

## **Giving Christianity Back to Agape Love: A New Paradigm for Being Church Together**

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Chapter Discussion Questions

### **Chapter 10: Pluralism: Being Christian in a World of Many Faiths**

1. Chapter ten begins by saying “People of other faiths are our neighbors, students, and friends; they are the people across town and the people next door. Asking questions about the meaning of interfaith is not a luxury. It’s a necessity.” (p. 67)

Do you agree about interfaith engagement being a necessity and not a luxury?

2. Page 69:

‘Tolerance can be a good first step in interfaith settings when you contrast it to the alternative... Beyond tolerance, the goal of IFYI is to deeply understand each other, realizing the deep interconnectedness inherent in life and in the human family.

‘We learn about the “other,” not only to understand them, and not only to have compassion for them, but to realize that we are not separate from them.’

What do you think about the word tolerance as it relates to interfaith relations?

3. Page 69:

‘In all cases, humanizing the “other” is the best way of countering ideas of religious superiority (“I am better than you”), condemnation (“you’re going to hell if you don’t believe what I believe”), or conversion (“you need to become exactly like me”).’

Do you have friends, family, or acquaintances whose approach to other religions is one of superiority, condemnation, and/or conversion?

In your experience, what is the best way to humanize someone that holds a different belief, religion, or philosophy from you?

4. Page 70:

‘Many of us who are religiously progressive (myself included), have an intolerance for intolerance. But the heart of interfaith engagement is developing understanding and compassion for those who are difficult to love, including those we label “intolerant.”’

Have you struggled with being intolerant of intolerance? Towards whom?

5. Page 70:

‘I am a better Christian because of my interactions with the Jews, Muslims, Humanists, Hindus, Buddhists, and others who have been part of the IFYI community over the years.

Through workshops, interfaith “circles,” days of interfaith dialogue, service, and small group sharing, I have been deeply inspired by persons representing faith traditions other than my own.’

Interfaith is not a “watering down” of anybody’s faith, or a place for evangelization or conversion. Interfaith, at its best, is a place where we learn deeply from our friends of other traditions, getting to know the real them. As we drop our stereotypes and preconceptions, we move into a place of mutual enrichment.

How have interactions with persons of other faiths deepened your own faith?

6. Page 72:

‘Some Christians adamantly assert that all practices and wisdom learned in churches must come from Christian scriptures or Christian tradition. Yet Jesus himself was not so closed-minded:

“John answered, ‘Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.’” (Luke 9: 49-50)

‘Too often we, like the disciples, try to put Jesus and Christianity in a box. But Jesus and God don’t fit neatly into boxes. Jesus’ wildly universal love and God’s abundant grace will always be set free from whatever restrictions we put on it.

‘There are Christians today (myself included) who practice yoga, go to retreats devoted to mindfulness, offer the healing energy of reiki, and attend kirtans chanting songs in Sanskrit. Is this wrong? Would Jesus disapprove? Or would Jesus respond today as to the disciples of old: “Whoever is not *against* you is *for* you.”’

Have you found spiritual practices outside traditional Christianity that feed you? Why? Why do you think the church has historically been so resistant to practices that aren’t rooted in Christian tradition?

#### 7. Page 73:

‘Christianity is just catching on that many people are leaving church because they don’t find spiritual depth or abundant life within it. Many people find more life in retreat centers, yoga classes, and hikes than they do in church. Christian faith communities, with some exceptions, have not offered embodied, devotional practices that help people deepen their spiritual lives and fill their spiritual cups... “Recovering” Christians see the rigidity of the institutional church as another way that church has become like the Pharisees- putting dogma and doctrine above love and spiritual growth.’

To what extent have you found embodied, devotional practices in church settings you’ve been part of?

#### 8. On page 74, Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast puts interfaith and interspiritual encounters in these terms: there is a “distinction between being *rooted* in your tradition and being stuck in it. The point is to have roots that nourish, rather than a desperate clinging that chokes off real spiritual vitality.”<sup>1</sup>

As you read this Chapter, what does being “interspiritual” mean to you?

What are the roots that nourish your spiritual life?

Closing blessing from page 74: ‘Religion and spirituality are about tapping into what gives us life and sharing that with others. Spirituality “is always about what nourishes. Tradition is useful as long as it enhances and serves the inner life. When it becomes an obstacle, we need to rethink the hold our religion has on us.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Teasdale, Wayne, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*, (Novato, CA, New World Library, 2001), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Teasdale, Wayne, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*, (Novato, CA, New World Library, 2001), 20.

## Chapter 11: Jesus and God

### 1. Page 78:

“I am inspired anew every time I encounter Jesus in the scriptures. In no other human being do I find such pure teaching of the road to peace, and such pure embodiment of that road.

“In our current day, there are a lot of teachers in spirituality and self-help who preach one thing and do the opposite. Integrity is the sign of a pure teacher. It points to someone who has fully integrated what they teach. Jesus was one such person.”

Share about teachers with integrity that have most inspired you in this life.

How are you inspired by the example of Jesus found in the scriptures?

### 2. Page 80:

‘Jesus avoided being put on a pedestal because he knew that doing so would turn him into the ultimate exception, rather than the ultimate example, of how humans could live.

“Jesus Christ gradually became promoted in people’s understanding from the status of a great spiritual master to someone higher than anything even imaginable: the Absolute Master, the ‘only Son of God.’”<sup>3</sup>

‘Christians have often believed that “it is heresy to claim that we are as special as Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> But could this be true? What if Jesus truly meant what he said- that we were to not only *strive* to live as he did, but that we actually *could*? What a monumental statement. Could humans be up for the task?’

What is the difference for Christians if Jesus is the “ultimate exception” or the “ultimate example” of how we can live?

### 3. Page 81:

‘The implicit message of Christian teachings is that humans are fully human, while Jesus was supremely special and divine in a way that we humans could never be.

‘Did Jesus say that we were the light of the world as he was; did he teach that we could do even *greater* things than he, just to encourage us to live like he did, though we never really could?’

‘What if Jesus was not the exclusive Son of God; the sole Anointed One?’

‘Jesus’ message was the antithesis of a “superiority” gospel. Jesus did not proclaim himself superior to us in all things, that we might worship him as God and ourselves as unworthy sinners. Jesus proclaimed a Oneness gospel. In this new paradigm, we are One with Christ, One with God, and One with all of life.’

What are the implications for Christian life when we worship Jesus as God and see ourselves as unworthy sinners?

Closing blessing from p. 79-80:

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<sup>3</sup> Kriyananda, Swami, *Revelations of Christ Proclaimed by Paramhansa Yogananda*, (Nevada City, CA, Crystal Clarity Publishers, 2007), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Walsch, Neale Donald, *The New Revelations: A Conversation with God*, (New York, Atria Books, 2002), 89.

‘Jesus pointed us to our own oneness with God as much as to his. Jesus desired for us to see our own dormant divinity within. For this reason, Jesus said that not only was he the light of the world, but that “You are the light of the world.” (Matthew 5: 14)

‘The Trinity does not exclude you and me. Rather, “As members of the mystical body, Christians actually partake in the divine nature of the Trinity.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> McColman, Carl *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism: The Essential Guide to Contemplative Spirituality* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2010), 165-166.

## Chapter 12: Substitutionary Sacrificial Atonement

### 1. Page 82-83:

“In unitive religious work, no matter what we believe or how strongly we disagree with one another, our first task is to embody the great commandment of love, as expressed in this prayer of Marco Antonio de Dominis:

In essentials, unity,  
in nonessentials, liberty,  
in all things charity.

As you reflect on this book, what is essential to your faith and what is not?

### 2. Page 83-84:

“Traditional Christian atonement theology begins with humans receiving a death sentence from God because of the sin of Adam and Eve.

“According to this theory, Jesus’ death was meant to pay the price for our sins. Jesus satisfied God’s wrath and humanity’s death sentence through his own death on a cross.

“Many Christians find beauty and comfort in the idea that Jesus saves us from our own sinfulness... The theory of substitutionary sacrificial atonement articulated in classic Christian theology never sat quite right with my heart.”

What has been your relationship to the traditional Christian theory of substitutionary sacrificial atonement?

What is the natural conclusion from this theory about the God whom Jesus loved?

### 3. Page 86:

“That the Creator would structure a life review into the afterlife says a lot about the nature of God. It says that even after we leave our physical bodies, God cares about our growth. Just as any good parent wants their child to learn from their mistakes, God is no different. God wants to celebrate and lift up our successes, and help us avoid the mistakes that keep us locked in fear, prejudice, or violence.

“This view of God as judge is radically different than the view portrayed by church tradition and articulated in classic atonement theology. The God of sacrificial atonement is a punishing Judge whose wrath must be appeased.”

Is the God of sacrificial atonement the same God of agape love we see expressed in and through the life of Jesus?

### 4. What do you think of this alternate view of atonement articulated on page 88:

‘The other day my 18-month-old daughter was not feeling good with a fever. As our minds tend to do, I began to think of the worst-case scenario. Desiring my daughter’s health above my own, I prayed, “Lord, if I can take this pain in her stead, I’d be glad to. Please, give me her suffering.”’

‘Such great love do I have for my daughter that without hesitation I would sacrifice my health for her benefit. Any parent who has touched that inexhaustible love for their child has felt the same, asking “How can I take their pain away?”’

‘If I, an unenlightened seeker, want to relieve another’s karma, wouldn’t an enlightened being (who feels boundless love for all) want to take away the karmic pains of their disciples?’

Closing blessing from p. 89:

‘Jesus conveys to his disciples the significance of his sacrifice on the cross soon before the crucifixion: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15: 13)

‘May we embody this vision, lived out by Jesus, and articulated by the early Christians: "Dear friends, let us love one another...for love comes from God. Whoever loves is born of God...for God is love..."! (1 John 4:7-8)