ALSO BY BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

Leaving Church
An Altar in the World
Learning to Walk in the Dark

Holy Envy

FINDING GOD *in the* FAITH *of* OTHERS

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For
Ray Cleere, who hired me,
James Mellichamp, who retired me,
and Timothy Lytle, my closest ally all along

Introduction: The Smaller Picture

What do they know of England, who only England know?

RUDYARD KIPLING

The book in your hands is a small window on a large subject. Set at a private liberal arts college in the foothills of the Appalachians, it is the story of a Christian minister who lost her way in the church and found a new home in the classroom, where the course she taught most often was not Introduction to the New Testament, Church History, or Christian Theology, but Religions of the World. As soon as she recovered from the shock of meeting God in so many new hats, she fell for every religion she taught. When she taught Judaism, she wanted to be a rabbi. When she taught Buddhism, she wanted to be a monk. It was only when she taught Christianity that the fire sputtered, because her religion looked so different once she saw it lined up with the others. She always promised her students that studying other faiths would not make them lose their own. Then she lost hers, or at least the one she started out with. This is the story of how that happened and what happened next.

It is my story, but it is also the story of a generation of young Americans who are growing up with more religious diversity

than their parents or grandparents did and who are still trying to decide whether this is a good thing or a bad thing. The Christians among them can sense the anxiety in their churches, where changing the music and hiring more millennial pastors have not brought the young people back. Will the Christianity they know best survive, or is it dying of old age? Is the Holy Spirit at work in what is going on, or is a more sinister spirit at work?

Some are questioning whether the churches they grew up in have anything to offer them as they make their ways in a culture of many cultures with many views of truth, some of which make a great deal of sense to them. For those who counted on God to protect them from so many choices, it is as if the heavenly Father let go of their hand in a crowd one day and vanished into a sea of divine possibilities. I cannot protect the students in my classes from this any better than I can protect myself. Existential dizziness is one of the side effects of higher education, and it affects teachers too.

I came to the classroom through the back door. Parish ministry was my front-door job, the one I had been doing for fifteen years when the president of a nearby college called and said there was an opening for someone to teach religion. Would I be interested? I said no the first time. My only credentials were a master's degree in divinity, deep immersion in one Christian denomination, and a lifelong curiosity about religion. All three were do-it-myself projects, since my parents had worked hard to protect me from God while I was growing up. When I was fifteen, I found my father sitting cross-legged in the dining room meditating in front of a biofeedback machine. When I told my mother I wanted to be baptized, she told me I would get over it. Both had such a poor opinion of religion that they raised my two younger sisters and me to believe in higher education instead of

a higher power. We went to the library every week, not church. We read Shakespeare, not the Bible.

This left me little choice but to rebel by joining every church in driving distance as soon as I got my license. I was Baptist for a while, then Presbyterian. In college I was an evangelical Christian who hung out with Methodist seminarians during the week and ate supper with Catholics on Sunday nights. But casual conversations were not enough. I wanted thick books, smart teachers, hard theological nuts to crack. I became a religion major, finding more of what I was looking for in the classroom than I had ever found in church. When my adviser suggested seminary, I went, with no ambition but to learn as much as I could about the divine mysteries of the universe from anyone willing to teach me more. A divinity school sounded like exactly the right place.

My favorite professor was an Episcopal priest who taught New Testament with nothing but a tiny Greek edition open on the table in front of him. Above the table he was immaculate, dressed in a black clergy shirt with a starched linen collar and a worsted wool jacket that made him look like a duke. Under the table he wore laced-up leather hunting boots with mud on them, as if he had barely made it to class on time after an early morning walk in the woods. He showed up in my dreams. He also taught me a great deal about the New Testament. When he returned my essays, every page was marked with neatly circled numbers that matched his handwritten comments on lined pages at the back.

No one had ever paid such careful attention to my scholarship, so when I sought him out for spiritual guidance, I did exactly what he said: I began attending Mass at the Anglo-Catholic church downtown, where the divine mysteries on display ex-

ceeded anything in my prior experience. Though I quickly learned how to genuflect, chant psalms, and cross myself at the name of the Trinity, it took me a full year to work up the nerve to take Communion. I was too afraid I would do something that caused the Communion wafer to combust in my palm—reach out with the wrong hand, for instance, or fail to confess a particularly subtle sin. When I finally found the courage to approach the altar rail and nothing terrible happened, I became a confirmed Episcopalian. The combination of fixed prayer and free thought was exactly what I had been looking for. It was the last church I joined, and the one I still call home.

Ordination was out of the question at the time, since the Episcopal church did not admit women to the priesthood until after my graduation from divinity school. Several years later, when things changed, I completed all the requirements for receiving what are still called "holy orders." The bishop signed the papers, the date was set, and in due time I knelt before the altar of a beautiful church with gold crosses painted on the red ceiling, holding very still as my soon-to-be-fellow priests gathered around to lay their hands on my head.

In the years that followed I got as close to the divine mysteries as I could. I learned to perform baptisms, marriages, house blessings, and funerals. I learned how to name and handle all the ritual items involved in a Sunday celebration of Holy Communion: chalice, paten, flagon, ciborium, pall, corporal, purificator, lavabo. I learned which vestments to wear on which occasions and how to hold my hands when I pronounced the benediction at the end of every service. As an alchemist of God's grace, I was allowed into the most private rooms of people's lives, which gave me a more spacious heart. In exchange for these privileges I attended dozens of committee meetings, ordered reams of Sunday

school materials, proofread hundreds of church newsletters, and filed drawers full of annual reports.

It was a good life for a long time. Then it was not. Ask me what happened, and I can offer you a variety of stories that are all true: I was not a skilled leader; I was gone too much; I succumbed to compassion fatigue; I lost faith in the church. All these years later there is another story that sounds as true as any of those, which goes like this: the same Spirit that called me into the church called me out again, to learn the difference between the living water and the well. As surely as priesthood had given me a sturdy bucket for dipping into that well—and as clearly as I could smell the elemental depths of the divine mystery every time I bent over to draw some of it up—the well was not the water. It was a container and not the source. My Episcopal well, beloved as it was, was no longer enough for me to live on. I was dry as a bone.

That was when the president of the nearby college called to ask if I might be interested in teaching religion. I said yes this time. It was the best way I could think of to start learning again—about buckets and wells other than my own this time, about other ways of approaching the divine mystery that were strange enough to upset my parched equilibrium. In short order I traded an altar for a desk, a pulpit for a whiteboard, a parish register for a roll book, and a black clergy shirt for a green dress.

My first class met at 8:00 a.m. in a room that could have passed for an autopsy suite. The cinder-block walls were painted slick white. A poster of the periodic table sagged from the bulletin board. The trash can needed emptying. I lined up a row of religious symbols on my desk, so there would be something to point to when students asked if they were in the right room: a brass menorah, a large image of Shiva, a seated Buddha, a carved

wooden cross, and an open copy of the Qur'an on a stand. I plugged a boom box into the wall and put on a disc from the Fez Music Festival in Morocco, which drowned out the buzz from the fluorescent lights overhead.

Two dozen students drifted into the room over the next few minutes, pausing a moment at the door and then choosing their places at one of the long tables. One girl went straight to a chair in the front row, opened a three-ring binder to a blank page, and wrote "Religion 101" at the top. Two big guys in athletic jackets headed to the back row, where they sat eating tater tots and scrambled eggs covered with cheese out of Styrofoam boxes. At 8:05 a.m. I welcomed everyone to class, so high on first-day adrenaline that some of the students shrank back as I strode among them passing out syllabi.

The stapled sheets of paper looked so official that even I believed in them. They had required and recommended books on them. They had a bulleted list of learning outcomes. They included a summary of graded assignments, guidelines for written work, a point system for attendance, and warnings about late papers. There was a complete class schedule at the end, which had worked out perfectly with the chapters in the textbook. We would spend five class sessions on each major world religion, with a ten-point quiz at the end of each unit, two short papers on topics of the students' own choosing, and a final exam. Those assignments, plus ten more points for attendance, added up to a perfect one hundred.

Laid out like that, it looked completely doable. Students who could not distinguish Hinduism from Buddhism would be able to describe the differences between them by the end. Students who knew nothing about the division between Protestants and Catholics would be able to explain it to their roommates. In

these ways and more, they would learn enough about the great religions of the world to think more deeply about what they believed and why. By the end of the course, their religious literacy would have taken a giant leap, equipping them to be better neighbors in both their personal and professional lives.

That was my welcome speech, more or less. By the time I finished it, the girl in the front row had gone through her syllabus with a yellow highlighter and taken a full page of notes. The two guys in the back had finished their breakfasts. A ginger-headed fellow in the middle had fallen asleep with his head on his arm and was breathing wetly through his mouth. When I asked for questions, there were a few about excused absences and whether it was okay to wear hats in class. Then the students were gone, apparently confident that I knew where we were going.

If I thought I did, it was because I had never been there before. I was on the first leg of a whole new journey, starting out in a covered wagon full of carefully selected supplies, a map on the seat beside me with a clear path drawn from the first day of class to the last. At this point I do not even remember when the compass broke or how many times I had to revise the map, because it did not match the territory. What I do remember is that I got exactly what I wanted: new views of the divine mystery, new worlds of meaning, new buckets for lowering into new wells, new words to describe the living water I fetched up.

The mistake was to think I could add these to the old Christian ones that had served me so well for so long with no upsetting consequences. The problem was that I could not teach other people's religions without loving them as I loved my own, or at least giving it my best shot. This turned out to be much more difficult than I thought.

Contrary to popular opinion, all religions are *not* alike. Their

followers see the world in very distinct ways. Their understandings of the human condition proceed from different assumptions, leading them to propose different remedies. If I had been able to resist the wisdom they offered me—if I had been able to keep my Christian glasses on, so that I only saw what those prescription lenses allowed me to see—then I might have emerged unchanged. But that is not how it went for me.

Instead, I found things to envy in all of the traditions I taught. Some were compatible with Christian faith, like the Jewish Sabbath or the Buddhist focus on compassion. Others forced a choice, like the Muslim understanding that God has no offspring or the Hindu view that humans create their own destiny through many lifetimes. This left some important questions on the table. Is there a sovereign God who rules the cosmos or not? Can someone else die on a cross for my sins or not? As much as I envied the spiritual independence of people who answered "not" to those questions, my tradition depended on "yes" answers to both of them. Could I still learn something by taking the opposite answers seriously? Could my faith be improved by the faith of others?

Clearly, the answer to that last question was yes, or you would not be holding this book in your hands. But this is not the book I set out to write. I wanted to write a book about teaching world religions to undergraduates at a small rural college in northeast Georgia, with students in all the starring roles. The plan was to narrate what they learned, how they learned it, and why it was important for you to learn it too, at least if you want to make better sense of the dizzying new world in which you live. I wanted to offer insights that would not cost you anything. I wanted to make life easier for you.

Fortunately, that book refused to be written. What took its place is a book about the teacher of the class, not the students,

and what she learned about the high cost of seeing the divine mystery through other people's eyes. As the title suggests, it is a book about how my envy of other traditions turned into holy envy, offering me the chance to be born again within my own tradition. It will take me a while to get there, but since the classroom remains my small window on a large subject, you need to know something about Piedmont College and the rural county where it was founded in 1897.

Legend has it that some of the first students arrived barefoot, with their parents pulling a live pig on a rope behind them in exchange for tuition. After the first president, a Methodist minister named Spence, cashed in his own life insurance policy to keep the place going, he turned to the American Missionary Board of the Congregational Church for help. Since 1901, Piedmont has gone forward as an independent, church-related, four-year liberal arts institution in Demorest, Georgia. Today the student body hovers around twenty-three hundred. The student–faculty ratio is fourteen to one. Some students are the first in their families to go to college.

Piedmont means "foot-mountain," which is an exaggeration, since most of the mountains are in the next county, but "foothill" works, since the campus is nestled in the lower swells of the Appalachians. There are still pig sheds and chicken houses nearby, along with one of the largest poultry producers in the country. According to the Chamber of Commerce, slightly more than 43,000 people lived in Habersham County in 2010, with 1,823 of them in the two-stoplight town of Demorest. This means Piedmont students outnumber full-time residents, with whom they share a very short main street with the post office and city hall on one side and a restaurant and the college art gallery on the other.

What the Chamber website does not say is that Demorest was once a "sundown town," where "colored people" were not welcome after dark. Now Habersham County is home to significant numbers of people with roots in Central America, along with smaller populations of Southeast Asian and African Americans. Though there are not enough Jews to make a quorum for prayer or enough Muslims to keep a halal butcher in business, there are enough Buddhists to support a temple nine miles south of the college, which means that it is not unusual to see a monk in orange robes testing the ripeness of the mangoes at the Super Walmart. College students hang out there too, since it is the closest thing they have to a mall. There is one movie theater in the county, one bowling alley, three rivers, and sixty-two churches.

As this suggests, most of my students identify as Christian. Though they come from twenty states and ten countries, they go to school in what the writer Flannery O'Connor once called "the Christ-haunted South," where Christianity is as mainstream as Coca-Cola and traveling evangelists still set up striped tents by the side of the road in the summertime. Christianity is in the water here. It is in the air and soil. Students who arrive from large public high schools in suburban areas are sometimes surprised by the shortage of cultural diversity on campus, both in the student body and among the faculty. At the same time, they value their small classes and the close friendships they develop on a residential and largely pedestrian campus. When the sky fills with Canada geese heading south on a September evening, honking their hearts out against a bright red sunset, there is no better place to be.

I suppose it is possible to feel isolated on a campus seventy-five miles from the nearest big city, but the advent of social media

makes that hard to imagine. As small and rural as my Piedmont window may be, it looks out on a global change of consciousness accelerated by everything from the shopping patterns of millennials to the Twitter feeds of the Trump presidency. My smartphone connects me to a rabbi in Jerusalem protesting the limits placed on her and other women who want to pray at the Western Wall. When I need some visuals of a Hindu funeral for class, YouTube offers me footage of a string of cremations taking place concurrently along the Ganges River in Varanasi.

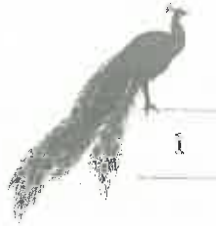
This sets up a weird tension between the small window of my classroom and the small window of my phone. Which is giving me a better picture of the real world? Are the headlines in my newsfeed truer than the ones in my local newspaper? If I trust what I see on my phone more than what I see out my window, what does it mean to believe that the real world is not where I live?

For the purposes of this book, I choose to trust the classroom first. The phone remains my link to the world beyond my two-stoplight town, but the classroom is all I know well enough to speak truly of it. My shelves are lined with big, smart books about the changing religious landscape of America, the role of religion in global conflict, the mandate for interfaith education in public schools, and the emerging worldviews of the spiritual-but-not-religious. These valuable resources have shaped my thinking and teaching about religion so significantly that they and their authors are listed in the back of this book.

As much as I rely on their work to help me understand the bigger picture, I keep hoping there is room for a book on the smaller picture as well—a far more local one that focuses on the lives of fewer than thirty people at a time, whose truth

claims do not extend beyond a single college classroom in north Georgia, written by a Christian teacher with no credentials to teach any tradition but her own, who is still moved to write because she believes there must be a few readers who—like her students—are waiting for someone to say what they have been thinking all along.

God willing, this is that book.



Religion 101

There is no one alive today who knows enough to say with confidence whether one religion has been greater than all others.

ARNOLD TOYNBEE

Today is the first day of class. Every chair is full. Religion 101 is always full, though I never know what to make of this. Do students sign up because they have heard about the field trips followed by free meals or because they have heard I am an easy grader? Are they here because they want to know more about the religions of the world or because the course meets one of their general education requirements? I never know, but today is the day I have to give them every reason to stay in the class, or they will drop it and shop for something else. How can I convey how important it is that they stay?

When I began teaching this course in the last millennium I billed it as a world tour. "How many of you have been to India?" I asked. No hands went up.

"How about Israel?" Still no hands.

"Saudi Arabia?" One girl raised her hand.

"My dad served in Desert Storm," she said.

"I'd like to hear about that," I said.

Then I told her and the others how this course would take them to all of those countries and more, at least in their imaginations. They would hear the call to prayer from the Great Mosque of Mecca and listen to a cantor sing the Kol Nidre on the eve of Yom Kippur. They would see the inside of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and sit in the shade of the Bodhi tree in northeast India where the Buddha achieved enlightenment. By the end of the course, they would be able to tell a stupa from a synagogue, a mandir from a minaret. They would know a few words in Sanskrit, Hebrew, Arabic, and Greek. Those who were religious would learn more about their own faith, and those who were not would learn how other people answer the big questions of human existence: Why are we here? What are we supposed to be doing? When we die, is that it? Whether the students agreed or disagreed with other people's answers to those questions, taking them seriously would help them ask better questions of themselves.

"Where else can you get all of that without a passport?" That was my pitch in the last millennium, when most people thought of world religions as religions that existed somewhere else in the world. Even the textbook conspired with that illusion, supplying glossy photos of Hasidic Jews in Jerusalem and Buddhist monks in Thailand. The VHS tapes I used to keep things lively featured a British guy in a pith helmet who tramped through the jungles of Southeast Asia, the deserts of Egypt, and the slums of Calcutta in search of true Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism. Although the series had an appealing Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom* edge to it, the clear message was that world religions were exotic flowers that bloomed elsewhere, among people who were not as fortunate as we.

Even then, the truth was quite different from the perception. By many accounts the first Muslim in America was Estevancio of Azamor, a Moroccan guide for a Spanish expedition in 1528 that landed in Florida.[1] A couple of centuries later, as many as a third of the African slaves in the United States were Muslim. After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, they were joined by immigrants from the Middle East, Europe, and India. The earliest mosques in the United States were established in Maine, North Dakota, Michigan, and Indiana between 1915 and 1925.[2]

The first Hindus on American soil may have been the six Asian Indians, employees of the East India Marine Society, who marched in the annual Fourth of July parade in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1851. After Swami Vivekananda addressed the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, he received so many invitations to speak in the United States that he stayed for another two years—founding the Vedanta Society of New York in 1894 and another in San Francisco during his second visit in 1900. The California community built the first Hindu temple in North America in 1906.[3]

Buddhists came during the Gold Rush of the mid-1800s, working not only as miners, but also as loggers, fishermen, farmers, and construction workers who were indispensable to the building of the Central Pacific Railroad. In 1860, 10 percent of the population of California was Chinese. In 1870, the same was true of Montana. By the turn of the century, hundreds of shrines and temples had sprung up along the West Coast and in the Rocky Mountains, including the historic Temple of the Forest Beneath the Clouds in Weaverville, California, built in 1874.[4]

Jews had been living in the United States for 250 years by then. In 1654, when twenty-three Sephardic Jews from Brazil arrived in the Dutch port of New Amsterdam, the first thing they did

was to form a congregation for worship. The second thing they did was to apply for permission to create a Jewish burial ground. Although Peter Stuyvesant, the governor of the colony, did not make things easy for them, the port passed to British rule in 1664 and the first synagogue in America was established in the newly named city of New York. By 1820, the largest Jewish community in the United States was in South Carolina, where Jewish men had been given the right to vote and hold office in 1790.[5]

Resistance to these developments took many forms, including legislation. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited virtually all immigration from China. The Immigration Act of 1917 expanded the banned zone by adding a wide swath of Asia that included India and the Middle East. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 added a national-origins quota to the mix, effectively decreasing the immigration of Italians, Jews, and Slavs from Southern and Eastern Europe. The main purpose of the Act, according to the Office of the Historian at the US Department of State, "was to preserve the ideal of American homogeneity."[6]

Repeals of various aspects of these laws followed in 1943 and 1952, with a sweeping revision in 1965. After Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration Act of 1965 into law at the foot of the Statue of Liberty in October of that year, the United States welcomed a spate of newcomers from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. By 2005, their grandchildren were roughly the same age as the students in my class.

The textbook for Religion 101 had changed by then. The VHS tapes were long retired. If I wanted students to see true Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, or Islam, all we had to do was get in the college van and drive seventy-five miles south to Atlanta, where we could visit the North American seat of the Dalai Lama's Tibetan Buddhist monastic lineage or the $10 million mosque near

Georgia Tech. During the unit on Hinduism we had so many choices that I alternated between large and small, taking students to the thirty-acre Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Sanstha (BAPS) temple complex in the suburbs one semester and the homey Vedanta Center of Atlanta the next. Once, on a field trip to the old Hare Krishna Temple near Emory University, several students mistook a statue of the founder for a living person and marveled at how quietly he sat during the entire service.

As hard as I work to keep class interesting, it is the field trips the students remember. To be fair, they are what I remember too—especially the first ones, when I was still finding my way around an Atlanta I did not know existed. Though I had gone to high school and college there and returned from seminary to work at a downtown church in the 1980s, the only religious diversity on my radar involved varieties of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. I passed many of their landmark buildings every day, almost all of them on Peachtree Road. The Episcopal Cathedral of Saint Philip, the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Christ the King, and Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church were next-door neighbors. Peachtree Road United Methodist Church was a little farther north; Covenant Presbyterian, Redeemer Lutheran Church, and the Reform Jewish Temple were a little farther south.

I am already in trouble for not naming the other big churches along that stretch, but the point is that none of them was a meditation center, a gurdwara, or a mosque. In the 1960s and 1970s the economic capital was not there for those buildings yet. The communities that would eventually create them were still meeting in homes and storefronts, which made them invisible to people like me—not just physically, but also psychologically. We do not see what we do not expect to see. The first time I passed the

Hindu Temple of Atlanta south of the airport, I thought it was a water park. The first time I passed Al-Farooq Masjid near Georgia Tech I thought it was a Greek Orthodox church. The communities that funded those buildings were two of the earliest to build impressive worship spaces in Atlanta. Neither of them was on Peachtree, though more than one tourist has mistaken the gold domes of the historic Fox Theater on Atlanta's main street for those of a grand mosque.

When I began teaching world religions, I had to relearn the city I had grown up in, not only because it had changed, but because I was changing too. Though I had long been drawn to the study of other religions, I was so surrounded by my own that there was no reason to think very deeply about how the faith of others might affect mine. There was also no pressing need to think about how the exclusive truth claims of my tradition affected people who stood outside of them. I was on the world tour I had advertised to my students, and I was enjoying it very much.

The second year I taught world religions at Piedmont, a student asked to see me before the last day of the drop-add period. When he showed up at the door of my office, he stood there a moment as if he were still deciding whether to come in. Maybe it was the three-foot-tall statue of the Buddha that did it or the framed Arabic calligraphy on the wall. My office has four generous windowsills, each holding objects from one of the religions we study in class, so without even stepping into the room he was faced with a brass Hanukkah menorah; an Ethiopian icon of St. George painted on goat skin; a large statue of the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesha; and another of Guanyin, a feminine embodiment of compassion in Mahayana Buddhism.

"Are you a Christian?" he asked me.

"I am," I said.

To his credit, he decided to come in. To my relief, he did not ask me what kind of Christian I was, since that is always hard to explain. When I first moved to Clarkesville, where there is still only one Episcopal church in the whole county, people trying to pronounce the name of my denomination sometimes landed on "Espicopal" (rhymes with "despicable"). When I went to the grocery store in my clerical collar, people would sometimes mistake me for a nun. But this young man was not interested in denominational distinctions. After he had taken a seat with his back to the Buddha, he told me he was concerned about the content of my class. He had come to a church-related college for a reason, he said. His faith meant a lot to him, and he did not want to put it at risk.

"If you really are a Christian," he said, "then are you going to help us see what is wrong with these other religions? From what you have said so far it doesn't sound like it, and if that's the case, then I don't think I can stay in the class."

Bees started buzzing inside my head when he said that. I was not angry, exactly. There was nothing belligerent in his tone to warrant that. I was dumbfounded instead, spiritually concussed from my sudden collision with such a solid wall of conviction about what it meant to be Christian. As hard as I had worked to create a course that spotlighted the wisdom of the world's great religions, I had not imagined that someone might take it in order to unplug all of them but one. Yet there he sat—a reminder not only of my short-sightedness but also of a whole different way of being Christian.

I remembered meeting people like him when I was in college. They had fallen in love with Jesus and set out to prove their loyalty by dismissing any truth that did not hinge on him. Their job, as they saw it, was to come up with solid Christian answers

to every important question and then to defend those answers against all rivals. When I fell in love with Jesus, I thought that was the only way to do it. Then, after about two weeks of being told I could only attend Bible study with other girls, not boys, and that if I wanted to argue about anything, I should be prepared to offer solid scriptural support for my view, I began yawning from lack of oxygen. I dropped out of Bible study and found another group of Christians, who were more interested in talking about the right questions Jesus asked than in giving the right answers about him. Although I sometimes missed the fevered certainty of the first group, I never missed their constraint. God was too great and the world too wide to allow for so little curiosity.

So, yes, I looked down on Christians who were not like me, including the student who sat in front of me returning the same look. Our standoff reminded me of so many other encounters since my college days: the steely confrontation between true believers, each needing the other to be wrong in order to be right. In this regard, it was difficult to discern what made the confrontations between Christians any different from the confrontations between Christians and people of other faiths.

In the present moment, however, the difference was that I had thirty years on the young man in front of me. He was the college student; I was the teacher. Remembering that, I asked him to tell me a little more about himself, though we both knew where the conversation was going. The Bible was his guide to Christian living, he told me. It said very clearly that Jesus was the only way to God. If the course was not going to support that truth, then he would be forced to drop it. I thanked him for coming and said I hoped I would see him in class on Thursday.

He did, in fact, drop the course. While I was sorry to lose him,

he taught me two important things. The first was that my practice of Christianity was pretty specialized. I was used to standing in front of a bunch of Episcopalians, not a classroom that included Jehovah's Witnesses, Missionary Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Mormons, and Pentecostals, along with a wide range of Christians from mainline denominations. Semester by semester they reminded me how limited my experience of Christianity really was and what a tiny slice of it I knew well. My full immersion in my own religion was about to take an entirely new turn, and it was going to call for a level of theological humility that I had not practiced in quite some time.

The other thing the student taught me by dropping my class was that I needed better answers to his question. Why *should* someone like him take a course in world religions that highlighted the best and not the worst? Where *were* the Bible verses that supported my point of view? Surely there was something in Christian scripture, history, or tradition that might set someone like him at ease. It was not enough for me to feel certain about the wideness of God's embrace. If I wanted to stay connected to the roots of my tradition, which I did, then it was time for me to make better connections with more traditional Christians, or at least with the sources they hold dear. My alternative was to become one more polarizing Christian who looks down on those who do not love Jesus the way she does.

It was the beginning of my education in teaching world religions, which would have been hard enough in a static world. Since I taught them in a world that was always changing—the media, the headlines, the skyline, the students—my syllabus changed every semester. The one I handed out on my first day of class would be a great embarrassment to me now, with its false confidence and clear parameters. The one I used last semester is

fifteen pages long, with dozens of hyperlinks, field-trip opportunities, and elective assignments featuring religious holidays, rituals, art, music, dress, and dance.

The "world tour" speech is gone now, replaced by one that highlights the more practical benefits of religious literacy. Whether students intend to become teachers, nurses, police officers, or businesspeople, I tell them, religious illiteracy is a luxury they can no longer afford. This is a new idea for them—that illiteracy might be a problem in religion as well as English—or that a religion class might have life applications beyond going to church.

A nursing major was the first to break this seal in my class. Three weeks into the unit on Hinduism, she told me she wanted to do her elective on Hindu views of illness and death. "I want to know how to take care of a Hindu patient in the hospital," she said, "and I just realized I don't know." When I was a hospital chaplain in the 1980s I never once thought about that. I did not have to, because I was a Christian chaplain at Georgia Baptist Hospital, where I never met a patient who was not Christian. Now, even in a hospital as small as the one in Habersham County, that would not be the case.

Business majors are more likely to relate to people across desks than bedpans, but they can benefit from knowing how people of different faiths view borrowing and lending money. Education majors need to know where the major holidays of their students fall on the academic calendar, especially the ones that are not on the Christmas–Passover axis of the public-school system. Sports management majors need to know the same thing, especially since the month-long fast of Ramadan can occur during any season of the year. Dietary laws may also affect the sorts of places athletes can and cannot eat while they are on the road. A

criminal justice major once told me that he never expected to learn anything in Religion 101 that would help him be a better detective. Then he learned about the ways that people of different faiths treat their dead—including murder victims—and why some families might resist allowing an autopsy that would help law enforcement do its job.

This new emphasis on religious literacy across the professions works well, since even students who are not religious can see the benefit. At the same time, I have read enough student papers to know what most of them will really be working on this semester: their own relationship to the divine. Some may call it "ultimate reality" instead, but their questions will be the same. What is true and what is not? How did they come to believe what they believe? If the bottom drops out, how far will they fall? If there is only one God, why are there so many religions?

What I know and most of them do not yet is that even people who belong to the same religion do not agree about what they mean when they say "God." Some mean a loving daddy, while others mean a cosmic judge. Some see Jesus on a cross and some see him on a white horse with a sharp sword in each hand. Some frankly admit that they do not know what they mean, though they know they ought to—and though they have prayed hard for some clear word from above on those nights when the sound of their own heart scares them half to death.

It is one of the reasons why I never tire of teaching the class and why it never rolls out the same way twice. Every semester brings a new mix of students who will affect each other in ways no one can predict. When the first-generation Bosnian American speaks of his grandfather who died in the war, the cheerleader beside him stops doodling to look at him. When the just-coming-out gay history major lands in the same small

group as a just-gone-rogue messianic Jew on the debate team, they both find new best friends.

Maybe these relationships are all that really matter, since it is impossible to teach five great religions in fifteen weeks. I can tinker with the syllabus all I like, but students will still come out blinking at the end, some of them suddenly unable to remember whether Torah goes with Judaism or Islam. Was Jesus born before or after the Buddha? After years of being crushed by this outcome, I now see it as a proper response to the disorientation of Religion 101.

All their lives, most of these students have looked out at the world through Christian glasses. They have learned to describe what they see in Christian terms and not to ask questions about what they cannot see clearly. Now, having tried on some glasses from other traditions—one or two of which have brought troublesome areas of their lives into sharper focus for the first time—they are suddenly aware of how many ways there are to view reality. The lens is not the landscape. It is a way of translating the landscape so that people can walk upright on it, making some sense of what happens to them.

To complicate matters, some students realize for the first time that Catholic lenses are different from Protestant ones, just as Asian lenses are different from Native American ones. Remembering that Torah goes with Judaism is a very minor detail to most of them at this point. They are still trying to get their heads around the fact that God may speak more languages than they ever thought, to far more people than they thought, using different methods than they thought. Either that, or the whole thing is fiction.

I hope that is not the conclusion they reach. As much as I respect their reasons for becoming more spiritual than religious,

I want the young people in my classes to know that religion is more than a source of conflict or a calculated way to stay out of hell. Religions are treasure chests of stories, songs, rituals, and ways of life that have been handed down for millennia—not covered in dust but evolving all the way—so that each new generation has something to choose from when it is time to ask the big questions about life. Where did we come from? Why do bad things happen to good people? Who is my neighbor? Where do we go from here? No one should have to start from scratch with questions like those. Overhearing the answers of the world's great religions can help anyone improve his or her own answers. Without a religion, these questions often do not get asked.

I also want the students to know that while every religion has its villains, each also has its saints. In the quiet backwater of my second-floor cinder-block classroom, I want to give their imaginations something better to work with than what they are getting from the movies and the news—some of the treasures in the chests they have never had any reason to open before. I want them to know about Mohandas Gandhi, Thich Nhat Hanh, Jalāl al-Din Rumi, and Abraham Heschel. I want them to know about the desert fathers and mothers, Teresa of Ávila, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Desmond Tutu.

For reasons I have yet to explain to you, I believe this has become my Christian duty. I believe it is the neighborly thing to do, the Christlike thing to do. Part of my ongoing priesthood is to find the bridges between my faith and the faiths of other people, so that those of us who draw water from wells on different sides of the river can still get together from time to time, making the whole area safer for our children.

The students are not my children, but I do want to make the world safer for them. As tired as I get of grading their papers, I

never tire of *them*—of trying to find better ways to expand their thinking without blowing their minds; of exposing the lies they have been told about people of other faiths without causing them to distrust their own families of faith; of preparing them for the criticism they will almost surely face if they are vocal about finding anything they admire in faiths other than their own. As often as I have been warned that no one can protect students from the alienating effects of higher education, I still hate to see it happen—as it will in this semester's class, if all goes well.

At the end of the first day of class, I give the students a brief quiz with basic questions about the five religions they are going to study. "You're not supposed to do well on it," I tell them when their faces pucker with anxiety. "If you cannot answer a single question correctly, then this class is exactly where you need to be. Plus, it can be really helpful to clarify what you don't know as well as what you do." I will return these ungraded quizzes to them on the last day of class, so they can see for themselves how far they have come. There will be a few unclaimed quizzes left over—there always are—reminders of the students who set out on this journey but lost heart before the end.

"Be sure to write your name at the top of your quiz," I say when our time is up. Then the students are gone. I gather up the extra syllabi strewn on the long tables. Next I pack up the menorah, the Shiva, the Buddha, the cross, and the Qur'an that have been with me all these years. We have seen a lot, and still we begin again. Heaving my satchel over my shoulder, I wonder what the students will teach me this time. Was it really twenty years ago that I found my way to the Hindu temple in Atlanta for the first time?

2

Vishnu's Alm

The God of your understanding is
of your understanding. What you
beyond your understanding.

The Hindu Temple of Atlanta was no
no other building like it on Riverda
highway south of the airport lined wi
shops, coin laundries, and self-storage
was raise your chin to look above the
tops of the trees, where the tiered towe
a giant sand castle. The first time I saw
neck trying to figure out what such a fa
ing in a place like that.

I had been teaching world religions
The textbook and the VHS tapes were
could anyone teach a living religion w
classroom? When it became clear that a
a British guy in a pith helmet were not
scouting sites for field trips in Atlanta.
the obvious choice, not only because it