

Holy Envy

Chapter 10: Divine Diversity

“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”—Jesus of Nazareth (John 14:2)

“One of the greatest gifts that holy envy has given me is the ability to reimagine my own tradition. I would like to tell you that it is the product of gaining wisdom, insight, and perspective through the study of other religions, but that would not be true. Instead, it is the product of losing my way, doubting my convictions, interrogating my religious language, and tossing many of my favorite accessories overboard when the air started leaking out of my theological life raft.”

Jonathan Sacks taught Taylor how important it is for people of faith to “make space for difference at the heart of our tradition.” He said that common human values are great, but when “groupishness sets in and we are looking for excuses to wipe each other out, we need stories from deep within our tradition that show us another way.” He believed this to be especially important for monotheists, “whose focus on one God can so easily lead us to believe we are the only apple of God’s eye. What we need instead are new understandings—each of us based on our own scriptures and traditions—that the unity of the Creator is expressed in the diversity of creation.”

Reinterpretation of the story of the Tower of Babel: “For reasons no one may ever understand, God decided it would be helpful for people to be different instead of the same, if only because it would slow us down a little bit.”

Jonathan Sacks: “The single greatest antidote to violence is conversation, speaking our fears, listening to the fears of others, and in that sharing of vulnerabilities discovering the genesis of hope.”

“There are plenty of times I want to go back to Babel, where everyone speaks the same language and we are all on the same page. My own church feels that way sometimes, like a safe city with a tower that has a cross on top, making a name for its builders by how far it reaches into the heavens. It is a beautiful place to rest, but it is not the best place to stay. If God’s revised will for Babel is any indication, then the clamorous world outside is the best place for human beings to stay—to stay on the move, that is, entering into conversations with neighbors who are as different from one another as they can be.”

Why take the risk of conversation if the chances of agreement are so slim? “My sole hope is to give God one more chance to work on me, by coming to me in the guise of a stranger who does not speak my language, asking me questions I cannot answer, until I become so interested in what can and cannot be said that the stranger and I go off to find lunch, leaving our half-built tower standing silent in the sand.”

Questions for Discussion

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?

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?

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?