

A Finger Pointing to the Moon

The problem of the nature of faith plagues us all our lives. Is openness to other ideas infidelity, or is it the beginning of spiritual maturity? What is it that can possibly take us so far afield from the initial believing self? How do we explain to ourselves the journey of getting from there to here, from unquestioning adherence to institutional answers, to the point of asking faithful questions? It took years before I realized that maybe it is belief itself, if it is real, that carries us there.



Maybe if we really believe about God what we say we believe, there comes a time when we have to go beyond the parochialisms of law. Maybe, if we are to be really spiritual people, we can't afford the mind-binding of denominationalism. In order to find the God of life in all of life, maybe we have to be willing to open ourselves to the part of it that lies outside the circles of our tiny little worlds

The Sufi tell of disciples who, when the death of their master was clearly imminent, became totally bereft. "If you leave us, Master," they pleaded, "how will we know what to do?" And the master relied, "I am nothing but a finger pointing at the moon. Perhaps when I am gone you will see the moon." The meaning is clear: It is God that religion must be about, not itself. When religion makes itself God, it ceases to be religion.

But when religion becomes the bridge that leads to God, it stretches us to live to the limits of human possibility. It requires us to be everything we can possibly be: kind, generous, honest, loving, compassionate, just. It defines the standards of the human condition. It sets the parameters within which we direct our institutions. It provides the basis for the ethics that guide our human relationships. It sets out to enable us to be fully human, human beings.

Clearly, religion is much more than dogmatism. And thank God for that, because dogmatism would not take religion very far at all.

Every time dogmatism reigns, in fact, religion is diminished. When a religion knows when the end of the world will come, and the date passes without incident, that religion fails itself. When religion decrees salvation for some, for our kind, and moral disaster for the rest of humankind—and that in the face of the goodness we see everywhere in every people on earth—it betrays the very God of love it teaches. When religion divides people on the basis of spiritual superiority, rather than unites them as common creatures of a common God, it rends the garment of humanity. It gives the lie to the God of cosmic creation. Hildegard of Bingen wrote, “Just as a circle embraces all that is within it, so does the Godhead embrace all.”

It is this awareness of the universal God that we miss in life. Our God has always been a Catholic God—or at least a Christian God. We have, as a result, missed so much of God’s revelation. So I fail to find God in the rest of the world. That makes other people so easy to kill ... Indians, Arabs, Jews, and Asians don’t have much of a chance when our God wants their God eradicated.

Indeed, religion at its worst is a sham. But religion at its best anchors us to the best in ourselves.

Most of all, religion enables us to find meaning in life. It gives purpose to the human condition. It sets the human compass toward home. It requires us to be more than we ever thought we could become. It raises our sights beyond ourselves. It sets standards for us that are above the lowest level of the self.

—from *Called to Question* (Rowman & Littlefield), by Joan Chittister