# *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*Introduction

* **Opening Prayer***Dear Lord, open our minds to your inspiration and insight as we begin our study of our brothers and sisters from various faith backgrounds. In your Son’s name we pray. Amen.*
* **Author Background – Barbara Brown Taylor**
	+ *Born in 1951*
	+ *Emory undergrad, Yale Divinity School*
	+ *1984 – ordained as an Episcopal priest*
	+ *Professor at Piedmont College in Demorest, GA (northeast corner of the state)*
	+ *1996 – Baylor named her as one of the 12 most effective preachers in the English-speaking world*
	+ *2014 – Time Magazine named her as one of the* [*100 most influential people in the world*](https://time.com/collection-post/70780/barbara-brown-taylor-2014-time-100/)
	+ *Authored 15 books, several on the NY Times bestsellers list (including Holy Envy)*
* **Video -** [**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fK3dMzTlrk0**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fK3dMzTlrk0) **[3:58] (find it in YouTube by searching for “oprah steep taylor”)**
	+ What is your standard Lenten practice?
	+ “3 things I would love to happen today”
		- How many things do you typically put on your daily to-do list?
	+ What advice would you give to your younger self?
* **Introduction**
	+ How would you describe your own relationship with religion to an outsider?
	+ Where have you found spiritual food beyond the boundaries of your church tradition?
	+ Taylor found a new home in the classroom
		- In what ways have you found a new home during your life?
	+ Youth are experiencing more religious diversity than ever
		- Traditional churches have discovered that changing the music and hiring millennials isn’t bringing the young people back. Do you see this as a matter of:
			* Needing to change in different ways to bring them back
			* Letting them go and create new expressions of their faith
			* Go with them leaving tradition behind
			* Something else?
	+ “…the same Spirit that called me into the church called me out again, to learn the difference between the living water and the well.”
		- What does Taylor mean by this difference?
	+ *Taylor was “born again within [her] own tradition” by envying other faith traditions*
	+ Taylor talks about trusting the window of her classroom more than the window of her phone [the Internet]
		- In what ways does our society trust our phones more than our firsthand human experience?
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

References for material:

* [*Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*](https://www.harpercollins.com/products/holy-envy-barbara-brown-taylor?variant=32117746139170)*;* [*Study Guide*](https://barbarabrowntaylor.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/HolyEnvy_SGG_4p.pdf)(page numbers from the text are noted in brackets [#] preceding quotes or relevant passages; note that e-book page numbers can differ from hardcopy books, but should be close)

*Italics* imply important points or example answers the leader can convey

Chapter 1

* **Opening Prayer**

*Open our ears, O God, to what you would have us hear. Through your holy Word, convict us, challenge us, and comfort us. Open our minds to new insights and fresh perspectives about our questions. Open our hearts to the moving of your Spirit. In the name of Jesus Christ your Son. Amen.*

* **Chapter 1 - Religion 101**
	+ When you grew up, did you think of world religions as something that happened somewhere else in the world?
		- *1/3 of African slaves were Muslim*
		- *Mosques were built in ND, MI, and IN between 1915-1925*
		- *Hindu temple was built in CA in 1906*
		- *Buddhists participated in the Gold Rush of mid-1800s*
		- *First synagogue was built in NY in 1664*
		- *1820 – largest Jewish community in North America was in SC*
	+ Review the story of the student who confronted Taylor about her approach
		- In what ways do you experience the need for believers to be right and others to be wrong?
		- How does this affect outsiders who are not part of either faith tradition being debated?
		- *Taylor learned two important things from the confrontation:*
			* *Her practice of Christianity was pretty specialized*
			* *She needed a better answer to the question of why someone like him should take a World Religions course that highlighted the best and not the worst*
				+ How might you answer that question for her?
	+ “…religious illiteracy is a luxury they [students] can no longer afford.”
		- In what ways do we suffer from this illiteracy?
		- In what ways do our children require this literacy?
	+ *“No one should have to start from scratch with questions like…”*
		- *Where did we come from?*
		- *Why do bad things happen to good people?*
		- *Who is my neighbor?*
		- *Where do we go from here?*
		- How might hearing the answers to these questions from other religions help you?
			* Do you think it would impact your faith and relationship with God?
	+ How would you answer the question “How did I come to believe what I believe?”
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 2

* **Opening Prayer***Heavenly Father, open our hearts and minds that we might have a better understanding of and empathy for our Hindu brethren. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* **Chapter 2 – Vishnu’s Almonds**
	+ Give an example of a great field trip you can remember from school
		- In what ways are field trips more effective than the classroom?
	+ Talk about a time when you’ve visited a non-Christian place of worship
		- Was it during a service?
		- Using your senses, what did you see, hear, smell, touch, and taste?
	+ [27] *“The God of your understanding” is just that – limited to your understanding*
	+ *Taylor makes these observations:*
		- *Hindu temple – deity names didn’t match traditional ones (Vishnu->Balaji, etc.)*
		- *Discovery that there are as many “denominations” of Hinduism as Christianity*
		- *“Hinduism is the great psychologist of the religions…It knows that people are different and offers them different paths to union with the divine.”*
	+ How does this help you to embrace Christian denominationalism?
	+ Dr. Acharya said loving Jesus doesn’t mean she can’t love Lord Vishnu.
		- Does it work in the reverse?
	+ Dr. Acharya lamented her grandchildren were at risk of *losing* their religion.
		- Do Protestants share similar lament?
	+ How do you think Hindu polytheists view our belief in the Trinity?
		- How is it the same? How is it different?
	+ [34] “It is not enough for you to think you know what physicists mean when they say something…You need to know what *they* think they mean when they say it.”
		- How do you interpret this?
		- In what ways do you find yourself falling into this trap?
	+ Shiva Nataraja, Lord of the Dance – dance of creation and destruction
		- What God-inflicted destruction appears in the Bible?  *Examples: Tower of Babel, Flood, Sodom & Gomorrah, Exodus, Jesus’ teachings (grain of wheat dying and bearing fruit, “destroy this Temple…and in three days”)*
		- How might these “dances” be seen as similar to Shiva’s?
	+ How might a crucifix be viewed by a non-Christian?
	+ How do you view a crucifix with Jesus present on the cross when you see it in a Catholic church?
	+ 1 Corinthians 8:10 – “For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols?”
		- Would you see your participation in such a Hindu experience as a threat to your children’s faith?
	+ [44] “…who could blame a neighbor for sensing that Christian love was mostly charitable condescension?”
		- In what ways do you see Christian love as charitable condescension?
	+ Taylor’s final project for her class was to design an interfaith chapel for Piedmont College
		- If you were to design such a chapel, what would it be like?
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 3

* **Opening Prayer***Heavenly Father, open our hearts and minds that we might have a better understanding of and empathy for our Buddhist brethren. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* **Chapter 3 – Wave Not Ocean**
	+ Activity: What do you mean when you say “God”?
		- Optional Exercise:
			* Have class create a word cloud using menti.com and their smart phones
			* Share screen showing mentimeter.com
			* Reflections on the results?
	+ Buddha’s teachings don’t mention capital-G God
	+ Buddhists believe that all that happens to us is a natural consequence of our actions, and no one can relieve us of those consequences
		- In what ways might you find this comforting?
		- In what ways might you find this troubling?
	+ Buddhism is about the teachings of a man rather than about God
		- Can you have a religion without God?
	+ [47] *Differences between Jesus and Buddha:*
		- *Jesus vs. Buddha showing how to achieve salvation*
		- *Sin vs. ignorance*
		- *Eternal life vs. impermanent self*
		- How is it possible that both can “work for” Barbara Brown Taylor (or us?)
	+ [47] Paul Knitter is quoted as saying “The more deeply one sinks into one’s own religious truth, the more broadly one can appreciate and learn from other truths.”
		- What does he mean?
		- How has maturing in your own faith helped you to better appreciate other faiths?
	+ Taylor finds the silence of the meditation bench more healing than reading Psalms
		- In what ways can you relate?
	+ Taylor describes her class’s Tibetan Buddhist monastery field trip
		- *Tucked into an office building*
		- *Participants wear street clothes rather than robes*
			* In what ways do your clothes affect your worship experience?
		- *Message by the monk*
			* [54] *“our unhappiness is a product of our own minds…While we spin our wheels trying to control things beyond our control, we ignore the one thing that is within our power to change: our way of seeing things.”*
			* What’s your reaction to this message?
		- [55] “In the Buddhist way, belief is optional” *but in the Christian way, it seems essential. In a sense, this is another way of saying that belief is just a product of the way we see things.*
			* In what ways could optional belief be attractive?
			* In what ways could it be a deterrent?
	+ [56] Taylor talks about Jesus as more the “question man” than the “answer man”
		- Why do you think Jesus responded so frequently with questions rather than answers?
		- *Taylor proposes an answer – You learn more about God by thinking about the questions and acting on them rather than listening to someone else’s answers*
			* Does this make sense to you?
	+ [58] Experience of a Jewish man talking to the Dalai Lama – “Judaism and Buddhism are very much alike. You should learn more about both and become a better Jew.”
		- Can you imagine a pastor, priest, or Pope giving the same advice?
	+ Gandhi’s “evangelism of the rose” – a rose spreads its fragrance and lets people respond as they will
		- What can we learn from this?
	+ Do you feel the same guilt/fear as Taylor when she started to smell the roses of other religions, based on what was instilled in her childhood Christian upbringing?
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 4

* **Opening Prayer***Lord God, help me to speak from the heart of my faith, wishing others well at the heart of theirs. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* **Chapter 4 – Holy Envy**
	+ [61] “Judaism actively discourages converts, since a person does not need to be Jewish in order to be righteous in God’s eyes.”
		- What does it mean to you to be “righteous”? *morally right or justifiable*
		- Do you believe you can be righteous in God’s eyes without being a Christian?
	+ Were you “raised to ignore the trust claims of other religions”?
	+ How do you react to the concept of being “spiritual but not religious”?
		- Young people gravitate here because it helps reconcile their faith with the beliefs of their friends
		- In what ways might this compromise or enhance faith?
	+ [63] *3 choices Taylor could have made in response to her attraction to other teachings:*
		- *Convert*
		- *Make a spiritual quilt, drawing from each with none at the center*
		- *Transform her love for her own*
		- *[4th not mentioned] Repress the attraction*
		- Can you think of anyone who has gone down one of the first two roads?
		Which choice makes the most sense?
	+ 3 rules of religious understanding proposed by biblical scholar Krister Stendahl
		1. Ask adherents and not enemies of the religion
		2. Compare the best to the best, not their worst to your best
		3. Leave room for holy envy
		- How are we guilty of the first two?
		- What do you think Stendahl meant by the third thing?
	+ [66] Christians haven’t come to grips with pluralism.
		- Do you think the strength of our faith is attributed to its large numbers, or do we have greater numbers because of our strong faith?
	+ [66] “If God isn’t partial to Christianity, then what am I doing here?”
		- How would you respond to Taylor’s “final exam” question for Christians?
		- “…the wish to secure divine favoritism strikes me as the worst possible reason to practice any religion”
			* How do you react to that?
	+ How have you allowed other religious traditions/practices/teachings influence your life?
	+ [74] Taylor discusses 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”
		- How important is the concept of original sin to you?
		- Jews and Muslims don’t consider sin a part of original human design.
			* Are they missing something or are we?
	+ [77] *Robert Farrar Capon, Episcopal priest, writes “human beings who wish to understand the ways of God are like oysters lying at the bottom of a tide pool, wishing to understand the ways of a prima ballerina.”*
	+ [78] *Rather than see religions as competing for the one truth, Taylor proposes that “absolute truth moves to the center of the system, leaving people of good faith with meaningful perceptions of that truth from their own orbits.” She also uses the metaphor of religions as different rivers having the same heavenly source.*
		- How do you respond to these images?
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 5

* **Opening Prayer***Heavenly Father, open our hearts and minds that we might have a better understanding of and empathy for our Jewish brethren. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* **Chapter 4 – The Nearest Neighbors**
	+ [81] “By the end of the first century, the religion of Jesus had become the religion about him, so that even he might have been alarmed by what his followers had done.”
		- How has Christianity then and now become more *about* Jesus than *of* Jesus?
	+ Taylor was similarly troubled by hatefulness toward Jews by Christian scripture and tradition. Later in the chapter, she says that “anti-Judaism was baked into the gospel.” She also discusses a Jewish psychiatrist calling her out for using “language of contempt” in her sermons (e.g., “burden of the law” and “righteousness of the Pharisees”)
		- What elements of scripture do you see fueling this hatefulness? *Examples:*
			* *Jews are blamed for Jesus’ crucifixion*
			* *Jews rejected Jesus’ preaching*
			* *Jews failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah*
			* *Pharisees are portrayed as legalistic*
		- What historical events are evidence of this hatred?
		- What things do you see in today’s society that counteract this hatred?
			* Are they secular or rooted in Christianity?
	+ Taylor talks about celebrities identifying themselves as “secular Jews” embracing Jewish culture but not Jewish religion. She says it’s a difficult thing for Christians to understand.
		- How might you react to the concept of a “secular Christian”?
	+ How might you compare Jews dismissing Jesus as the Jewish messiah with Christians dismissing Sun Myung Moon and David Koresh as the Christian messiah?
	+ Taylor compares the invisibility of her faith to the visibility of an orthodox Jew.
		- In what ways is your faith visible or invisible?
	+ In Taylor’s class’s field trip to the synagogue, the rabbi invites them to stand around as she reads the Torah
		- In what ways do we solicit similar participation by visitors in our services?
		- How might this work?
	+ Taylor talks about her student falling into the trap of drawing conclusions about Jewish faith based on one visit.
		- Could you see yourself rejecting Christianity if your only exposure to it was a single church service?
		- *This reinforces the need for deeper understanding and experience without judgment*
	+ Jews identify more with how one lives rather than what one believes.
		- Do you agree it’s the other way around with Christians?
	+ *Items on our “checklist” date to a series of 90 essays from 1910-1915, republished as a complete set by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles*
		- *Virgin birth*
		- *Bible is inerrant word of God*
		- *Jesus is the only way to God*
	+ More important than *belief* questions - “How does being Christian change the way you live?”
		- *Student quote – “Saying you love God is one thing; changing the way you eat for God is something else altogether.”*
	+ In what ways might you have holy envy for Jewish practices related to diet?
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 6

* **Opening Prayer***.
Lord, we thank you for the blessing of scripture, and pray that you open our ears to your Holy Word in new ways today and each time we encounter it. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* **Chapter 6 – Disowning God**
	+ [101] [traveling around the country giving lectures to those undergoing religious reformations] “The faith that had sustained them through their middle years had gotten as tight as their old clothes”
		- In what ways do you feel like your faith has gotten tight?
	+ [102-103] Read the questions on pages 102 to 103. Which is most urgent for you to answer, and why?
	+ *Taylor talks about hearing hymns and scripture differently, paying attention to “shadow language”*
		- *“Crown him with many crowns… Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own”*
		- *Men first, divisive (church vs. world, light vs. dark), glorifying suffering*
		- *Taylor says we should be on the lookout*
		- In what ways do you find yourself more aware of these shadow messages as you read scripture?
	+ The Bible offers Taylor “ballast.”
		- How has your approach changed to reading scripture over your lifetime?
	+ [106] We interpret scripture to meet our own needs. “There is nothing wrong with this unless we deny that we are doing it”
		- Are Bible literalists still *interpreting* scripture? How?
	+ Scripture is full of “righteous gentiles” who are strangers to the faith and who temporarily sojourn within the story (e.g., Jesus’ interactions with Samaritans and the Roman centurion)
		- What message do you draw from this?
		- Do we tend to “baptize them as anonymous Christians” and make them one of us?
			* How is this doing the message a disservice?
	+ Read Matthew 8:5-13
		- Do you find this message harsh?
		- Why did Jesus feel compelled to put things in this way?
	+ Who are the “strangers” in our society today whom scripture is calling us to love?
	+ [114-117] *Taylor recounts Luke’s story of Jesus reading scripture in the Nazareth synagogue – “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”*
		- Read Luke 8:14-30
		- *People didn’t get upset about Jesus saying this after reading*
		- *They got mad when he called them out for not welcoming him (“no prophet is welcome in the prophet’s hometown” -and- for citing scripture where God favored religious strangers (widow in Sidon, Naaman the Syrian)*
		- Did you have the same original interpretation as Taylor?
	+ Jesus reminds those in Nazareth that God does not belong to them
		- In what ways do we act like God belongs to us as Christians?
	+ *Taylor compares two verses:*
		- *John 14:6 – “No one comes to the Father except through me.”*
		- *John 12:44 – “Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me”*
		- *Many favor the first. Taylor wonders if our favorite verses are the ones that make us feel most right.*
		- What are your favorite verses? Do you think you might have chosen them because they made you feel right or because they validated you as a Christian?
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 7

* **Opening Prayer***.
Heavenly Father, open our hearts and minds that we might have a better understanding of and empathy for our Muslim brethren. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* **Chapter 7 – The Shadow-Bearers**
	+ [101] [traveling around the country giving lectures to those undergoing religious reformations] “The faith that had sustained them through their middle years had gotten as tight as their old clothes”
	+ What images come up when you hear the words “Muslim” and “Islam”?
	+ Review largest populations of Islam (ref: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country>):

| **Country/Region**  | **Total Population**  | **Muslim Population**  | **Muslim percentage of total population**  | **Percentage of world (%)**  | **Sources**  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  [Pakistan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Pakistan)  | 249,600,000  | 240,760,000  | 96.5  | 11.1  | [[248]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-248)[[249]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-249)  |
|  [Indonesia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Indonesia)  | 275,000,000  | 236,000,000  | 86.7  | 12.7  | [[175]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-175)  |
|  [India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_India)  | 1,370,000,000  | 200,000,000  | 14.6  | 10.9  | [[174]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-174)  |
|  [Bangladesh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Bangladesh)  | 165,200,000  | 150,800,000  | 91.0  | 9.2  | [[61]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-61)[[62]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-62)  |
|  [Nigeria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Nigeria)  | 200,000,000  | 95,000,000–97,000,000  | 47-49  | 5.3  | [[39]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-pewmuslim7-39)[[244]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-244)  |
|  [Egypt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Egypt)  | 95,000,000  | 85,000,000–90,000,000  | 90–94.7  | 4.9  | [[127]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-127)[[128]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-128)  |
|  [Iran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Iran)  | 83,000,000  | 82,500,000  | 99.4  | 4.6  | [[176]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-176)  |
|  [Turkey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Turkey)  | 86,000,000  | 78,000,000 - 84,400,000  | 89-98  | 4.6  | [[286]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-287)[[287]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-288)  |
|  [Algeria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Algeria)  | 44,178,884  | 43,737,096  | 99  | 2.7  | [[43]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-43)  |
|  [Sudan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Sudan)  | 40,825,770  | 38,585,777  | 96  | 1.9  | [[272]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-273)  |
|  [Iraq](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Iraq)  | 40,462,701  | 38,439,566–39,653,447  | 95-98  | 1.9  | [[177]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-177)  |
|  [Afghanistan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Afghanistan)  | 37,135,000  | 37,025,000  | 99.7  | 2.0  | [[40]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-40)  |
|  [Morocco](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Morocco)  | 36,738,229  | 36,370,847  | 99  | 4.1  | [[237]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-237)  |
|  [Ethiopia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Ethiopia)  | 110,871,031  | 34,702,632  | 31.3  | 1.8  | [[139]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country#cite_note-139)  |
|  [Saudi Arabia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Saudi_Arabia)  | 34,220,000  | 31,535,000  | 96.2  | 1.8  |  |

* + What do you think is at the heart of the association of Islam with terrorism?
	+ Why might people you know object to courses that might shine favorably on Islam?
	+ [123] “It is hard to argue with worst-case scenarios” – for example, snap arguments made against gun control (‘the only person in the room with a gun will be the criminal’)
		- Taylor writes that mortal fear of dying in a traffic accident doesn’t spill over to others in the way that fear of a terrorist does.
			* In what ways do you agree/disagree with this statement?
		- How do you counteract this fearmongering of terrorism?
	+ *Taylor takes her class on a field trip to the mosque, and had several takeaways:*
		- *Muhammad’s teaching that “the ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr”*
		- *Hijackers’ actions contradicted their claims to be Muslims*
		- *Lineage of Muslim scholars over the centuries are to be trusted over personal readings and ambitions that prompt bloodshed*
		- *Partner with other faiths to resist violence*
	+ Do you know any Muslims who were living in the U.S. at the time of 9/11?
		- How do you imagine they were feeling?
	+ How has the pain of 9/11 softened or intensified over time?
	+ [130] Jonathan Sacks in *Not in God’s Name* claims that “It is not our religion that makes us violent. Instead, it is our penchant for violence that gives rise to our religious impulse.” He further claims that we bond best when we confront a common enemy, and this groupishness fuels violence.
		- What’s your reaction to this?
		- Where do you see groupishness in America?
	+ Muslims revere Jesus as prophet and messiah (leader/savior of a particular group/cause)
		- Do you think Muslim antipathy toward U.S. has anything to do with Christianity?
	+ Consider what it’s like to be a Muslim in the U.S.
		- How is life different for them?
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 8

* **Opening Prayer***.
Heavenly Father, help us to better understand this religion we claim. Grant us the insight that comes from scripture, reason, experience, and tradition, and help us to see ourselves and our relationship with your Son in a new way. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* **Chapter 8 – Failing Christianity**
	+ How do you think you’d do on a college-level quiz on Christianity?
		- Do you think you’d do better or worse today than when you were in high school? Why?
	+ [141] “My religion professor was not interested in teaching me what to think. He wanted to teach me *how* to think, which was so different from what I expected that I kept signing up for religion courses until I had enough to declare a major”
		- What teachers in your past took this approach?
		- In what ways and courses of study do you find it most effective? Least effective?
	+ As she prepared for teaching her first college-level religion course, Taylor describes letting go of her belief in the unity of the Christian church
		- Do you see us as a unified or disjoint church?
			* Provide examples of each
		- How important do you think this unity is to Jesus?
	+ [148] Taylor discusses the negative influence Christian evangelism has had on people of other faiths.
		- In what ways have you seen Christian evangelism “done right”?
		- In what ways have you seen it done wrong?
		- How do you determine right vs. wrong here?
	+ [149] Taylor quotes the Nobel Prize-winning daughter of missionaries, Pearl Buck, when referring to missionaries in China: “No, they were there, these missionaries, to fulfill some spiritual need of their own.”
		- If you’ve had personal experience with missionaries, what do you believe to be their true motivation?
	+ [152] What does Taylor mean when she writes “If your life does not speak, your footnotes will have limited impact”?
	+ At the end of the chapter, Taylor describes her experience at a spirituality conference, sharing the stage with an orthodox Jew.
		- Talk about Taylor’s choice to forgo Communion at the end of the combined Shabbat and Communion services.
			* How would you respond to the question she posed to herself – “What have I just done?”
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 9

* **Opening Prayer***.
Heavenly Father, shine a light on our current Christian practices, and help us to better understand what being born again means to us today. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* **Chapter 9 – Born Again**
	+ Have a volunteer read John 3:1-10
	+ Taylor says that she’s always felt bad for Nicodemus – that he comes with questions and doesn’t get answers.
		- Can you relate?
	+ How do you interpret Jesus’ directive to be “born again”?
	+ Reread John 3:5-8
	+ Taylor highlights that the “mother” in this second birth is the Spirit
		- Does this help with your interpretation of being “born again”?
	+ What does Jesus mean in verse 8 (“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit”)?
	+ Taylor wonders whether Jesus’ purpose is not to enlighten Nicodemus, but to “endarken him, establishing the limits of what humans can know about God and what we cannot”?
		- Do you think God might point out what we don’t know to remind us of our non-divinity?
	+ In what ways have you become “endarkened”? Are there things you were once certain of that you don’t know about anymore?
	+ Taylor gained respect for *agnostics* because they are simply admitting that they don’t know.
		- In what ways might you respect an agnostic’s point of view?
	+ [168] *Maya Angelou’s reaction to people telling her they were Christian – “Already? You already got it?”*
	+ 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?
	+ Taylor mentions the UMC symbol of the flame licking up the side of a cross
		- What are your current thoughts on the denomination’s symbol?
	+ Of the Trinity, the Spirit seems the hardest to visualize.
		- How does Taylor’s proposition of referring to the Spirit as a *She* help?
	+ [172] Do you agree with Taylor’s Muslim friend that solving the Israel/Palestine problem is up to Christians (because we are the peacemakers)?
	+ What have you learned about your faith from people who do not share it?
	+ [173] *“Once you have given up knowing who is right, it is easy to see neighbors everywhere you look.”*
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 10

* **Opening Prayer***.
Dear Lord, today we ask that you open our minds and hearts to new perspectives inspired by those around us and your Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* **Chapter 10 – Divine Diversity**
	+ Taylor experienced holy envy by going through a period of doubt in which she discarded previous theological baggage and reimagined her own tradition.
		- Have you gone through such a period in your life - perhaps a period when your faith was tested?
		- Do you think such a period is helpful, or perhaps even essential, in growing your faith?
	+ [175] “It is a great thing to see something familiar from an unfamiliar angle for the first time.”
		- Blind **Spot Eye Test**
			1. Close your left eye.
			2. Fully stretch out your left arm in front of you, palm facing away.
			3. Make a partial fist with your left hand, with your index finger pointing upwards and your thumb pointing to the right (making an ‘L’).
			4. Fixate your vision on the top of your left index finger.
			5. Stretch out your right arm and mirror your left hand. Let the tips of your thumbs touch.
			6. Without moving your gaze from the top of your left index finger, observe your right index finger.
		- Caused by the optic nerve obscuring part of the retina. Your brain compensates for this blind spot with information from both eyes.
		- What are the root causes of our spiritual blind spots? What keeps us from seeing the whole picture?
	+ Genesis 11:1-9 – The Tower of Babel
		- Read *NRSV*
			* How have you traditionally interpreted this scripture?
		- Read *The Message*
			* What’s different? Focus on what God says in verse 6.
		- What are the cultural advantages of diversity?
		- What are the religious advantages of diversity?
	+ Jewish midrash [textural interpretation] – creating new stories that stand beside (not replace) existing Bible stories
		- Have any of you read or otherwise witnessed a Jewish midrash? *All the time – retelling of stories, especially in art, poetry, and song*
	+ Taylor presents a midrash that reinforces the concept of God promoting diversity
		- Because of their frustration with trying to understand differences in language, people gathered with others of the same language
		- Sounds like the recent nationalist trends
			* Is our world just in a cycle of nationalism vs. globalism, or are the scales tipping more permanently toward nationalism?
			* Is this nationalism fighting or supporting God’s will?
	+ [182] Jonathan Sacks – “The greatest single antidote to violence is *conversation*.”
		- How do you see this playing out in current national and global events?
	+ [182] “It [Babel / own church] is a beautiful place to rest, but it is not the best place to stay.”
		- Can you think of an example of a place you stayed that was not “restful” due to its differences from your normal experience?
		- In what ways was this place better than your more restful place?
	+ [184] Taylor poses the question – “What is the story you are working on that doesn’t have an ending yet?”
		- How might you answer this question?
	+ At what stage in your faith journey does it make most sense to go through a holy envy period where you are entertaining a variety of religious visions? Is there a time when it doesn’t make sense?
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 11

* **Opening Prayer***.
Heavenly Father, we thank you for our personal expressions of spirituality and our uniquely individual ways of encountering you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* **Chapter 11 – The God You Didn’t Make Up**
	+ What does *spirituality* mean to you?
		- “…the active pursuit of the God you didn’t make up”
			* How does/doesn’t this work for you?
	+ Do you agree with Taylor that your view of God is your own creation?
		- From where does your view of God originate?
	+ After studying all the world’s religions, Taylor finds herself still drawn to the teachings that she likes.
		- Is faith a matter of determining what you like?
	+ How important is it to have broad knowledge of other faiths?
	+ Taylor says that to empathize with a bereaved person is more about being “authentically human” than to try to know and emulate their culture
		- What does it mean to be “authentically human”
		- Do you think this concept is common across faiths and cultures?
		- Is Christianity “quite excellent,” as Taylor claims, to speak of what it means to be authentically human?
	+ [194] Where do you find it hardest to “love God in the person standing right in front of you”?
	+ What is your reaction to Taylor’s modification of the Golden Rule… “Do unto others as *they* would have you do unto them (instead of thinking they are just like you)”?
	+ Jesus tells several of those he heals that *their faith* has made them well, as opposed to *their faith in Him*.
		- What’s the difference?
	+ Who are the strangers in your life?
		- What are ways in which you can show them love?
	+ Share an instance in which you were either:
		- a stranger and someone showed kindness to you
		- called upon to show kindness to a stranger
	+ Jonathan Sacks says, “The supreme religious challenge is to see God’s image in one who is not in our image.”
		- In whom do you see God’s image who is not in your image?
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 12 & Epilogue

* **Opening Prayer***.
Dear Father, we thank you for the witness and perspectives of all our brethren from the world’s diverse religions. We pray that our increased understanding of them strengthen our personal faith in you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
* **Chapter 12 – The Final Exam**
	+ What were your favorite and least favorite final exams?
	+ [204] “When they leave my class, it is the relationships they remember.”
		- Is that your experience with school?
	+ A student observes that she wishes Christians were more compassionate and didn’t feel like correcting everyone else.
		- In what ways does this ring true or false for you?
	+ Why might Taylor have handed out bumper stickers prior to the unit on Islam saying, “Don’t Believe Everything You Think”?
	+ Taylor tries to see God in Christians who disappoint her just as hard as she does for people of other or no faiths.
		- Do you find it harder to see God in Christians who disappoint you?
	+ [207] Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor, not to love our religion
		- How do we fall into the trap of loving our religion, even at the expense of our neighbor?
	+ [208] “If it is God you want, look for the light and not the diamond. There are so many facets, and yet the light is not in any of them. Their beauty lies in their ability to reflect what is beyond them.”
		- How do you interpret this?
	+ God surprises both the sheep and the goats in whom he chooses. In the end, it has nothing to do with what they believe, but how they have treated the least important people in their lives.
		- How do you reconcile this with Ephesians 2:8 – “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God”?
		- [213] Why can’t people be part sheep and part goats? Is that perhaps the answer to the previous question?
	+ Taylor says that her relationships with complex religious strangers have benefited her faith more than grounded religious practice/certainty.
		- What types of religious certainty remain important to you?
	+ Who are the religious strangers in your life from whom you have benefited, perhaps from shaking up your grounded beliefs?
	+ Other reflections?
* **Epilogue**
	+ Taylor describes being on “the edge of the inside” of the circle of her faith tradition.
		- If you were to place yourself in a faith tradition circle, where would you be?
		- How do you feel about that?
	+ How has this book challenged your religious practices and traditions?
	+ Other reflections?
* **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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