

Tim Madigan*

Book One

***Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*
by Barbara Brown Taylor**

HarperOne, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishing, 2019
ISBN 978-0062406569

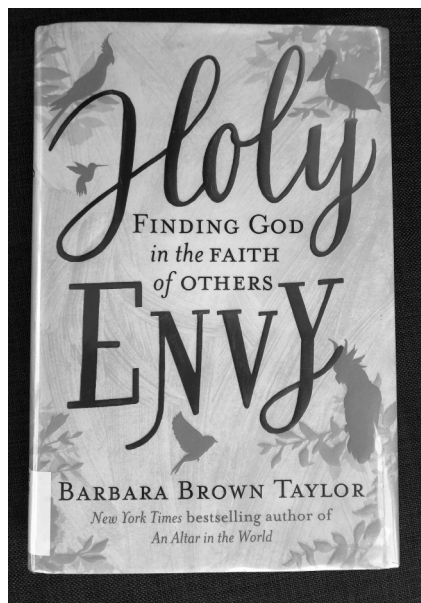
Holy Envy is the latest book by Taylor, and like her other titles, it offers quite a bit of memoir woven into the point she is making, that viewing her own Christianity through the lens of other religions has shaped her continual growth as a spiritual person. After a long career as a pastor in a small church, Taylor made the switch to teaching religious studies at a small liberal arts college in the state of Georgia, not too far from Atlanta.

More familiar with Christian doctrine, she was assigned a “Religions of the World” course for freshmen, requiring her to start with some research on her own. Like all good teachers, her course evolved over

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* Supervising Librarian, Solano County Library, California, USA. M.A. Copy Editor of *Madang*.

time. She started out focusing on the textbook descriptions and the geographical birthplaces of the worlds' great religions. She soon discovered that a better way to make these religions relevant to her students, most of whom knew only the basics of non-Christian religions (or worse, mostly misinformation about other religions) was to take advantage of the growing faith communities in the United States.



Since Atlanta, the major metropolitan area of the South, was only a two-hour drive from the college, she made field trips with the students to a mosque, and Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindu temples each semester, where the class was invited to participate in worship.

Taylor takes the book title from the writings of Krister Stendahl who proposed three rules for religious understanding (pg. 65):

- 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.

Taylor confesses to holy envy is commenting on how neither Islam nor Judaism include original sin in their doctrines, so mankind is not born flawed with this inherited sin, but we must choose the path of good or evil of our own free will.

Taylor sees multiple benefits to her students from exploring other religions. They think more deeply about their current beliefs, they learn how to explain their beliefs with people who do not share them, exploration brings them in contact with faiths that may have irreconcilable differences, and they engage these differences without the need to defeat or destroy those with different beliefs (76).

Throughout the book Taylor emphasizes empathy and understanding at a deeper level, and she acknowledges how difficult this can be. She gives language as an example, recognizing that it is not feasible for most of us to learn multiple languages, but concludes that acting in an “authentically human” manner is what’s needed to cross religious and cultural boundaries. Many parables from Jesus involve religious strangers, as do those in the Torah. “In my religious language, there is no loving God without loving other human beings—or, as a disciple named John said more forcefully in one of his letters, “Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen”” (194).

Book Two

Why Religion? A Personal Story by Elaine Pagels

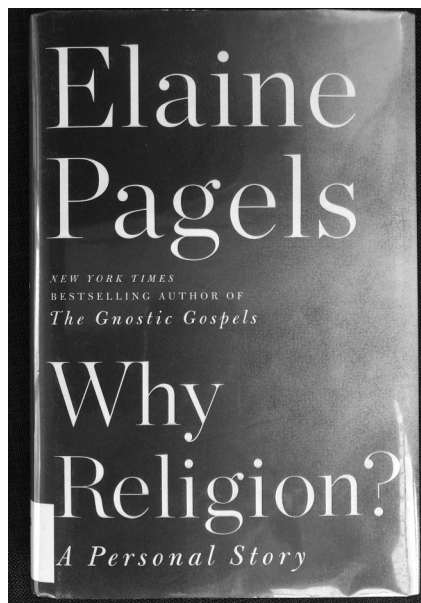
Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers 2018
ISBN 978-0-06236853-9

A professor at Princeton University, Elaine Pagels is well known

and most famous for *The Gnostic Gospels*, a book written for a non-academic audience based on her translations of the codices written in Coptic found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. *Why Religion* is a very personal book, discussing the difficulties she had growing up in a non-religious family and her own personal search for the divine. She came of age in the 1960s, a very different time in America, as young men she knew died in

Vietnam and academic life was vastly different than now. Stanford had no religion department, and her letter of rejection from the PhD program at Harvard stated the reason for her rejection was that she was a woman, and Harvard had found that women invariably did not finish the program. She was told she could attend the following year if she was really serious.

Once at Harvard, Pagels was one of the few people in the world to have access to the Nag Hammadi artifacts, which coupled with the Dead Sea Scrolls, were changing the way the world viewed biblical times, and are in conflict with New Testament teachings. There is still a fair amount of controversy today. Pagels touches on these texts here, but her other books go into more detail, instead focusing on a more personal attraction. "What I love about sources like the Gospel of Thomas is that they open up far more than a single path (33)." Pagels



writes and sums up the appeal of the Gnostic findings to her succinctly: “Many people raised, even nominally, as I was, within Christian culture find Christianity’s traditional exclusion of anything outside its boundaries too confining. And while finding truth for ourselves is difficult, often elusive, some of us can’t avoid the challenge: instead, we dive in!” (183)

The most powerful chapters of the book deal with Pagels’ personal loss. She describes in detail the death of her young son to illness, and the accidental death of her husband soon after in a very painful, truthful manner. Stating that it took her 25 years to write, she grapples with her faith as she shares the stories with her audience.

Book Three

How the Bible Actually Works **by Peter Enns**

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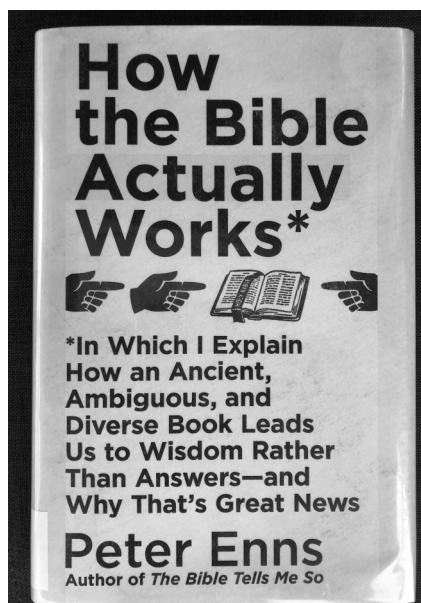
This title and subtitles to Enns’ other works says a lot about his point of view to *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our “Correct” Beliefs* and *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It*. The subtitle to his most current book works as a synopsis: *How the Bible Actually Works: In Which I Explain How an Ancient, Ambiguous, and Diverse Book Leads Us to Wisdom Rather Than Answers—and Why That’s Great*

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Enns leads with his analysis that while we should not read the Bible literally, it should be read, but in a more open-ended frame of mind due to three characteristics—the Bible is ancient, ambiguous and diverse. The Bible is ancient, written in a different culture and time. A time when slavery was the norm, for instance, making it difficult to follow as a word-for-word proscription for behavior

in contemporary times. The Bible is ambiguous, and lacking details for clear boundaries for day-to-day modern living. The Bible is diverse in that many conflicting and points of view are espoused, instead of a clarifying singular perspective—a natural result of a tome having many authors. “When reading the Bible for spiritual guidance, we find we are usually left to work things out for ourselves at the end of the day. This isn’t a drawback or problem. This is by design (8).”

Enns calls the Bible a book of wisdom rather than a set of rules to live by, leading to spiritual maturity. “Rulebook answers are distant and passive, but wisdom is intimate and learned through experience (12).” Seeking wisdom is the goal of reading both the Old Testament and the New. Enns sees wisdom in Proverbs 8 as the vehicle to make God accessible to us here and now (42). The parables of Jesus, are akin to Proverbs, frequently open to interpretation, ambiguous and offering



opportunity for wisdom if we put them into action in our own lives (200).

Enns writing style is extremely conversational. It is written with humor strewn throughout and is intended for a lay audience. The result is a very approachable book that clearly communicates its thesis.