

# Charting a New Reformation, Part XXXVI – Thesis #11, Life After Death

22 September 2016: [Start the discussion! » \(http://johnshelbyspong.com/2016/09/22/charting-a-new-reformation-part-xxxvi-thesis-11-life-after-death/#respond\)](http://johnshelbyspong.com/2016/09/22/charting-a-new-reformation-part-xxxvi-thesis-11-life-after-death/#respond)

[\( # \)](#) 8 (#)  
(#)

*“The traditional understanding of life after death in Western Christianity was created on the premise of human uniqueness. Human beings were understood to be a special creation, made in the image of God, and endowed with an eternal soul. That perspective has not only been challenged, but destroyed by modern scholarship. Charles Darwin showed us that all life emerged from the first single cell. The discovery of DNA in the 1960’s revealed the deep connection among all living things. Evolutionary biology now traces our history not just to the great apes, but also to the cabbages and even to the plankton of the sea. Astrophysics has introduced us to the vastness of the universe and even to the possibility that intelligent life might inhabit places within it other than the planet earth. These discoveries have served to destroy the original basis for belief in life after death and to have reduced that idea to the realm of pious hope. Can modern men and women then continue to talk about “eternal life” with any degree of intellectual integrity? Can Christianity survive without it?”*

I have no use for life after death as the tool of behavior control. In many religious people that is its only purpose. I do not believe that parents can effectively raise their children on the basis of promising them a reward for “good” behavior and punishment for “bad” behavior. If this pattern represents a style of parenting that is all but universally dismissed by experts in child development, then I wonder why Christian people have not banished this same mentality from the life of the Christian Church. Heaven and hell are, quite frankly, badly dated, unbelievable concepts, which need to be dismissed at once from our minds and from the liturgical life of the church. Only the most irrelevant of our ecclesiastical thinkers appear not to see this and so they alone cling to these archaic ideas.

Obvious changes in the meaning we attach to various words in our secular society make this shift very clear. Look at what has happened to the word “heaven.” Since Gene Autry in 1928 sang: “You’re the only star in my blue heaven” it has become little more than a synonym for the sky. When the word “heaven” is turned into the adjective, “heavenly,” it is used to describe everything from a new dress to good sex! Understanding this, Anglican theologian Don Cupitt could and did write a book entitled: *Above Us Only Sky!*

The word “hell” has fared no better. It has become a mild oath with little meaning. One can say in the summer: “It is as hot as hell today” and one can say in the winter: “It is as cold as hell today” and mean the same thing! The word ‘hell’ no longer has any content,

We also trace this ever-changing meaning when we look at the way the early and medieval church constructed the realms that in their minds made up the afterlife. Those structures were constantly being adapted to meet human need. There was nothing unchanging or eternal about them. The major concern in the church with regard to life after

death was not its reality, but the imperative necessity that the leaders of the church felt to control human behavior on this earth. Originally, there were only two areas in the geography of life after death. By far the most graphic area was hell in which sinners were eternally punished and where the fires burned eternally. Then brimstone was added to heighten the fear and to motivate virtue. To this realm called “hell” were assigned not just the wicked, but also the non-believers, the heretics, the infidels and the unbaptized.

The other realm, called “heaven,” was constructed as a place of bliss and reward created and reserved for the virtuous, the saved, those who acknowledged “Jesus Christ as savior” and who were thus baptized. Please note that the church thus added “belief control” to “behavior control.” One must not think outside the boxes of orthodoxy if one wanted to be “saved.”

This bicameral system of heaven and hell, however, did not fit reality. Virtuous and godly lives had existed long before the time of Jesus so people in this period of history could not possibly have believed in Jesus or have been baptized, which was the standard for the “saved.” In the early church this ecclesiastical discussion centered on great thinkers of the past like Plato and Aristotle, who were indeed being read to shape the theology of the established church quite intentionally, once Christianity had received official recognition and had begun to move toward becoming the dominant religion of the Western world. Could Plato and Aristotle be assigned to hell appropriately and still be quoted regularly by the church fathers? It was an intolerable situation and so the church leaders set about to remedy this anomaly. This changing pattern was a clear indicator that the truth of life after death was not the product of divine revelation, but of human adaptations. Soon the church proceeded to address this crisis by adding a third alternative to the structures of the afterlife, supplementing the original two destinations of heaven and hell. This third place was called “Limbo” and it was presented as the eternal destinations of “noble pagans.” Limbo was not a place of suffering, but it was also not a place where the beatific vision could ever be achieved. Limbo served primarily to accommodate the human conscience that could no longer assign to hell the noble pagans, who would have had no chance to have encountered Jesus. In the 20th century, a person like Mahatma Gandhi, not Plato or Aristotle, became the primary illustration of why “Limbo” was so essential to our rational consciousness. It protected the “justice” of God.

It was not long after that before the moral outrage of assigning unbaptized babies to hell created another crisis in our belief in the afterlife. If heaven was only for the baptized Christians, then in an era of widespread infant mortality, what was the fate of a baby who died before baptism? What about stillborn infants? What about a miscarriage or even an aborted fetus? What kind of God was it who would punish innocent infants for either the accidents of their births or for the negligence of their parents? This debate raged in all parts of the Christian Church movement until finally a fourth structure was added to the geography of the afterlife. It was called “Limbo for unbaptized children.” Now the leaders of the Christian Church could say that an unbaptized child would not be eternally punished, but would find his or her eternal dwelling place in this “Limbo for unbaptized children.” In this new realm, there was no eternal punishment for evil, once again, saving God’s sense of being fair and even merciful. At the same time, there was no eternal bliss and no hope of heaven was held out to these unbaptized little ones. This had the effect of saving Christian authority. Eternal life could now be had without either punishment or reward, but with fairness!

The next debate about the reality of the afterlife arose when people began to see “degrees of evil” in those who came to the moment of judgment. Were not some lives more overtly evil than others? Could Genghis Khan and Adolph

Hitler be put in the same category as those who ate meat on Friday, cursed from time to time, violated their marriage vows or got a divorce? The pressure arising from the sense of the relativity of evil found expression when yet another new room was added to the geography of the afterlife. This new room was called “purgatory.” Purgatory was an enormous step in a new direction for the church to take. With the advent of purgatory, the punishment of hell, but not the bliss of heaven, became time related. Even those, who had been the most evil of the world, were now not doomed to suffer through all eternity, but only to serve a longer sentence in purgatory. Those whose sins were either moderate or merely expressions of carelessness, would spend less time in purgatory. In the last analysis, however, everyone, good and evil alike, would finally gain the promise of heaven. Purgatory was the first step taken by the church in the process of moving toward the healing hope of universalism.

The result of all of these changes was, however, that the afterlife began to look like a house built by a committee! New rooms were being added to take care of every newly perceived human need. The afterlife was clearly a human construction reflecting adaptations in the ever-changing human understanding of God. The power of these images in the task of controlling human behavior was immense. Next these concepts entered our literature and framed our consciousness. One thinks of such works as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained* and John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Christianity was clearly now in the behavior control business! If these powerful controls were ever relativized, it was assumed that moral anarchy was inevitable.

Is behavior control really the purpose of the Christian faith? One of the slogans of the American Humanist Association is “Good without a God!” Does anyone really believe that goodness is dependent on a belief in God? Christian history surely reveals that the Christians of the world can be evil even with a God. To separate reward and punishment, good and evil from any connection with life after death becomes, therefore, a necessary first step that must be accomplished before we can begin to examine anew the possibility of life after death. Heaven and hell, as aspects of the old reward and punishment, behavior control system will surely have to be discarded. For many people that theme is so dominant a part of the afterlife that once it is dismissed there is nothing left. Does the possibility of life after death disappear when heaven and hell, reward and punishment disappear? Is that what life and death are ultimately about? I do not think so. To face this anomaly is, however, a necessary and essential first step. We take it and we move a step deeper into the subject.

John Shelby Spong

## Question & Answer

Glen Bennett from Canada, via the Internet, writes:

### Question:

Teach me to pray. I have read *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* and it has been a great help to me as I could never get my head around the Bible. For the last 30 years I have followed faithfully eight of the Ten Commandments. When I become angry I sometimes swear and, like your book explains, I think the Fourth Commandment has never been followed.

**Answer:**

Dear Glen,

Thank you for your letter

Let me go quickly to your request. Teach me to pray! The misunderstanding and difficulty people have with prayer most of the time is because they have not tried to define God outside of the theistic, authoritarian patterns of the past. If God is a supernatural, external power, prayer is an attempt to get God's power to work for us. It is an attempt to impose my will onto God, to force God, a supernatural being, to do my will. If that is what prayer means to you, you will spend your life explaining why it doesn't work. Why does tragedy occur? Why does suffering abound? Why is the world not perfect?

If one can escape theism sufficiently to begin to experience God as the "Source of life," empowering me to live, the "Source of love," freeing me to love, and the "Ground of Being," giving me the courage to be all that I can be, then prayer begins to make sense. Prayer then is the activity that calls us to build a world in which life can be enhanced for everyone, love can be increased for everyone and the courage to be all that each person can be in the infinite variety of our humanity can be a possibility for everyone. Until this shift in the definition of our God experience occurs, trying to answer the question of how to pray will be an endless "merry-go-round." Prayer, you see, is not a request for something, but the exercise required to open us to all that God is and all that God means.

In the first book that I wrote, *Honest Prayer*, (still available through St. Johann Press, Haworth, New Jersey), I sowed the seeds for understanding prayer this way. This book was written in 1972. I have grown far beyond that book today, but that was where the journey out of the prayer patterns of my youth began, so I still treasure it.

Hope this helps.

John Shelby Spong

**Announcements**

© 2014 [ProgressiveChristianity.org \(http://progressivechristianity.org\)](http://progressivechristianity.org) | [Privacy Policy \(http://johnshelbyspong.com/privacy-policy/\)](#) | [Contact Us \(http://johnshelbyspong.com/contact-us/\)](#)