate arbiter of human meaning?
- b) To continue to be "religious" by denying the realities of new knowledge. Evangelicals and traditional Catholics act as if they can do this daily. Does it have integrity? Is this a realistic way to enter the future?

c) Can such religious symbols as God, Christ, sin, salvation, worship, prayer, judgement and eternity be rethought in the light of the intellectual revolution from Copernicus to Hawking? What would such a Christianity look like? Why not start over and not just translate the meaningless concepts of the past?

### **Requirements**

Course will be a combination of lecture and discussion. A 1500 word paper will be required for those who take the course for credit. The purpose of the paper is to get students to raise to consciousness their convictions on this subject. It is quite possible to believe in believing in life after death without actually believing in it. It is quite possible to say "I believe" or "I do not believe" in life after death without ever thinking about it. This paper will ask and require an answer to the question: "Why I believe or do not believe in life after death. For those ordained people serving congregations the sub-theme of "How my convictions on this subject shapes my ministry" will ground it in the concreteness of ordained life.

The course grade will be based on the final paper (50%), attendance in class (25%) and participation in discussion (25%).

### **Grading and Plagiarism Policy**

Grading policy: <http://www.psr.edu/grades>

Plagiarism policy: <http://www.psr.edu/plagiarism-policy>

### **Calendar of Assignments**

- I Why life after death has faded from view in the last century -- even in religious circles.
  - A) The evidence to substantiate the loss of conviction.
  - B) The causes for the demise of this once firm conviction
  - C) The results in Christianity of the result of the death of this idea.
- II Turning away from life after death.
  - A) The birth of the universe - The birth of the planet Earth - The Emergence of life, consciousness and self-consciousness.
  - B) The birth of self-consciousness and the rise of religion.
  - C) Examining the drive to survive found in all living things.
- III The shape of religion from animism to monotheism
  - A) The universality of the god concept.
  - B) The ever-changing nature of these concepts.
  - C) The crisis in human life that accompanies the death of religion.
- IV Rethinking God, Sin and Jesus.
  - A) Moving beyond theism but not into atheism.
  - B) Dismissing the theology of the Fall without dismissing the reality of evil.
  - C) Incarnation theology is the answer to an improper anthropology.
  - D) Rethinking Jesus and Resurrection.
- V A new vision of Eternal Life.
  - A) Enoch - Moses - Elijah - A new lens through which to view life beyond death.

- B) The move from self-consciousness to universal consciousness.
- C) Why I believe in life that is eternal.

**Required Texts:**

Spong, John Shelby. *Eternal Life: A New Vision: Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2009).

Spong, John Shelby. *Here I Stand -- My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love and Equality* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2000).

**Suggested Texts:**

Robinson, John A.T. *In the End, God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

Spong, John Shelby. *Jesus for the Non-Religious: Recovering the Divine at the Heart of the Human* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007).

Spong, John Shelby. *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005).

Spong, John Shelby. *A New Christianity for a New World -- Why Traditional Faith is Dying and How a New Faith is Being Born* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003).

Spong, John Shelby. *Why Christianity Must Change or Die -- A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998).

Spong, John Shelby. *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996).

Thielicke, Helmut. *Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970)

**English as Second Language (ESL) Policy**

1. Upon request by the ESL student to the PSR faculty, the faculty member will extend the deadline for papers one week to allow time for editing.
2. Upon request by the ESL student, PSR faculty will allow twice as much time for ESL students to complete in-class written exams.