

Chapter 4

HOLY ENVY:

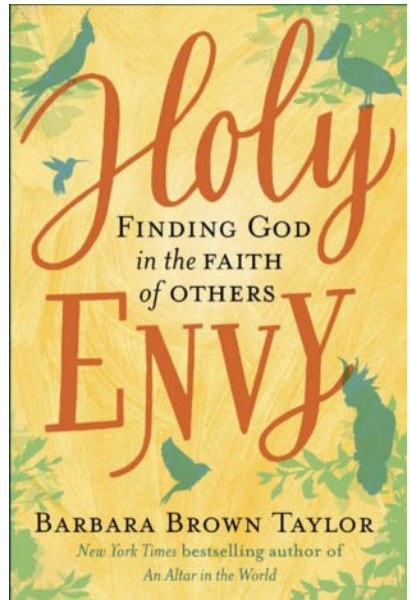
Finding God in the Faith of Others

by Barbara Brown Taylor

Reviewed by David Bradshaw

Introduction to Interspirituality

“The definitive revolution is the spiritual awakening of humankind. This revolution will be the task of the Interspiritual Age. The necessary shifts in consciousness require a new approach to spirituality that transcends past religious cultures of fragmentation and isolation.” -Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*



I was first introduced to Barbara Brown Taylor at a conference she spoke at on the topic of The Universal Christ hosted by author Richard Rohr and the Center for Action and Contemplation. Her topic was the subject of her last book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. Christians, including myself have been rather prejudice against the darkness, so I was interested in her entirely enlightening presentation about what we can learn about God in the darkness — which physics now reveals is full of microscopic light particles.

Barbara is very gifted at communicating complex spiritual truths using everyday experiences. As another of her book titles proclaims, she sees *An Altar in the World* — not just in church buildings. This ability to mystically see God in all things and people, combined with her gift of being an articulate storyteller, pays off big in her newest book, *Holy Envy*, as she tackles the timely subject of how Christians can gracefully move from spiritual exclusivity toward greater inclusivity in just over 200 fast-moving pages.

Warning: Reading Ms. Taylor can easily become both habit-forming and myth-busting as she weaves her contagious love of God and neighbor tightly into the fabric of her stories.

Readers are immediately invited into her Piedmont College classroom located in northeast Georgia — as well as real-world experiences in mosques and temples — 47 for a whirlwind course in the world's major religions. What is most refreshing

is that Barbara's starting point is loving exploration, rather than condescending spiritual judgment.

Growing Your Faith By Experiencing Others

“The tragedy of Christianity is that it came to see itself as replacing other religions instead of adding something to all of them.” -Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*
Barbara's experience serving as an Episcopal priest for decades allows her the humility to offer herself as a perfect example of how little most Christians know about others within our own faith, let alone the other major faiths of the world. Thankfully, her spiritual journey brings both her students (and her readers) to a new place of “holy envy” — by learning to love other people and their different spiritual traditions with the same love she offers to those who embrace her own spiritual tradition.

Given the current state of cultural, spiritual, ethnic and racial polarization in America, I'd say this book is the perfect healing balm which needs to be liberally applied to the faithful — especially by those mature elders who are willing and interested in extending an olive branch of peace toward other wisdom traditions.

Are you brave enough to set aside your preconceived notions about God and explore the divine mystery through other people's eyes?

If so, be prepared to be swept into a new, spacious spiritual world that will enable you to love all Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists with a new level of passion — and inspire you to love your God and your neighbor (both believing and unbelieving).

Overcoming The “Cocoon Effect”

“Christianity has created a great problem by presenting itself as a completing ideology rather than a way to see all things. Rather than revealing God in new and surprising places, too often it has led us to confine God to our place.” -Richard Rohr, *What Mystics Know*

Most people are busy during their first half of life establishing a strong foundational belief system and a healthy ego. So when encountering others who hold a different spiritual perspective we're often quick to defend our brand of faith, which typically has been passed on to us by our family, friends or community.

The exclusive claims of Christianity, coupled with surrounding ourselves with only our own, can create what Barbara calls a “cocoon effect,” which often prevents us from thinking very much about the faith of others. As she puts it, “It is difficult 48

to discern what made the confrontations between Christians any different than the confrontations between Christians and people of other faiths.”

When Christians speak in language loaded with exclusivity we are violating the most basic command of loving our neighbor, Brown emphasizes. “Something all great religions have in common; the truth of their teaching hinges on how people treat one another.” Both Old and New Testament verses command believers to “love the strangers” among us. Jesus said “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” (John 10:16).

Part of the problem Christians have, according to Ms. Brown, is knowing when to read the Bible literally, and when to read it literarily — that is, figuratively instead of word for word. Most Fundamentalist Christians have been taught that all of the Bible is to be read literally — which is only one school of interpretation. Barbara sums it up, “Every sacred text has human readers...we interpret to meet our own needs.”

“At one end of the Biblical interpretation spectrum is the literal approach, “which seeks accuracy and factuality,” Brian McLaren explains in *The Great Spiritual Migration*, “while at the other end is a literary approach, which looks for artistry and meaning. Both can have great value, depending upon the text and context.”

The best way to overcome the “cocoon effect” is to rub shoulders with others from different spiritual perspectives than our own. We need to listen carefully to how we sound to strangers. “We need partners from outside of our in-groups to keep telling how we sound,” admits Ms. Brown.

So, What’s To Envy?

“Just as the church had discerned the mystery of Christ hidden in the religious history of Israel, so it was possible and necessary to discover the face of Christ hidden within all the religions of the world.” -Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses of Our Time*

While walking down the path of spiritual inclusion with her college students, Barbara does an excellent job in living up to the book’s title “Holy Envy,” by naming many of the specific spiritual practices of the world’s major religions she and her students have grown to envy — and why.

For example, Barbara found herself experiencing ‘holy envy’ when visiting a Hindu temple as the leaders blessed her and her students regardless of their beliefs. “Why was my religion so much less generous?” she asked herself. “Who had

convinced us that faith was a competitive sport...and that only one team could win for all eternity.”

When examining Hinduism she was struck by the freedom that followers have to find their own path to divine union via scholarship, service, meditation and devotion. She was shocked to discover that Hindus love both Jesus and Vishnu as well as the similarity of resurrection and reincarnation which both require life, death and rebirth.

When we look for truth in others we can often understand our own truth better says Ms. Brown. “I learn from other spiritual leaders, but I come home to Jesus at night.”

When visiting a Buddhist temple, Barbara embraced the teaching of the founder, Siddhartha Gautma, who never claimed to be God, but rather said he was an enlightened man who found the path to peace by understanding that life is never pain-free, but that suffering can be overcome. She envied the Buddhist’s confidence in their own ability to decide their path, rather than always looking to others for direction.

Conclusion – “Nothing Left to Envy”

“The world’s great spiritual traditions and human attempts to comprehend the Divine into two basic categories; ‘Ascending’ and ‘Descending’ — seeking God above the earth and seeking God in the earth. It is in this union of Ascending and Descending currents that harmony is found...it seems that only when both are united that both can be saved...If you and I do not contribute to this union, then it is very possible we will destroy the only Earth we have and forfeit the only Heaven we might otherwise embrace.” -Ken Wilbur, *A Brief History of Everything*

Ken Wilber views religion as having two primary functions. The first is to create “meaning for the separate self.” The second and mature function of religion is to help individuals transcend that very self. Moving from the small “false” self to the larger “True” self. This resonates with the message of “Holy Envy.”

Ms. Brown concludes that the meteoric rise of the spiritual category ‘Spiritual, but not Religious’... “Reflects the fact that for many people it is easier than trying to reconcile strict Christian teachings (such as heaven, hell, creation, evolution, etc.) with their affection for non-Christian friends.”

“Holy envy,” she writes, “alerts me to things in other religions that have become neglected in my own... such as the inclusiveness of Hinduism, the non-violence of Buddhism, the prayer life of Islam and the intentional Sabbath of Judaism.” 50

“It is past time for a Copernican revolution in theology, in which God assumes the prime place at the center and Christianity joins the orbit of the great religions circling around.” I like that image. And I love this book, along with her other 3 books, *Altar in the World*, *Leaving Church*, and *Learning to Walk in the Darkness*.

Barbara concludes her compelling call to interspirituality with a story of her visit to Church of the Common Ground, which meets outdoors at a park in Atlanta. The service began with an interrupter/heckler who later quieted down and listened as the church humbly gathered in a circle and celebrated communion. She suddenly found herself... “where the church meets the world... with no walls or ceiling”... leaving her with “nothing left to envy.”

Holy Envy

(Based on the book *Holy Envy*)

Imagine seeing all with new eyes full of love,
Embracing union with all - starting with God.
Ending the trajectory of violence and division,
Changing the flow of history toward compassion.

Holy envy - finding God in the faith of others,
Holy envy - seeing God's face in one another,
Holy envy - listening for the genuine in each other.

Welcome to the inter-spiritual awakening,
The end of exclusion, dawning full inclusion.
A new worldview where East meets West,
A new recognition that The Golden Rule is best.

Holy envy - finding God in the faith of others,
Holy envy - seeing God's face in one another,
Holy envy - listening for the genuine in each other.

I now see universal truth and everything belongs,
I can see why dividing and Judging is so wrong.
Let us now agree to place God at the very center,
May we both ascend and descend into godly union.

Holy envy - finding God in the faith of others,
Holy envy - seeing God's face in one another,
Holy envy - listening for the genuine in each other.