

Holy Envy

Chapter 11: The God You Didn't Make Up

“Spirituality is the active pursuit of the God you didn't make up.”

“I could not argue with the part about making God up. All you have to do is dust my Bible for fingerprints to find my favorite parts and the ignored ones—or follow my tracks on Google, or check my book purchases on Amazon, or poll my friends. I stick very close to sources that support my view of reality.”

“My view of God is my own creation, made from bits and pieces of received or perceived knowledge about divine reality that I hope or fear are true. My mosaic has my fingerprints all over it. Ask anyone what she means when she says ‘God’ and chances are that you will learn a lot more about the person than you will learn about God.”

“So how does one get beyond that? How do any of us pursue the God we did not make up?”

“There is no way to overstate the importance of what I have learned from studying the world's great religions, but here is what I noticed: I was still drawn to the teachings that I liked.”

“I make my own mosaic. Whether the resources at my disposal come only from my own tradition or from a wide array of traditions, my ego stays very active selecting the ones that please me most.”

“But if you stop and think about it, what better way could there be for me to actively pursue the God I did not make up—the one I cannot see—than to try for even twelve seconds to love these brothers and sisters whom I *can* see. What better way to shatter my custom-made divine mosaic than to accept that these fundamentally irritating and sometimes frightening people are also made in the image of God?”

This is the “monumental challenge of living with religious difference—and more centrally than that—of living with anyone who does not happen to be me. ‘Love God in the person standing right in front of you,’ the Jesus of my understanding says, ‘or forget the whole thing, because if you cannot do that, then you are just going to keep making shit up.’”

According to Jonathan Sacks, “The supreme religious challenge is to see God’s image in one who is not in our image.”

“If he is right, then the stranger—the one who does not look, think, or act like the rest of us—may offer our best chance at seeing past our own reflections in the mirror to the God we did not make up.”

“I think it is no mistake that the New Testament never offers a physical description of Jesus...All scripture says is that when he appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, few of them recognized him at first. Others thought he was a fisherman. A couple thought he was a stranger on the road. Even when most of his disciples recognized him, a few still doubted.”

“That seems just right to me. How wonderful of him to come back undercover, so that even the people who knew him best had to look, then look again, before they got the crawly feeling that they had seen him somewhere before. It was the perfect setup for people who wanted to know what made him different from anyone else they had met: his ability to reflect their humanity back to them, both familiar and strange, so that they never got tired of searching each other’s faces for some sign of him.”

Questions for Discussion

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?

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?

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?