

Study Guide:***When Faith Meets Reason******Religion Scholars Reflect on Their Spiritual Journeys*****Getting Started**

Read the introduction and prepare to describe the challenge to the traditional creeds posed by the Renaissance and Enlightenment.

Review popular religious beliefs in America in the twenty-first century and describe them to the group.

- Jesus was born of a virgin.
- Jesus will actually return to earth someday.
- There is a devil.
- There is life beyond death.
- Satan actually exists.
- Heaven actually exists.

Discussion should center on how these beliefs fare in the light of human reason.

Discussion/Quiz Questions

1. Can continuity be maintained with ancient beliefs?
2. In what ways does the Bible present diverse views of God and Jesus?
3. How were creeds and canons used to minimize diversity and establish "orthodoxy" in the church?
4. "What happens to traditional faith when the old creeds and confessions can no longer be squared with an empirical worldview?"
5. What are the four options available to those who face challenges to traditional faith?

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CHAPTER 1

Glenna S. Jackson
From Hippo to Hippos

Overview of the Journey

As you read this chapter, note the elements of the journey:

- Fascination with the biblical story
- Missionary conundrum
- Sexism in the institution
- Humanism or Christianity?
- Religion as an academic exercise
- Women in the history of religions
- Social justice
- Out of Africa—modern insights on ancient texts

Discussion Questions

1. While Jackson's first "edge of smash" was of a physical nature, what life events led to her theological "edge of smash?" At what points in your life have you been at the "edge of smash?"
2. Jackson's beliefs are often in contrast to those of "orthodox" Christianity. Why does she still call herself a "Christian"? What beliefs do you think are critical to being a Christian?
3. How have the following perspectives informed and shaped Jackson's thinking about Christian beliefs?
 - Jesus Seminar
 - African experiences
 - John Wesley's quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason
4. Who were the significant persons who helped form your faith and practices? In what ways were they helpful and/or harmful?
5. What basic beliefs did you come to find unacceptable?
6. Have you had experiences with other countries or cultures that caused you to re-think what you believe and how you live your faith?
7. What has changed in your understanding and practice of prayer?
8. Does Jackson's journey parallel your own in any way?

Class Exercises

Jackson has been highly influenced by the insights and experience of African students, especially in terms of their interpretation of the historically-reliable parables of Jesus.

- Read the parable of The Samaritan.
- Read the parable of The Barren Tree.
- Read the parable of The Dinner Party.

Theological Terms for Consideration

- original sin
- predestination
- liberation theology
- just-war theory
- omni-God (omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, omni-benevolent)

Religious Thinkers for Consideration

- Augustine (354–430)
- Gandhi (1869–1948)
- John Wesley (1703–1791)

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CHAPTER 2

Charles W. Hedrick
Out of the Enchanted Forest

Overview of the Journey

As you read this chapter, note the following transitions

- The enchanted Forest
- God's literal words?
- "Saved" at sixteen
- Jesus a fellow traveler
- A community of fellow travelers
- The absence of God
- What's left?

Discussion Questions

1. What led Hedrick to think of the Bible as human words about God rather than as "Word of God"?
2. Should faith be grounded in experiences of the world or in religious texts? Why?
3. What, if any, are the differences between religious texts and other writings?
4. Why did Hedrick describe his early life in Mississippi as living in an "enchanted forest." How would you characterize your early faith position?
5. Explain how Hedrick arrived at the conclusion that Jesus was not divine. What do you believe about the divinity of Jesus and why?
6. How would you define "church" and how does it differ from other communities?
7. Do you find participation in a faith community meaningful? Why or why not?
8. For Hedrick, what does it mean to live the "religious life"? What would it mean from your perspective?
9. Does "Mother Nature" have a conscience? What does your answer suggest about the character of God?
10. Does Hedrick's journey parallel your own in any way?

Class Exercises

- Instruct the class to prepare a list of what they know about Jesus of Nazareth that would not have been obvious to a first-century person who did not share the beliefs of the canonical gospel writers? Share the lists and discuss what this implies for a twenty-first-century faith.
- Hedrick says the Bible comprises human words about God. Instruct the group to compare the resurrection accounts (Matt 28:1-8 = Mark 16:1-8 = Luke 24:1-11, John 20:1-13), identify all the differences and discuss them. What do such differences imply for the Bible and the historical character of the resurrection?

Theological Terms for Consideration

- omnipotence/omnipresence
- original sin
- orthodox
- pantheism/panentheism
- resurrection/resuscitation

Religious Leaders for Consideration

- Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976)
- J. A. T. Robinson (1919–1983)
- Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965)

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CHAPTER 3

Nigel Leaves
A Journey in Life

Overview of the Journey

As you read this chapter, please note how the journey has evolved:

- Childhood participation in a worshipping community that was steeped in nationalism
- A Christian missionary is confronted by indigenous spiritualities
- Social inequality and Christian capitalism
- Indifference to Christianity from secularism
- What it means to live “in the shadow of the Galilean”
- Ecological concerns
- The redefining of faith for an ever-changing world
- Theological investigation as a life-long passion

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think about the traditional church’s stance of opposing acceptance of homosexuality?
2. How does the discovery at Nag Hammadi in 1945 change our understanding of early Christians and their beliefs?
3. How does the current trend toward a “theological monism” contrast with the findings of more than 50 ancient Christian texts at Nag Hammadi?
4. Read and discuss the Ten Resolutions of Geering (p. 29). With which ones do you agree? Which ones are you violating?
5. What should be the missions of Christians to cultures with a meaningful religion and spirituality?
6. Do you agree that if Jesus was “exclusively a wandering wisdom teacher” that he would not have been crucified? If he was one of thousands of wisdom teachers who have lived, why should we care what he said?
7. Would Jesus have been a savior of any kind if he had died of old age rather than crucified?
8. How might the “greening of Christianity” affect you personally and as a member of the global community?
9. In what ways did Leaves’ global experiences challenge his conception of the church?
10. What stands has the Anglican Church taken that exemplify social and religious issues that have driven many to join the “church alumni association”?

11. How does Leaves answer his own question, "Is it reasonable to give one's life to an organization that is always at least a generation behind the rest of the world's best and latest thinking?"
12. What encouraging and discouraging signs do you see for the faith and the church in today's world?

Theological Terms for Consideration

- mysticism (apophatic or negative theology)
- God is "the beyond in the midst of life"
- post-Christianity
- church alumni association
- apocalyptic

Religious Thinkers for Consideration

- John Shelby Spong (1931–)
- Don Cupitt (1934–)
- Lloyd Geering (1918–)
- Richard Holloway (1933–)

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CHAPTER 4

Robert M. Price
Footsteps in the Quicksand

Overview of the Journey

As you read this chapter, note the elements of the journey:

- From fundamentalism to neo-evangelicalism
- Shattered faith in biblical authority
- Return to liberal Baptist Church
- Discovery of the power and poetry of liturgy in the Episcopal church
- Experiment with religious Humanism
- Flirtation with Unitarian Universalism
- Work with Secular Humanism
- Coming to terms with religion to integrate present with past

Discussion Questions

1. Price mentions the “Death of God” theologians of the 1960s. What does the phrase “the death of God” mean to you?
2. Price wonders if, after the collapse of his orthodox Christian faith, his continuing interest in Jesus was perhaps merely vestigial and nostalgic. What are some other types of responses that people might have as their traditional faith beliefs collapse?
3. If a Christian commits to a belief in a neutral or even hostile universe without the assurance of supernatural protection, how might her/his faith survive?
4. How does a spirituality of inquiry stretch the soul more than a belief in dogmatic answers?
5. Do Bible stories have to be historical in nature in order to transform us or to communicate spiritual power? Respond to the idea that, if the gospel stories are unhistorical, they are bunk?
6. If you have rejected traditional faith, have you found anything else to replace it? Do you feel any animosity toward your religious past? Is it time to move on to something else? What might that be?
7. Price describes how he can temporarily suspend disbelief and participate in religious services in a beneficial way. Compare that concept with how you view participation in religious services.
8. Discuss the appeal of Price’s concept of a “poetic faith”.
9. It appears to be difficult for many people to hold intellectual questions open while pursuing spiritual development through religious ritual.

Discuss how it might be possible to participate in traditional religious experiences without compromising intellectual integrity.

Class Exercise

- Discuss the Parable of the Madman by Friedrich Nietzsche.

Theological Terms for Consideration

- fundamentalism
- evangelicalism
- deconstruction
- liberal theology
- neo-orthodoxy
- religious humanism
- secular humanism

Religious Thinkers for Consideration

- Paul Tillich
- Thomas J.J. Altizer
- Don Cupitt
- Max Scheler

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CHAPTER 5

Paul Alan Laughlin
A Mystical Christian Credo

Overview of the Journey

As you read this chapter, note the elements of the journey:

- the author's admitted mystical orientation
- the Western spiritual writers and traditions he mentions favorably
- their Eastern counterparts he appears to admire
- his non-traditional views of God, nature, humanity, Jesus, and the Bible
- the practical implications for modern living that he draws

Discussion Questions

1. Laughlin believes that any theology (that is, thoughtful and well-developed concept of God) should be based on an experience of God. How do you feel about such a claim? On what is your own view of God founded?
2. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, produced the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral—the four sources of authority on which Christian belief should be built: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Laughlin starts with experience and works backward to reason (in the form of a well-thought out and logically-arranged *credo*). How do you feel about this direction? Do you think that his use of Christian scripture and tradition is enough to call his a Christian theology? Why or why not?
3. In the course of his essay, Laughlin notes the importance of catalysts in one's spiritual development, including among other things mentors and books. What such catalysts can you identify in your own life? How have they affected your thinking about God, the world of nature and people, existence, and yourself?
4. Laughlin's essay presents the conceptual fruits of his spiritual journey rather than the specific experiences along the way that might have yielded them. His decades of having studied, taught, and written about Eastern religions and philosophies and his life-long role as a jazz pianist have affected his spirituality and religious thought. Which of your own vocations and avocations have helped to shape your theological views and religious practices? How?
5. Laughlin expresses his conviction that "mystical" moments (that is, "moments of extraordinary depth") are much more common than we might think; and he gives examples, drawn mostly from the arts, as

- possible occasions for such experiences to occur. Can you identify any such moments in your own life? If so, name them and indicate to what extent and precisely how they may have affected your own religious thought. If not, why do you suppose this might be the case?
6. Laughlin lays out his beliefs in this topical order: God, Nature and Humanity, Jesus Christ, the Bible and other scripture, spiritual practice and experience, the planet and people, spiritual community, sources for spiritual truth, and personal faith development. This is obviously one—but not the only—logical way of arranging such topics. How would you arrange them to reflect your own spiritual, religious, or theological thinking? Which items (or articles) would you eliminate, add, or change? Why? How?

Class Exercises

- Have the class prepare their own working individual credos. Share the lists and discuss similarities and differences.
- Purely as a thought exercise, imagine what your own church or religious community would look like if it were suddenly to embrace and adopt Laughlin's nine articles of faith. Specifically, how would worship and ministry to the world beyond its own walls be different from what it is now?

Theological Terms for Consideration

- autonomy
- emanation
- heteronomy
- immanence
- metaphysics
- monism
- mysticism
- ontology
- pantheism
- transcendence

Religious Thinkers for Consideration

- Meister Eckhart (1260–1328)
- W. T. Stace (1886–1967)
- Thomas Merton (1915–1968)
- Anthony de Mello (1931–1987)
- Wayne Teasdale (1945–2004)

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CHAPTER 6

James M. Robinson
What I Believe

Overview of the Journey

As you read this chapter, note the following transitions:

- A strict “Calvinist” home
- Studies in Europe
- Breaking monopolies
- Negative side of ancient culture
- Positive side of ancient culture
- The faith of Jesus
- Trusting God

Discussion Questions

1. How did a strict “Calvinist” home influence Robinson?
2. What role did his European education play in shaping his ideas?
3. What were some things commonly believed in the ancient world? How do these ideas seem to you?
4. Why does Robinson think that Christians today should not be expected to believe the ancient Christian creeds? Do you agree?
5. What does it mean to “demythologize” the miracles of Jesus?
6. What did the ancient writers try to do with “myth” according to Robinson?
7. Why does Robinson say that in the early sayings gospel Q Jesus continued to speak after the crucifixion?
8. Why does Robinson think that Jesus’ behavior was “selfless”?
9. Why does Robinson think that trusting in God, like Jesus did, means not believing in ancient Christian doctrine.

Class Exercises

- Have the group draw up a list of the popular beliefs of antiquity and consider how they are related to the creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries. Which aspects of popular belief does the group think are out of date and which are still current?
- Have each member of the group complete the following sentence: “The miracles attributed to Jesus in the Gospels....” Take up the papers, read them to the group, and discuss them.

Theological Terms for Consideration

- demythologize
- kerygma
- form criticism
- existentialism
- hermeneutic

Religious Thinkers for Consideration

- Karl Barth (1886–1968)
- Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976)
- Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965)
- David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874)
- Robert W. Funk (1926–2005)

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CHAPTER 7

Mahlon H. Smith
Ears to Hear

Overview

As you read this chapter note the following key ideas:

- Presence is a dialogue or debate
- Scripture is a collection of “faith declarations” by different human authors
- “Revelation” is open to all by observing the cosmos
- Faith is a wrestling match with God (and/or Jesus)
- Jesus is fully human and *not* divine
- Unjust suffering challenges traditional views of God
- Distinguishing Jesus’ viewpoint from others’ views of Jesus
- Jesus was a gadfly who challenged traditional values
- God is a paradoxical parent who acts with irony

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways do we experience the presence of Jesus? Why don't all agree on what this presence means?
2. What difference does it make to understand the Bible as a "collection of faith declarations by humans"?
3. What lessons are to be learned from human suffering and tragedy?
4. How do we "distinguish the voice and worldview of Jesus" from those who wrote about him?
5. What do you believe to be the traits of the essential Jesus? How did you come to this decision?

Class Exercises

- Read the story of Jacob’s wrestling match.
- Read Mark’s account of Jesus’ transfiguration.
- Have the class take turns identifying one or two sayings the Bible ascribes to Jesus that they find to be personally challenging. Ask each how they would deal with it. Did Jesus really say something like this? Discuss why or why not.

Technical Terms

- dialectic

- eudemonism
- existential
- gnostic
- hermeneutic

Religious Thinkers for Consideration

- Martin Buber (1878–1965)
- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955)
- Carl Michalson (1915–1965)

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CHAPTER 8

Theodore J. Weeden, Sr.
A Faith Odyssey

Overview of the Journey

As you read this chapter, note the following transitions:

- Childhood and adolescent beliefs
- Disbelief about the Apostles' Creed's depiction of Jesus.
- Mark's invention of passion narrative events.
- Three important things about Jesus.
- Jesus' vision
- God of childhood and adolescence.
- A Different view of God.
- From Death Tradition to Life Tradition.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you react to Weeden, a pastor, rejecting historic creedal beliefs about Jesus?
2. What childhood and adolescent beliefs are no longer credible to you?
3. Explain the things about the historical Jesus which have enduring importance for Weeden.
4. What acts attributed to Jesus do you question being historically true?
5. What is metaphorical truth? How does Weeden differentiate between historical truth and metaphorical truth about Jesus? How does metaphorical truth help to elucidate the significance of Jesus?
6. What experiences have helped you to overcome racism, sexism and other prejudices that deny inclusive love?
7. Why is it so difficult to live Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God and its ethic?
8. How do you image God and how does your view of God make a difference in your life and worship?
9. Are there ways you question the Apostle Paul's perspective of Jesus' death as a sacrifice for sins?
10. What is the difference between the "Death Tradition" and the "Life Tradition"?
11. Which tradition is for you more representative of the meaning of Jesus' life and death, and why?

Class Exercises

- Have class members discuss the Apostles' Creed and have each member write his or her own creed, stating beliefs about Jesus and God.
- Invite class members describe moments when they have experienced God in nature.
- Have class members describe ways in which they find religious authorities today exerting "belief-control" over people, marginalizing and rejecting those who dissent.
- Have class members list the elements of Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God and its ethic, as Weeden describes it. Then have the class discuss whether they believe in Jesus' vision and its ethic and what difference it would make in the world if the ethic of Jesus' vision were lived in the Church and in the world.

Theological/Literary Terms for Consideration

- Apostles' Creed
- canon
- Sayings Gospel Q
- kingdom of God
- metaphorical truth
- death tradition
- life tradition

Religious Thinkers for Consideration

- John B. Cobb, Jr. (1925–)
- John Dominic Crossan (1934–)
- James M. Robinson (1924–)

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CHAPTER 9

Walter Wink
The Myth of the Human Jesus

Overview of the Journey

As you read this chapter, note the elements of the journey:

- Accessing Jesus
- The historical method
- Myth of the historical Jesus and the human Jesus
- The unleashing of Jesus

Discussion Questions

1. How does the quest for the historical Jesus result in the myth of the human Jesus?
2. Why can't there be an objective view of Jesus as he really was? In what ways do we project our views and needs into the search for the historical Jesus?
3. Do you agree "No scholar can construct a picture of Jesus beyond the level and spiritual awareness that she or he has attained"? Defend your position.
4. What was Jesus' original impulse and how is it related to structures of domination?
5. How are you willing to change in soul, mind and passion for justice by what you discover in the quest for the historical Jesus?
6. What if Jesus was "just like us"? How would that affect our faith?
7. How do you feel about the term, "Christian myth"?
8. How do you react to the idea that there is a domination system in place in our society today?
9. Respond to Wink's statement: "The churches have largely failed to continue Jesus' mission."
10. Historical research has provided information about Jesus, the human being. Wink says that information provides an image of someone who is "numinously activating, religiously compelling, and spiritually transformative." What would a faith community based on that image look like? Would it be Christian or something else? In what ways?
11. Wink says the biblical text is not a "Rorschach inkblot onto which any conceivable interpretation can be read." Discuss your perspective on that statement. (You will want to reflect on how the Bible is used to support positions in social discussions.)

12. Discuss the statement: "For no one was aware, until Albert Schweitzer exposed it, that the real driving force behind this scholarly exertion was in fact a modern longing to be encountered by the divine."

Class Exercises

- Write a mythology about yourself; how is your historical self different from your mythological self?
- Find a newspaper article from several different newspapers around the world about the same topic on the same date. What are the "historical facts"? What mythologies are evident? What appears to be influencing the reporters?
- Speaking about the Bible, Wink says the following on page 105:

I listen intently to the Book. But I do not acquiesce in it. I rail at it. I make accusations. I censure it for endorsing patriarchy, violence, anti-Judaism, homophobia, and slavery. It rails back at me, accusing me of greed, presumption, narcissism, and cowardice. We wrestle. We roll on the ground, neither of us capitulating, until it wounds my thigh with "new-ancient" words. And the Holy Spirit is right there the whole time, strengthening us both.

Describe how you study and perhaps wrestle with the messages you find in the Bible. Respond to the specific issues Wink surfaces as requiring censure. Reflect on your own issues with biblical texts and concepts.

Theological Terms for Consideration

- domination system
- historical critical method
- historical Jesus
- historiography
- mythology

Theological Thinkers for Consideration

- Martin Luther King
- Nicholas Berdyaev
- Mahatma Gandhi
- Desmond Tutu
- Bruce Chilton
- Albert Schweitzer

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CHAPTER 10

David Galston
Giving Up the Truth

Overview of the Journey

As you read this chapter, note the following transitions:

- Fixed reality and flexible reality
- From Christian practice to Christian confession
- From social gospel to neo-orthodoxy
- The power of neo-orthodoxy but its incredulity
- The Death of God and the fallen theologian
- The epic and the parable
- The parable and the unserious self

Discussion Questions

1. How do parables and creeds differ in describing truth?
2. What is the weight of Christianity? Should we recite creeds we do not believe to be true? Why or why not?
3. How does the study of the historical Jesus turn us from creeds and revealed truth to the practice of life as followers of Jesus?
4. Does believing in a strictly human Jesus but not in the Christ of faith mean we should no longer claim to be Christians? Why or why not?
5. If Jesus is only the teller of parables and aphorisms, what makes him different from others who teach with stories and sayings?

Theological Terms for Consideration

- social gospel
- neo-orthodoxy
- the death of God
- eschatology
- cosmogony

Religious Thinkers for Consideration

- Douglas John Hall (1928–)
- Robert Funk (1926–2005)
- Don Cupitt (1934–)

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CHAPTER 11

Darren J. N. Middleton
Min(d)ing God

Overview of the Journey

As you read this chapter, note the elements of the journey:

- Experience as a source and norm for thinking theologically
- Mining as a metaphor for theological investigation
- The “supernatural existential”
- Theology as a form of imaginative, human construction
- Characteristics appropriate to theology’s work
- Evaluating theologies
- Process panentheism
- Fiction as a lens through which to view God
- Theology as the unblinking scrutiny of God

Discussion Questions

1. Middleton’s first sentence defines “faith.” How would you define it?
2. How does Middleton’s background provide him with his essay’s presiding metaphor for thinking theologically? What are some of the metaphors you live by, and how do they shape the way you talk about God?
3. Are you able to relate to Rahner’s examples of our “spirit” or “openness” to God (p. 125)? If so, how? If not, why not?
4. How do you respond to Middleton’s conviction that all theologies are constructed activities?
5. How might a conservative or a liberal Christian criticize Middleton’s three criteria for evaluating God-talk?
6. Why did Middleton abandon classical theism? What reservations, if any, do you have about moving away from traditional ways of picturing God?
7. What are the merits and demerits of process panentheism?
8. How might the view that the future is the future for God, not only for us, influence the way you live your life?
9. Have any novels, short stories, or poems ever illuminated abstract theological concepts such as grace, God, forgiveness, Jesus, atonement, et cetera. If so, which?
10. Process theologians think God is a verb, not a noun. What is the difference?

11. Does the idea that God is subject to change as we are subject to change have any relevance to your faith community today? If so, how? If not, why not?

Class Exercises

- Form two groups. One group is to argue that the Bible upholds the notion that God does not change. The other group is to argue from the Bible against their view. After the debate evaluate your own views.
- Write a sermon based on the insights of the process theologians mentioned in Middleton's chapter.
- Have the group tackle the following question: "What is Theology?" Share and appraise the different answers.
- Discuss the differences between classical theism and process panentheism. Which perspective do you most value and why?
- Some might say that faith's challenge is to evolve without ceasing, which implies it must present its truth afresh to each new generation. Have the group debate this idea.

Theological Terms

- classical theology
- process theology
- panentheism
- supernatural existential
- Unmoved Mover

Theological Personalities

- Karl Rahner (1904–1984)
- Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274)
- Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000)
- Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955)
- Jack Miles (1942–)

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CHAPTER 12

Susan M. (Elli) Elliott
Coming to Jesus, Coming through Jesus

Overview of the Journey

As you read this chapter, note some of the themes of the journey:

- Unfinished truth
- Embodiment and incarnation
- Praxis: changing the world and being changed
- Acceptance of the messiness of human life
- Lived faith, lived truth, and integrity
- Reverence, awe, wonder, mystery, and immensity
- Inclusion and listening
- Faith as an unfolding relationship
- Faith as a community relationship
- Presence

Discussion Questions

1. Elliott mentions very few thinkers traditionally called “theologians,” yet the life she describes has been profoundly influenced by theological thinking. List some of her theological sources. How would you characterize them? What sources have influenced your spiritual life?
2. Elliott states that “Covenant involves a commitment to life in community lived for the greater good” (p. 140). Consider the implications that living in faith may require accepting others’ real claims upon you. Does this make you uncomfortable? Who can you trust to make those claims? How do your own experiences relate to your consideration of this question?
3. Consider the statement, “Active faith is a dangerous spiritual practice” (p. 145). Elliott cites the danger to the practitioner who threatens existing power structures as well as the potential dangers posed by practitioners who needs must act with limited knowledge. Think of examples of both dangers. Consider how passivity can also do harm.
4. How does male language and imagery influence your concept of God?

Class Exercises

- As a class, write a covenant together to which all the members can commit. Start by asking members to share their understandings of the purposes of the class or group. List these so everyone can see them. Then share what

- members' understand should be expected of all the class members. Discuss the lists until you come to consensus on the elements of your class covenant. Reflect together on the process.
- Give each class member an index card and ask them to write a short legible answer to the question: "How are you living the truth?" Collect the cards, shuffle them and pass them out to the group. Ask each member to read what is written on the card they received. When all the note cards are read, invite members to discuss what they heard from others. Discuss what it means to hear truth(s) and what it means to listen. Consider this question together (without assuming that there is a correct answer): "Is it better to understand God as a presence giving us words to speak or as a presence giving us ears to hear?"

Theological Terms for Consideration

- Covenant
- Resurrection
- Forgiveness

Communities and Thinkers for Consideration

- Maximus the Confessor (580–662)
- Paolo Freire (1921–1997)
- Mary Daly (1928–)
- InterPlay Community (1989–)

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CHAPTER 13

Hal Taussig

Disparate Presence

Overview of the Journey

As you read the chapter, note the following transitions:

- The introductory challenge to objectivity and modernity

- The spiritual exercise
- The ambiguities of God language
- The proposal for a “personalized universe”
- The three characterizations of the dynamics of the universe
- Ways postmodernism de-centers the conversation
- The relationship between Jesus’ teachings and disparate presence
- Addressing evil, pain, and suffering
- Biblical scholarship’s shyness in making meaning

Discussion Questions

1. Taussig describes his own life of prayer as a major dimension of his participation in what he alternately calls “a personal universe,” “God,” or “a godless personal universe.” Do you pray (or meditate) in order to involve yourself with the universe or God? Why or why not?
2. Read John Bell’s prayer again (p. 149). What are its possibilities and limitations for you?
3. Taussig says that he prays to flowers, sunlight, and paintings, but prefers generally not to think of them as “God.” What are the advantages and disadvantages of using God language in spiritual exercises like this?
4. Is there a difference for you between looking at something in nature or art and praying? If so, what is that difference?
5. What words of poets, prophets, teachers and other writers help you understand who you are and what life means?
6. What does it mean to say that the universe is personal?
7. Are there differences between affirming a “personal God,” “a personal universe,” and “a godless personal universe”? If so, what are they?
8. How do Swimme and Berry’s description of the three basic characteristics of the universes (pp. 153–54) relate to Christian understandings of God?
9. What do you think of Michel Foucault’s and Jacques Derrida’s assertion that every articulation about objective truth reflects an inherent “power interest” of the one who proposes to know objective truth? How much or little does such thirst for power by those who would know the truth make reliable knowledge impossible?
10. What are the similarities Taussig sees between the “disparate presence” he experiences in his prayer / meditation and Jesus’ teachings about the “basileia of God”?
11. What is Taussig’s position on whether “disparate presence” can triumph over evil, pain, and suffering? What is yours?
12. Why does Taussig commend Robert Funk’s 1985 appeal for “a new fiction” in scholarship about Jesus? Do you seek fiction or fact about Jesus? Why?

Class Exercises

- Take a walk and repeat Taussig’s meditation/prayer exercise for yourself. (Use the language of John Bell, Augustine, William Laud, or Francis of Assisi.) Return and discuss whether you experienced a “disparate presence” in the objects which you addressed with the words of Bell,

- Augustine, Laud, or Francis of Assisi. What differences are there between your experience of the objects you addressed and your experience (or lack of) of God?
- Many twenty-first century thinkers characterize God as “energy” or “force.” Other, more traditional thinkers characterize God as a “person.” Divide the class into those who think of God as energy or force, those who think of God as person, those who do not believe in God, and those who are basically unsure about God. Taussig “disparate presence” sometimes appears personal (in that one seems to “pray” to it), sometimes seems something other than God (in that it is compared to “a godless personal universe), and sometimes seems like a force or energy. Have each of the four groups respond to the idea of “disparate presence” and how much it is like or different than the group’s position about God.

Theological terms for consideration

- presence
- God
- prayer
- universe
- communion
- subjectivity
- glory

Religious leaders for consideration

- Thomas Berry (1914–)
- Mary Oliver (1935–)
- Karen L. King
- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955)
- Rosemary Radford Ruether (1936–)
- David Tracy
- Sallie McFague (1933–)