

Chapter Five

Faith: The Evolution

“In life, in religion, in science, this I believe: any conviction worth its salt has chosen to cohabit with a piece of mystery, and that mystery is at the essence of the vitality and growth of the thing.” —Krista Tippett

OPENING QUESTION

“Faith is evolutionary, in every culture, and in any life.”

How has your faith (or some particular concept of faith) evolved through the experiences of your life? Are there words you use, or tenets of belief, that have remained meaningful across time and yet have become filled with new and different understandings and connotations?

DISCUSSION STARTERS

Tippett shares that the fear of the religion of her childhood was about “measuring up—about moral perfection, and the eternal cost of falling short.” In contrast, she goes on to say that at this point in her life, “faith is in interplay with moral imagination, something distinct from moral perfection.”

Does this distinction make sense to you, and how? In what ways can moral imagination (as opposed to moral perfection) be nurtured?

For many, the move from childhood into adulthood is synonymous with a shift from mystery to certainty. However, Robert Coles pinpoints the childhood quality of a “questioning spirit” as being an important trait in those who are thought of as the great figures of religion.

Have you experienced Robert Coles’s sense that mystery can be a great companion? What makes it challenging? What makes it comforting?

Consider the “Nones,” those who respond “none” when asked about their religious affiliation by pollsters. Tippett says this nonreligious space is far from being absent of spirituality; that many Nones are theologically searching, spiritually curious, and service oriented.

Explore the phrase “spiritual but not religious.” What does it mean in the world you see around you? How is this development interesting/relevant/uncomfortable for you? What challenges/opportunities does it create for your religious/spiritual identity and understanding?

Many scientists are not religious in a traditional sense—and yet Tippett finds that they often have a more robust vocabulary of wonder and mystery than many religious and are contributing to our understanding of enduring questions of meaning—where we come from, what it means to be human, how free we are to create our lives, how we understand our place in the cosmos. She quotes a geneticist who describes a spirituality of the scientist that is akin to the spirituality of a mystic.

Are you aware of, perhaps in a new way, science as a core human endeavor, and as something that is resonant with spiritual questions?

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks sums up the Jewish imperative saying, “To be true to your faith is a blessing to others regardless of their faith.”

Have you had, or seen, an experience of this?

KEY QUOTATIONS

“If God is God—and that in itself is a crazy shorthand, begging volumes of unfolding of the question—he/she does not need us craven. He/she desires us, needs us, grateful and attentive and courageous in the everyday.”

“To invoke some of my favorite classic approaches to a definition, if God is the ‘mind behind the universe,’ God honors our minds. If God is the ‘ground of being,’ God blesses our wholeness.”

“Faith is evolutionary, in every culture, and in any life.”

“Wisdom, of the everyday sort, is about how we reckon with the surprises and mysteries that make life life as opposed to stasis. Mystery lands in us as a humbling fullness of reality we cannot sum up or pin down. Such moments change us from the inside, if we let them.”

“Wondering is a useful way to begin to speak of a shared vocabulary of mystery we might embrace across our disciplines, our contrasting certainties, and our doubts.”

“Once upon a time I took in mystery as a sensation best left unexamined. Now I experience it as a welcome.”

“Spiritual life is a way of dwelling with perplexity—taking it seriously, searching for its purpose as well as its perils, its beauty as well as its ravages.”

“Spiritual life is a reasonable, reality-based pursuit. It can have mystical entry points and destinations, to be sure. But it is in the end about befriending reality, the common human experience of mystery included. It acknowledges the full drama of the human condition. It attends to beauty and pleasure; it attends to grief and pain and the enigma of our capacity to resist the very things we long for and need.”

“At this point in my life, I find ‘sin’ a useful inheritance from my religious mother tongue, not merely a condemnation of this act or that act, this transgression or that wrong, but a piece of psychological clarity.”

“So much of what we orient towards in culture numbs a little going in and helps us avoid the reckoning we actually long for—the push to self-knowledge and deeper lived integrity.”

“Maybe this is another way to think about original sin—the ingrained lure of the possibility of going numb, a habit of acquiescence to it.”

“The phrase ‘spiritual but not religious,’ now common social parlance, is just the tip of an iceberg that has already moved on. We are among the first peoples in human history who do not broadly inherit religious identity as a given, a matter of kin and tribe, like hair color and hometown. But the very fluidity of this—the possibility of choice that arises, the ability to craft and discern one’s own spiritual bearings—is not leading to the decline of spiritual life but its revival. It is changing us, collectively.”

“I don’t find it surprising that young people born in the 1980s and 1990s have distanced themselves from the notion of religious declaration, growing up as they did in an era in which strident religious voices became toxic forces in American cultural life.”

“The growing universe of the Nones—the new nonreligious—is one of the most spiritually vibrant and provocative spaces in modern life. It is not a world in which spiritual life is absent. It is a world that resists religious excesses and shallows.”

“The Nones of this age are ecumenical, humanist, transreligious. But in their midst are analogs to the original monastics: spiritual rebels and seekers on the margins of established religion, pointing tradition back to its own untamable, countercultural, service-oriented heart.”

“Religion, in the sweep of the drama of human history and the contemporary globe, has a power to magnify the worst of what humanity is capable of as well as the best.”

“Fear comes out in public looking like anger, when it comes to nations as well as individuals.”

“The longer I live, the less comprehensible I find the notion of a God who listens, yields, takes account of our struggles. Yet at the very same time, I see that an undeniable aspect of the science of our age, mirrored in the disarray of journalism as I first learned to practice it, is the acknowledgment that the very notion of objectivity is an illusion. Simply put, the human participant is always a participant, never merely an observer. Somehow our subjectivity, our presence, our wills matter cosmically, whether we want them to or not.”

“I apprehend—with a knowledge that is as much visceral as cognitive—that God is love. That somehow the possibility of care that can transform us—love muscular and resilient—is an echo of a reality behind reality, embedded in the creative force that gives us life.”

“I cherish my conversations with cosmologists and physicists. They are standing on ground where religious thinkers reigned until very recently in human history, the sphere in which we imagine the nature of the cosmos and our place in it.”

“This is not a question physicists might pose, but it is a question they plant in me: might our evolving insights into the laws of physics eventually fill in for what our imagination and our words have always called God?”

“Both the scientist and the mystic live boldly with the discoveries they have made, all the while anticipating better discoveries to come.”

“I honor the integrity and necessity of doctrine and theologies that have emerged in conversation across generations and across time. But so many of our categories, defined and wrapped in forms and institutions that no longer quite work, had become too narrow. Certain kinds of religiosity turned themselves into boxes into which too little light and air could enter or escape.”

“Dogmatic atheism is no more intellectually credible than dogmatic faith. Both presume a certainty in things unproven that a spirit of inquiry, a virtue of investigation, inclines to nuance.”

“Our traditions are vast repositories of conversation across generations about the intricacies of really loving one another and of living in hope.”

“Religious institutions are struggling to reimagine their institutional health and their contribution to the unfolding world. This struggle itself is leading to invention and renewal of sacred spaces as common spaces where the virtues we’re better understanding can be practiced and applied.”

“In so many ways I see the new dynamics of spiritual life in our time as gifts to the wisdom of the ages, even as they unsettle the foundations of faith as we’ve known it for what feels like forever.”

“Our greatest aspirations and virtues have always relied on a measure of inner equanimity. And this is something many of us are learning to tend better, more consciously, precisely as the noisy world feels like it is pulling us apart.”