

SMALL  
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# *Holy Envy*

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FINDING GOD *in the* FAITH *of* OTHERS

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## INTRODUCTION: THE SMALLER PICTURE

1. How would you describe your own relationship with religion to an outsider?
2. Barbara Brown Taylor recounts how, in the process of teaching world religions, she fell in love with each one (p. 1). How have encounters with other faith traditions changed your relationship with your own?
3. Where have you found sources of living water beyond the boundaries of your tradition (p. 5)?
4. Taylor is left with some important questions to answer in the process of reckoning with other religions: “Is there a sovereign God who rules the cosmos or not? Can someone else die on a cross for my sins or not? . . . Could I still learn something by taking the opposite answers seriously? Could my faith be improved by the faith of others?” (p. 8). Which of her questions is most compelling for you to answer, and why?

## CHAPTER 1: RELIGION 101

1. Do you come from a religion with exclusive truth claims? How do you make sense of these claims in light of the truth claims of other religions?

2. How do you think your tradition's truth claims affect outsiders (p. 18)? What is the basis for your answer to that question?
3. One of Taylor's students drops her class, because he had hoped that she would point out what was wrong with other religions and why Christianity was right (p. 19). How do you respond to this story and why?
4. One of the questions that Taylor's religion course regularly provokes for her students is, "How did I come to believe what I believe?" (p. 23). How would you answer that question? How does your answer affect your confidence in your own religion?

## CHAPTER 2: VISHNU'S ALMONDS

1. After witnessing Padmavathi's bath (p. 37), Taylor writes that "I have never seen anything like this mix of the sensual and the sacred, with no fireproof ditch between the two." How do you feel about the sensual and the sacred being so intertwined?
2. What are the tensions and overlaps between being culturally respectful and participating in a religion you don't follow? Discuss Taylor's questions: "Can anyone who visits a sacred space remain an observer, or does one become a participant simply by entering in? Does

taking part in the ritual of another faith automatically make you a traitor to your own?" (pp. 43–44).

### CHAPTER 3: WAVE NOT OCEAN

1. Try this exercise with your group: Write on an index card what you mean when you say “God” without signing your name. Then gather all the cards and take turns reading them aloud. Talk about the similarities and differences you hear and what they say about your various faith traditions (p. 45).
2. Taylor quotes author Paul Knitter, who wrote, “The more deeply one sinks into one’s own religious truth, the more broadly one can appreciate and learn from other truths” (p. 48). Can you describe any instances where you’ve had this experience in your own life? How has maturing in your own faith helped you to appreciate other faiths?

### CHAPTER 4: HOLY ENVY

1. There were at least three obvious routes of action Taylor could have taken when finding other religions attractive: convert to one of them, make a quilt of spiritual bits and pieces from all of them with none at the center, or let her attraction to other teachings transform her love for her own (pp. 63–64). She chooses the third as the best op-

- tion for her. Do you know anyone who has chosen one of the others? What choice sounds best to you?
2. What parts of other religious traditions do you envy? How could that envy be turned into what Taylor describes as “holy envy” (an appreciation of other religions that deepens one’s own)?
  3. Taylor laments the Christian doctrine of original sin, saying, “It drops the bar on being human so low that you have to wonder why we don’t all just stay in bed” (p. 74). At the same time, many Christians embrace this doctrine because it makes clear that humans cannot work their way to salvation, but must accept salvation as a gift of sheer grace. How important is original sin to your understanding of faith?
  4. Rather than see religions as competing for the one and only place of truth, Taylor presents a view where “absolute truth moves to the center of the system, leaving people of good faith with meaningful perceptions of that truth from their own orbits” (p. 78). She also shares the metaphor of religions as different rivers having the same heavenly source. How do you respond to these images and why?

## CHAPTER 5: THE NEAREST NEIGHBORS

1. A Jewish psychiatrist writes Taylor about the latent “language of contempt” he has found in her writing

- (p. 87), in which she reinforces the idea that God's covenant with Abraham has been supplanted by a new covenant with Christ. Is that idea new or old to you? How might a compelling challenge to that idea change your reading of the New Testament?
2. Taylor contrasts the Christian emphasis on right religious belief with the Jewish emphasis on right religious practice. What is your answer to the question on page 95, "How does being Christian change the way you live?" If "Christian" does not describe you, choose another word that does, such as "Buddhist," "Humanist" or "Spiritual but not Religious."

## CHAPTER 6: DISOWNING GOD

1. As Taylor speaks to a broader audience on religious issues, some questions come to the fore. Read the questions on pages 102 to 103. Which is most urgent for you to answer, and why?
2. Taylor persists in reading the Bible because "it is my baseline in matters of faith—something far older than I am, with a great deal more experience in what it means to be both human and divine. . . . I return to the Book—not to find a solution, but to remember how many possibilities there are" (p. 106). How do you approach the sacred text of your tradition? How has your

approach changed, and—if you still read it—why do you persist?

3. Taylor recounts some stories of religious strangers in the Bible—from King Melchizedek in Genesis to the wise magi of the Gospels—who enter the sacred story of a particular tradition in order to deliver a blessing and then leave it again without ever becoming a member of the tradition (pp. 108–110). What do you think of that idea? How does it challenge common understandings of how God works?
4. What is your response to Taylor’s interpretation from Jesus’s first sermon at Nazareth (pp. 111–17)—that no tradition has privileged access to the divine and no religion owns God? How would accepting this conclusion change how you practice your faith or how you relate to other faiths?

## CHAPTER 7: THE SHADOW-BEARERS

1. On page 129, Taylor says that September 11 changed the way Americans view Islam, resulting in what President Bush called “a quiet, unyielding anger” (p. 129), that continues today. What fears do you have around terrorism? Where do they come from? How do they affect your perception of everyday Muslims?

2. Referencing author Jonathan Sacks, Taylor identifies “groupishness” as the source of our violence, more than religion or secularism (p. 131). Where do you see “groupishness” in your own community? How can we maintain a positive sense of group identity without needing to diminish the value of those who do not belong to it?

## CHAPTER 8: FAILING CHRISTIANITY

1. Have you ever looked at your faith from the outside, as Taylor did, through the eyes of historians and religion scholars? What has that lens revealed to you?
2. Taylor describes learning from people of other faiths about “how bruised they were by Christian evangelism,” especially since their consensus was that “Christian evangelists are not very good listeners” (p. 148). What is your experience of Christian evangelists? Have you ever witnessed Christian evangelism done in a way that seemed respectful to others and their faiths? Who do you think is the best judge of whether evangelism is respectful or not?
3. What do you think of Taylor’s idea that Jesus alone is the arbiter of salvation in his name” and that his saying about being the way, the truth, and the life “puts him in charge of deciding who is on his way or not” (p. 153)? Is that comforting or discomfoting, and why?



4. At the end of the chapter, Taylor tells the story of how she refrained from taking Communion one time because it was painful to her Jewish companion (pp. 157–59). She asks, “Am I really meant to choose between [Jesus] and my neighbors of other faiths?” What do you think of her decision in that instance? What does it mean to you to love your neighbors of other faiths?

## CHAPTER 9: BORN AGAIN

1. In Taylor’s rereading of the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the night (pp. 163–68), being “born again” means acknowledging all that you don’t know about God and being freed by that unknowing. Are there things you were once certain of that you don’t know about anymore? How does Taylor’s understanding of being “born again” compare to yours?
2. Taylor suggests we should keep our ways of thinking and speaking of God fluid, lest our theologies become “*theolatries*—things we worship instead of God, because we cannot get God to hold still long enough to pin God down” (p. 171). How important is orthodoxy (correct theology) to you?
3. Though Taylor has moved away from the traditional center of Christianity, she has learned from friends in other religions to see the good in her tradition

(pp. 171–73). If you have experienced a similar shift in your religious perspective, what new views do you have of your tradition?

## CHAPTER 10: DIVINE DIVERSITY

1. In Taylor's reading of the Tower of Babel story, God decided it would be *good* for humans to speak a diversity of languages, slow down, and work harder to understand one another (p. 181). Though it feels safer to go back to Babel, where everyone speaks the same language, Taylor believes it's important to live in spaces of diversity even if they include the potential for misunderstanding and require more intentional communication. How do you feel about living among differences and trying to have conversations with people who think differently than you? What kinds of diversity are valued in your community and what kinds are not?
2. Do you think it's possible to have a real conversation with someone if you are unwilling to entertain the idea that you could be wrong, or at the very least the idea that there could be more than one way to see a given issue? How willing are you, at this point, to take on new perspectives (religious, political, or otherwise) and surrender the primacy of your own?

3. Taylor admits at the end of the chapter that having holy envy, and entertaining a variety of religious visions, might require a level of maturity in one's faith tradition. At what point in the religious journey is it appropriate to begin reimagining the stories of your tradition? If you are in a position of passing your faith onto children or those new to the faith, how do you give them truths to hold on to without being rigid about those truths?

#### CHAPTER 11: THE GOD YOU DIDN'T MAKE UP

1. Think about your own spirituality. How do you filter what new information to include in your picture of God? Whom do you trust to speak to your faith, whom don't you trust, and why? When your spirituality has shifted, what has caused those shifts?
2. Taylor concludes that what can help most in getting beyond her own limited perspective is not trying to be proficient in all religious languages (p. 190) or giving up speaking her own (p. 193), but being authentically human in how she talks and listens to others. What does it mean to you to be authentically human? Who are your best role models?
3. As difficult as it may be to love those who look, think, and act differently from us, Taylor notes that it is perhaps the best way to get close to the God we didn't make

up (p. 195). Can you share an instance where you were called upon to show kindness to a stranger, or when you were a stranger who received surprising kindness from someone else? What did these experiences teach you about your own humanity, and about God?

## CHAPTER 12: THE FINAL EXAM

1. Taylor discovers that her relationships with complex, surprising religious strangers have benefited her faith more than religious certainty and solid ground (p. 213). In your own spiritual journey, what kind of certainty has remained important to you and what kind has not? How do you feel about standing on changing ground? What relationships have shaken your spiritual foundations and what has the outcome been for you?
2. Taylor's baseline for becoming Christian is "to extend the same care to every human being that I wish for myself, to treat every human being as if he or she were Jesus in disguise" (p. 214). What are your thoughts about this? What is your definition of what it means to be Christian?

## EPILOGUE: CHURCH OF THE COMMON GROUND

1. Though Taylor spent half a lifetime near the center of her religion, she now finds herself on what Richard

- Rohr calls “the edge of the inside” (p. 217). Where are you in relation to the center of your tradition? What benefits and drawbacks do you experience in this position? How do you feel about where you are?
2. When Taylor visits the Church of the Common Ground, which meets outdoors in a public park in Atlanta, the bishop’s words strike a new chord with her: “As different as we are, whatever concerns we bring, we are all one” (p. 222). Having chewed on this book, what do the words “we are all one” mean to you? What do you affirm in them? What do you question in them?
  3. How has this book challenged your understandings of what it means to practice true religion, to be a good person, to be on the right spiritual path? Has anything changed about how you relate to people of other religious traditions or how you practice your own faith? If so, what do you think you will do about it?