

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Engaging with others, leading to 'holy envy'



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Can we have "holy envy" of aspects of a religion different from our own?

This is the theme of the just-released book by Barbara Brown Taylor, "Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others." Taylor, an Episcopal priest and retired professor of religion at Piedmont College in Georgia, tells the story of her own faith journey as she fully realized that "all religions are not alike."

"Their followers see the world in very distinct ways," Taylor writes. "Their understanding of the human condition proceeds from different assumptions, leading them to propose different remedies." Yet, she adds, "I found things to envy in all of the traditions." She then asks, "Could my faith be improved by the faith of others?"

She describes her book as being "about how my envy of other traditions turned into holy envy, offering me the chance to be born again within my own tradition."

She traces the term "holy envy" to biblical scholar Krister Stendahl, who was on the faculty and served as dean of Harvard Divinity School. He then returned to his home in Sweden and was elected as bishop of Stockholm. Stendahl proposed three rules for interfaith understanding:

1. When trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.
2. Don't compare your best to their worst.
3. Leave room for holy envy.

He explained that holy envy is being willing to recognize elements in the other religious tradition or faith that you admire and wish could, in some way, be reflected in your own religious tradition or faith.

In my own experience of traveling for two-and-a-half weeks to Turkey with a professor of Islamic studies, I experienced some holy envy. As I observed the Muslim practice of praying five times a day and learned more about the practice of fasting from dawn to dusk for the whole month of Ramadan, I was envious of the discipline practiced in this tradition. I realized that my Christian practice has often become sloppy by comparison. I was envious of the discipline and measurable goals in this tradition.

As Stendahl practiced his own interfaith rules while dealing with minority religious traditions in Sweden, he concluded, "In the eyes of God, we are all minorities. That's a rude awakening for many Christians, who have never come to grips with the pluralism of the world."

Taylor writes about her students coming to grips with pluralism and embracing it, but with little help from their elders. She writes, "No preacher has suggested to them that today's Good Samaritan might be a Good Muslim or a Good Humanist. No confirmation class teacher has taught them that the Golden Rule includes honoring the neighbor's religion as they would have the neighbor honor theirs."

She also writes about the attitude of some who approach religion as wanting to "play on the winning team, the wish to secure divine



Barbara Brown Taylor is the author of "Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others."

favoritism."

Our desire to understand and experience God is not a contest where we have to see ourselves as the winners and the others as losers. Even in sports competition, one can learn from the other team and become better. This gets to Stendahl's second rule. "Don't compare your best to their worst." Taylor suggests, "Compare your best to their best, so that each becomes better in its own distinct way."

For nearly everyone who has become deeply involved with learning about and learning with others of a different faith, the experience has deepened one's own faith. If our only interaction is with people who believe as we do, we can stay at a shallow level. Engaging beliefs different from one's own pushes us to think more deeply about our beliefs. Taylor also urges us to "engage those who are different without feeling compelled to defeat or destroy them. This requires skills. It also requires spiritual and psychological maturity, which makes it a work in progress for humans of any age."

Taylor also warns against the "race to the lowest common denominator." We are not trying to say that all religions are the same, because doing such prevents us "from exploring the differences in any meaningful way." In our interfaith efforts here in West Michigan, we have warned against "thin dialogue," where we water down our faith so we will all agree. We learn from "thick dialogue," where we bring the thickness of our faith to the table, but in a way that respects the thickness of the other's faith.

Taylor shares the insight of British theologian John Hick, who has called for a "Copernican revolution in theology." Before Copernicus, we believed that the Earth was the center of the universe. Now, we understand that we are one of a number of planets circling the sun that is the center. In Hick's Copernican revolution in theology, "God assumes the prime place at the center and Christianity joins the orbits of the great religions circling around."

We act with humility and do not assume that we have absolute truth. As Taylor puts it, "Absolute truth moves to the center of the system, leaving people of good faith with meaningful perceptions of that truth from their own orbits. This does not require anyone to give up the claim to uniqueness. It only requires the acceptance of unique neighbors, who concur that the brightness they see at the center of everything exceeds their ability to possess it."

Can each of us affirm our own insights while staying open to the insights of others? Can we even be open to a little holy envy?

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