My holy envy of other faith traditions

How my attraction to other religions deepened my love of my own

by Barbara Brown Taylor in the March 13, 2019 issue

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Early in my tenure at Piedmont College, a student who had taken my Religion 101 class decided to become a Jew. As anyone who has tried it knows, this is not the same as deciding to become a Christian. Judaism actively discourages converts, since a person does not need to be Jewish in order to be righteous in God's eyes. Why take on so many extra responsibilities if you are fine with God the way you are?

The student, whom I will call Natalie, persisted. When the rabbi called Natalie by her new name, placed a large Torah scroll in her arms, and welcomed her to the Congregation Children of Israel, I sat there feeling very happy for her.

I also felt a little jumpy—not because Natalie had become a Jew, but because it was possible that Religion 101 had played a part in her decision and that was not in the course plan. I was focused on teaching the basics of five major world religions, not

helping students decide which one was right for them, yet that was clearly what a number of them were doing. Another student decided to be baptized for the first time after a class discussion on the difference between infant and believer's baptisms. Another got a tattoo of a yin-yang symbol on her forearm during the unit on Chinese traditions. When she showed it to me after class one day, she asked if I could steer her toward the nearest Taoist church.

These students were the exception, not the rule, but they reminded me that there is more than one way to respond to religious pluralism. The Christian majority may have been raised to ignore the truth claims of other religions, but others are strongly affected by what they learn. Some, like Natalie, make a conscious decision to convert, either to another world faith or to another branch of the one they grew up in.

These days, when I offer students a list of options they may check to describe their religious identity ("Mark as many as apply"), the "spiritual but not religious" option gets a lot of checks. I know how critical some of my religious friends are about this designation, which they characterize as shallow, self-serving, and socially disengaged. Since that describes more than a few people who are still warming pews, it is hard to understand why the spiritual seeking of one group is less honorable than the other. Is it because one helps pay the utility bills and the other does not?

Based on the young people I know best, more and more of them identify as spiritual but not religious because it is easier than trying to reconcile the teachings of their faith with their affection for their non-Christian friends. According to the teachings they have received in church, their friends are not all right the way they are. Unless they become Christian, God will not allow them to enter heaven. Instead, they will roast in hell for all eternity for refusing to accept Jesus as their Lord. This does not make any more sense to some young people than the teaching that they must choose between the account of creation in the Bible and the one their biology teacher has laid out for them.

These are only a few of the serious questions they have that no one in their churches wants to talk about with them. They want more from their communities of faith than a new music leader, a youth pledge card, and the assurance that they can wear jeans to church. So of course they stop doodling in class when they discover a religion that does not require belief in God or one whose followers believe God is

equally present to those of all faiths. The idea that karma might explain the apparent injustice of the universe appeals to some of them, along with the idea that right action might be more important to God than right belief.

All of these teachings caught my attention when I first learned them too. They were as yet unimagined ways of viewing the relationship between the human and the divine, and once I encountered them, I could not let them go. It took me a while to understand that finding these things attractive did not mean it was time for me to convert or—conversely—to start making a quilt of spiritual bits and pieces with no strong center. The third possibility was to let my attraction to other teachings transform my love for my own.

Holy envy alerted me to things in another religion that were neglected in my own.

The first time I heard the phrase “holy envy” I knew it was an improvement over the plain old envy I felt while studying other faiths. When the Jewish Sabbath came up in class, I wanted it. Why did Christians ever let it go? When we watched a film of the God-intoxicated Sufis spinning, I wanted that too. The best my tradition could offer me during worship was kneeling to pray and standing to sing. My spiritual covetousness extended to the inclusiveness of Hinduism, the nonviolence of Buddhism, the prayer life of Islam, and the sacred debate of Judaism. Of course this list is simplistic, idealistic, overgeneralized, and full of my own projections. It tells you as much about what I find wanting in my own tradition as it does about what I find desirable in another. This gets to the heart of the problem: with plain old envy, my own tradition always comes up wanting.

The phrase “holy envy” can be traced back to a biblical scholar named Krister Stendahl. I remember him from my years at Yale Divinity School, when he was the dean of Harvard Divinity School—a tall, Scandinavian man with a stiff neck and a head of wavy hair. He was such a friend to the women students in his school, many of whom were not eligible for ordination in their churches at that time, that they called him “Sister Krister.” Several years after his tenure as dean was over, Stendahl was elected the bishop of Stockholm and returned home to Sweden. He had only been in place about a year when he became aware of mounting opposition to a new Mormon temple opening in the summer of 1985. At a press conference prior to the dedication of the building, Stendahl aimed to defuse tension by proposing three rules of religious understanding, which have by now made the rounds more often than any of his scholarly work on the apostle Paul. Here is the most common version

of what he said:

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.

No one is certain what he meant by number three, but Stendahl soon acted on it in ways that required holy courage. As a Lutheran, he found much to envy in the Mormon practice of vicarious baptism, by which a living Latter-day Saint chooses to be baptized on behalf of a person who has died without completing this requirement for entering God’s kingdom.

Since Lutherans have historically shied away from Catholic teachings about how the living might benefit the dead, Stendahl had nothing like vicarious baptism in his own tradition. Yet he saw value in it and proceeded to envy it across the fence.

Stendahl’s decision to stand with the Mormon minority in Stockholm was about more than his interest in the afterlife, however. “In the eyes of God, we are all minorities,” he told a reporter shortly before his death in 2008. “That’s a rude awakening for many Christians, who have never come to grips with the pluralism of the world.”

From my limited perspective in a small college classroom, I believe that increasing numbers of young Christians are coming to grips with pluralism—embracing it, even—though they are getting very little help from their elders as they think through what it means to be a person of faith in community with people of other (and no) faiths. 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.

An old story is told about Rabia of Basra, an eighth-century Sufi mystic who was seen running through the streets of her city one day carrying a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When someone asked her what she was doing, she said she wanted to burn down the rewards of paradise with the torch and put out the fires of hell with the water, because both blocked the way to God. “O, Allah,” Rabia prayed, “if I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise. But if I worship You for Your Own sake, grudge me not Your everlasting Beauty.”

In Christian tradition this comes under the heading of unconditional love, though it is usually understood as the kind of love God exercises toward humans instead of the other way around. Now, thanks to a Muslim mystic from Iraq, I have a new way of understanding what it means to love God unconditionally. Whenever I am tempted to act from fear of divine punishment or hope of divine reward, Rabia leans over from her religion into mine and empties a bucket of water on my head.

This, I believe, is how holy envy is meant to work. When students study the Five Pillars of Islam, they linger over the five daily prayers. “People actually stop what they are doing to pray five times a day? They do it wherever they are, even if other people can see them?” This astonishes students who may bow their heads before meals or kneel by their beds at night but who have never imagined what it would take to ask for time off from work to say their midday prayers or to unfurl a prayer rug at the stadium at sundown to say their evening ones. Devout Christians struggle with the fact that devout Muslims pray more than they do. They might not call it “holy envy,” but it leads more than a few of them to take their own prayer lives more seriously. A Christian student who has never heard of the season of Lent decides to try it this year. It will be her Ramadan, she says. A Muslim student who stopped praying when he came to college says he is getting an app for his phone that will go off five times a day. Maybe all he will do is turn it off, he says, but at least he will know what time it is.

Devout Christians may notice that devout Muslims are even more faithful in prayer.

The more I explored the concept of holy envy, the more kinds of religious envy I discovered—and not all of them holy. When I first began teaching Religion 101, my envy took the form of spiritual shoplifting. When I saw something I liked in another tradition, I helped myself: Tibetan singing bowls, Hindu deities, necklaces strung with Zuni fetishes, Muslim prayer rugs. I paid handsomely for all of these things. My desire to possess them stemmed from a genuine wish to draw closer to their original owners, but when I survey the objects on the windowsills in my office—a 19th-century spice box made of sterling silver once used for the Jewish prayer service that ends the Sabbath, a splendid wooden Buddha covered with gold leaf from an antique shop in Bangkok, a rare set of Muslim prayer beads from Morocco made from amber—I feel more than a little like a colonialist displaying her loot. It is not that I lack respect for the objects; it is that I have separated them from their religious roots for display purposes.

I justify my ongoing possession of them for teaching purposes, but I still remember the look on one Muslim student's face when he saw me pack a study Qur'an into my book bag under a menorah and a statue of Shiva. I would not have thought twice about doing the same thing with a study Bible, but that was my mistake. A Bible is not a Qur'an, and it was a mistake to assume that a Muslim's attitude toward his holy book was the same as my attitude toward mine. Let the other define herself, Stendahl cautioned those who engage the faith of others. "Don't think you know the other without listening."

Although my fingers still get a little twitchy when I see a really nice Tibetan temple bell in a shop window, I have learned that possessing an artifact is not the same as possessing the spiritual reality it represents. The jewels of the world's great religions have their own sovereignty. I may look, but I may not poach. As much as I admire the brilliance of the Jewish Talmud—especially the way it hallows sacred debate across the centuries—I cannot have it. It belongs to those in whose lifeblood it was written. As much as my soul leans toward the whirling of the Sufis who bring heaven to earth with their ethereal spinning, I cannot have that either. It belongs to those who have devoted their lives to the love of Allah.

Another kind of holy envy alerts me to things in other religions that have become neglected in my own, though they may go by different names. Buddhist meditation is not the same as Christian centering prayer, but my envy of the discipline required by the former increases my desire to put more effort into the latter. A Muslim goes to Mecca for different reasons than I go to Bethlehem or Canterbury, but my envy of the Hajj causes me to wonder why I make my pilgrimages alone. What do Muslims know about the power of community that has all but withered from my neglect? Surely this is what Stendahl meant by his second rule: "Don't compare your best to their worst." Instead, compare your best to their best, so that each becomes better in its own distinct way.

There is, however, a troubling form of holy envy that keeps me up at night, since it leads me farther from home than I really want to go. This happens when I envy something in another tradition that is so foreign to my own, or so absent from it, that taking it seriously means questioning one of my basic assumptions about how divine reality works. This happened when I encountered the Buddhist teaching that human beings are responsible for our own destiny, with no divine mediator to erase our mistakes or offer us a free pass to salvation. Our words and actions have natural consequences, which affect everyone around us. Some lead to joy and some to

sorrow, but no one else can handle them for us. They are ours to handle—and to learn from—as best we are able. When the Buddha himself lay dying, his disciples asked him how they could possibly go on without him. Who would guide them after he was gone? “Be lamps unto yourselves,” he told them. “Rely on yourselves, and do not rely on external help. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp.”

This was so close to something Jesus once said to his disciples—“You are the light of the world”—that I was warmed by the parallel sayings. But I did not find anything in my tradition that came close to the Buddhist view of human ability and responsibility. In the Christian view, human beings are incapable of saving ourselves from our sins. Our only hope is to accept the miraculous intervention of God’s only Son, who can take away the consequences of our actions if we let him. In the Episcopal communion service and in the prayers of the people, we praise Jesus as “our only Mediator and Advocate.”

Through long habits of devotion, I learned to love that language along with the restriction and dependence embedded in it, which made the Buddha’s dying words all the more startling to me. After I read them, I could not stop thinking about what it might mean to praise Jesus for lighting the fire in me and then to step into the full adulthood of being a lamp unto myself, burning in a community of others who accepted that responsibility with me.

We must decide how to treat those of other faiths, or our worst impulses will prevail.

A closely related holy envy flared up when I discovered that neither Judaism nor Islam includes a doctrine of original sin. In the orthodox view of my own tradition, human beings are born with a congenital flaw due to Adam and Eve’s original sin in the Garden of Eden. While different kinds of Christians posit different kinds of remedies—baptism, personal reform, universal reconciliation—the stain of sin is never entirely eradicated, since it shows up in each generation anew. On days when the entire human race and I seem to be at our worst, this comes as something of a comfort. Sin is in our DNA. At the same time, it drops the bar on being human so low that you have to wonder why we don’t all just stay in bed. Weren’t Adam and Eve also made in the image of God? What happened to that part of the story?

Jews and Muslims recognize the reality of sin without viewing it as an inherent flaw in human design. In their religious worldviews, God created humans exactly the way we are, with freedom to choose good or evil. God tipped the scales by offering divine

guidance in the form of sacred texts and prophets, but no one can do our choosing for us. In this view, Abraham bargains with God on the people's behalf, and Moses pleads their case, Muhammad shows them what perfect submission to God looks like, but God leaves people free to decide how they will respond. No one dooms them to sin, and no one can take their sin away. Humans have everything they need to choose what is good.

Once, after Friday prayer at a *masjid*, a Christian student asked how Muslims are forgiven for their sins without Jesus. "Muslims confess their sins directly to God," the imam explained, "and God directly forgives them." If we had been in a synagogue instead of a *masjid*, a rabbi would have said the same thing—an answer that might have given any Christian pause. *Well, that makes sense.* But if it makes sense, then what sense does one make of Jesus' death on the cross?

Holy envy is not a prerequisite for exploring answers to such questions. All one needs is the willingness to enter another religious world and engage those who live there. After you have allowed the other to define herself, listening carefully to all the ways in which she is not you, it is hard to overlook the fact that you and she are made of the same basic material. "You are dust, and to dust you shall return."

There are dozens of ways to imagine the relationship of the world's great faiths. Raimon Panikkar, a renowned scholar of religion who was also a Catholic priest, spent a lot of time thinking about what it might mean for Christians to focus on contributing to the world's faiths instead of dominating them. Born in Spain to a Catholic mother and a Hindu father, he used the analogy of the world's great rivers. The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges all nourish the lives of those who live along their banks, he said. One flows through Israel, one flows through Rome, and one flows through India. If he were writing today he might have added the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, which flow through Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.

None of these rivers meet on earth, Panikkar said, though they do meet in the heavens, where water from each of them condenses into clouds that rain down on all the mortals of the earth. In the same way, he said, the religions of the world remain distinct and unmixed on earth—but "they meet once transformed into vapor, once metamorphosed into Spirit," which then is poured out in innumerable tongues.

Eventually all people of faith must decide how they will think about and respond to people of other (and no) faiths. Otherwise we will be left at the mercy of our worst

impulses when push comes to shove and our fear deadens us to the best teachings of our religions.

Once, at the end of a field trip to the Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam, the imam ended his meeting with students by saying, “Our deepest desire is not that you become Muslim, but that you become the best Christian, the best Jew, the best person you can be. In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Thank you for coming.” Then he was gone, leaving me with a fresh case of holy envy.

I could do that, I thought. I could speak from the heart of my faith, wishing others well at the heart of theirs—including those who had no name for what got them through the night. It might mean taking down some fences, but turf was no longer the reigning metaphor. I was not imagining two separate yards with neighbors leaning over a shared boundary. I was imagining a single reservoir of living water, with two people looking into it. One might have been a Muslim and the other a Christian, but there was nothing in their faces to tell me that. All I saw were two human beings looking into deep waters that did not belong to either of them, reflecting back to them the truth that they were not alone.