

Holy Envy

Chapter 12: The Final Exam

“So what do we do? This is our final question. Whether religion is, for us, a good word or bad; whether (if on balance it is a good word) we side with a single religious tradition or to some degree open our arms to all: How do we comport ourselves in a pluralistic world that is riven by ideologies, some sacred, some profane? We listen.”—Huston Smith

Final exam question: “A respected religious scholar named Krister Stendahl one formulated three rules for religious understanding that include ‘Make room for holy envy.’ What has inspired ‘holy envy’ in you this semester?”

For Taylor, teaching Religion 101 “is a repeating loop that has inspired my best efforts for years, which means my education has loops in it too...I have done it so often that I do not need the sheet music anymore. I can play it by heart. But that is the treble line of the course, which starts over again every fifteen weeks. The bass line is something else altogether—a low, insistent strain that does not stop when the class ends but is there when I wake up in the morning and is still there when I go to sleep at night. It is the sound of my own unknowing going forward like an underground current headed toward an ocean for which I have no name.”

“Teaching the course has enriched my soul in so many ways. It has also shaken many of my foundations.”

“Spending extended amounts of time inside other religious worldviews has loosened the screws on my own, which is beginning to seem like a good thing. Disowning God has been a great help to me. Owning my distinct view of God has helped me understand it much better. Although I can see the places where religious truth claims collide, this does not bother me as much as it could. I am far more interested in how people live than in what they believe.”

“The only clear line I draw these days is this: when my religion tries to come between me and my neighbor, I will choose my neighbor. That self-canceling feature of my religion is one of the things I like best about it. Jesus never commanded me to love my religion.”

“If your faith depends on being God’s only child, then the discovery that there are others can lead you to decide that someone must be wrong—or that everyone belongs, which means that no religion, including yours, is the entire ocean.”

Matthew 25: “If you know this passage as well as I do, you may have to slow down and count all of the king’s disguises as they go by: hungry person, strange person, naked person, sick person, imprisoned person. How many did you get right? I do not know why so many people skip over the strange person, but they do. Yet there it is. One of the way the Son of Man smuggles himself into our midst is by showing up as a stranger in need of welcome. *Welcome* is the king’s solution to the problem of the stranger. Always has been, always will be.”

“I asked God for religious certainty, and God gave me relationships instead. I asked for solid ground, and God gave me human beings instead—strange, funny, compelling, complicated human beings—who keep puncturing my stereotypes, challenging my ideas, and upsetting my ideas about God, so that they are always under construction.”

“It helps to remember that neither the sheep nor the goats in Matthew’s parable knew which one they were. They were all on the sacred way of unknowing. The sheep were as surprised to learn they had done something *right* as the goats were to learn they had done something *wrong*. None of them recognized the king in their midst...the only thing that set them apart, in the end, was that half of them had made a habit of treating everyone they met with kindness and respect—even the ungrateful ones, even the ones that scared them—and that made all the difference.”

Questions for Discussion

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?

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?