

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Finding God in the faith of others through 'Holy Envy'



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Can learning of other faiths, and getting to know others who believe differently, strengthen our own faith understanding?

This is the theme of the recent book by Barbara Brown Taylor, "Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others." Taylor, an Episcopal priest and a 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. "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 the 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 the 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.

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 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."

In my many years with the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, I have found that, 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. The benefit of 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

IF YOU GO

What: Interfaith book group discussing Barbara Brown Taylor's "Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others"

When: Alternate Tuesdays, 3-4:30 p.m., through March

Where: Seidman Center, 50 Front Ave. SW, Grand Rapids

Information and parking permits at: InterfaithUnderstanding.org



Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and a retired professor of religion, is the author of "Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others."

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.

Interacting with those of a different faith can get tricky when it comes to how far one goes in sharing worship practices. Taylor tells of a time when she stood next to a Jewish colleague at a Christian service that included communion or the Eucharist. While the Christian leader made it clear that all were welcome to participate, it was also clear that her Jewish friend was not planning to do so but to just observe. Taylor did the same, but then, as she writes, "What had I just done? Why had I done it?" She knew that her colleague did not expect that gesture from her. Then Taylor writes, "I still do not know whether I failed Christianity that night or passed." But she did know that her act was one that involved the relationship of that human being standing next to her.

We don't always know what is the right thing to do in a given situation, but, as a Jewish reviewer of her book, Nancy Fuchs Kriemer, commented, "We are not God, so we don't know how God most wants to be worshipped. We have a better idea how people want to be treated. We are not commanded to love our religions. We are commanded to love our neighbors."

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."

In Hick's theological image, 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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