Finding God outside the church walls

The Spirit is God’s wild card, played over and over again when old forms fail.

by Barbara Brown Taylor in the July 15, 2020 issue

(Illustration by Tim Cook)

During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it’s tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one’s mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939, in which we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, “How my mind has changed.” This essay is the ***second*** *in the new series.*

The idea of God has been dying for most of my life. When I was a sophomore in high school, I used to hang out at a coffee house in the basement of Glenn Memorial Church on the campus of Emory University in Atlanta. My father, who once taught psychology there, appreciated the writing of an Emory religion professor named Thomas J. J. Altizer. There were also a lot of books by Alan Watts, D. T. Suzuki, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti lying around our house.

In 1966, *Time* magazine came out with its first text-only cover. “Is God Dead?” the headline read, in giant red letters against a black background. No one I knew bothered to read the article inside, which explained that Altizer and his like-minded colleagues were not the first to surmise God’s demise. Nor did they all mean the same thing when they talked about the death of God, although two world wars, the Holocaust, and the racist violence exposed by the American civil rights movement figured centrally in their thinking. How could a benevolent God live through human catastrophes like those?

Altizer was gone by the time I became a religion major at Emory three years later, responding to my secular childhood by diving headlong into contemporary theology, biblical exegesis, and faith-related social justice. Nothing I read about God or God’s absence frightened me. What frightened me were the assassinations of Medgar Evers, John and Bobby Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. The war in Vietnam frightened me, especially as college boys my age were drafted to serve. The M˜y Lai Massacre frightened me, along with the Ohio National Guard’s shooting of 13 student protesters at Kent State in 1970. I remember staring at the picture of Jeffrey Miller, one of the four who was killed, lying face down on the pavement in a puddle of blood with his hands underneath him. He had been shot through the mouth.

Never did I hold God responsible for any of that. If anything, I saw Jesus in the middle of it all, bleeding with everyone else while he called his followers to *do something*. I went to seminary on the tide of that call, became an Episcopalian, and worked at various jobs for another seven years before clearing the hurdles to ordination. Then I served in full-time parish ministry for 15 years before becoming a college professor for another 20. On the 50th anniversary of the *Time* cover, a follow-up article noted that the number of Americans who believe in God had declined from 97 percent in 1966 to 63 percent in 2014.

That change did not surprise me. What surprised me was that the students in my classes who distanced themselves from religion often knew more about the faith they had left behind than the students who stayed put without question. The distancers’ suspicion of words such as *sin, saved, believe,* and *God* taught me about the aftereffects of spiritual abuse, changing the way I used religious code words both inside and outside of class. I no longer assumed everyone heard them the same way I did, or even meant the same thing when they used the words in positive ways. The great gift of the unbelievers in class was to send me back to my historic vocabulary

list to explore its meaning in the present.

Take *church*, for instance. I do not speak of “the church” anymore, although I miss the idea of one body with many parts and hope there is more unity in the divine mind than is apparent on earth. On earth there are many kinds of Christian churches, some of which are not in communion with one another, some of which have suffered grievous ruptures in their own bodies, and some of which do more to divide people than to heal their divisions. Many remain sources of life and hope, not only for their members but also for their neighborhoods. I attend churches, speak and preach in churches, fund churches, pray for churches, and count on churches to transcend their own self-interest like no other social organization can. I just do not speak of them as *one* anymore, or as the only places where God is at home.

Last Sunday I passed a little country church with a sign out front that said, “Come on in. God has been waiting for you here.” It is hard to think of anyone who believes that anymore. If God is waiting anywhere, God is waiting everywhere. That is a big change for someone who once believed God’s address was the church. Now I believe that churches are where people go to learn the rituals, stories, songs, and ways of being together that help them recognize the divine presence wherever else they go. They are wherever people practice the way of life that makes all life holy.

Another way to say this is that the distinction between sacred and secular realms no longer holds. In Wendell Berry’s words, “There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places.” Yet one of the unintended consequences of this more unified worldview is that more and more couples are as happy being married in a meadow as in a church or observing the sabbath on a hike with friends instead of singing hymns with a congregation. There are plenty of reasons to worry about where this is going without assuming that absence from church means absence from God.

Every time I hear someone my age ask, “How are we going to get the young people back to church?” I say, “Why don’t you ask them where they are finding meaning instead?” This is the exciting part. Not just what the next generation of seekers is doing, but what the Holy Spirit is doing in them that can enliven my generation as well. With a house full of antiques and a head of white hair, I am the last person in the world to assert that *new* is better than *old*, but I take Jesus’ teaching about wineskins to heart.

There is new wine being poured that old skins cannot contain. If I want a taste—and I do—then I accept the invitation to refresh my vocabulary, retool my theology, relocate my boundaries, and recalibrate my calling. I even accept feeling lost much of the time, since losing my bearings is how I discover things I might not have found any other way.

Two recent experiences of church epitomize what I am saying. The first happened a few months ago, when I finally pulled off the expressway outside Atlanta to investigate a huge new church building that had been under construction for months. The lines of the design were clean and soaring. The windows in the broad steeple were clear. The only unusual thing about the architecture was the way the corners of the roof turned up at the tips, like a pagoda. The sign in front said a lot, but the only line I could read was the one in English: Holy Vietnamese Martyrs Catholic Church.

A little research filled in the details. The martyrs include 117 Vietnamese Catholics and European missionaries who died in Vietnam during persecutions in the 18th and 19th centuries. Four thousand people attended the dedication of the building on Thanksgiving Day 2019. The congregation has a membership of 1,600 families, with more than 1,000 young people enrolled in religious education programs. The church is located in Gwinnett County, which became a majority-minority county in 2010. *Where have I been?*

The other significant church experience happened several years ago during a trip to Belgium, where overall church attendance has dropped dramatically to less than 10 percent of the population. My family and I were in the old city of Bruges, exploring its rich history, chocolate, and beer, when we came across the Gothic Revival Church of St. Magdalene, built in the mid 1800s. The door was wide open in the middle of a weekday. A banner hung next to it announcing an experiment in space, humanity, and religion. *What?* We went inside.

The first thing I saw was a wide, square pool of water where the pews should have been, with a woman in a swing going back and forth above it. The ropes of the swing went way up into the rafters, so her arcs were slow and long. She held a terrier in her lap. Beyond her I saw a giant, empty picture frame suspended between the main body of the church and the altar. Below it was a plain table with 12 chairs around it. The place did not try to tell me anything. It asked me things instead.

How deep do you suppose the water is? Do you want to wade in? How does the view through the frame change depending on what side you are on? Would you like to sit in one of the chairs? How about the swing? Please do, the place said. Please do.

I toured the interactive panels posted in several languages on the walls. I discovered that St. Magdalene was part of the Open Churches network, dedicated to keeping sacred spaces open to anyone drawn inside, whether for spiritual or cultural reasons or simple curiosity. Some of the churches still had active congregations and some did not. Some were Catholic and some were Protestant.

What struck me was not that the church had been repurposed. There were plenty of churches back home that had become restaurants, concert halls, or condominiums. What struck me was that someone had decided to foot the bill for keeping the church open as a sacred space, though one with no creed, cultural majority, or set rules of conduct. I remember my hour there as an hour in the heart of God.

I could not have imagined either of these churches 20 years ago. Now their existence changes what I mean when I say *church*. So does the Church of the Common Ground which meets in an Atlanta city park, the North Point Community Church with one holographic preacher on several campuses, and the Boat Church that gathers on Lake Rabun a few miles from where I live. They are as different as they can be, these new wineskins. Collectively, they show me what happens when the Spirit overflows, spilling into the world with more porous boundaries than ever before.

My understanding of priesthood has spilled over in similar ways. When I was ordained more than three decades ago, the vows I made centered on congregational life. My bishop at the time had tried to talk me out of it. “Why do you want to narrow your ministry?” he asked. In the concentric circles he drew on a piece of paper for me, the ministry of the laity was by far the largest, active in business, education, medicine, and law. The ministry of deacons was smaller, focused on assisting bishops and priests to engage the needs of the world. The ministry of priests was even smaller, focused on preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. “By the time you get to my job,” my bishop said, tapping his tiny circle, “it’s hard to get out of the building.”

But I did not want to get out of the building. I was drawn to the altar and all it involved: the performance of sacred mysteries, the recital of timeless prayers, the

sharing of heavenly nourishment, the blessing of divine presence. Everything else I did flowed from there. The preaching, teaching, parish life, and pastoral care all radiated from the portal of the altar and returned there on Sunday, the first day of the week.

I loved the vestments, the candles, the silver cups and plates, the smell of old wood and starched linen. I did not always like the people, but they did not always like me either. Church brought out the best in us. It called us to something higher than getting our own way. That was a good life for a long time.

Then it came to an end, in part because I no longer wanted to be set apart the way clergy are set apart, both by themselves and other people. My wardrobe had become too limited. My heart had become too managed. My relationships had become too prescribed. At my going-away party from the last parish I served, my hosts grabbed me by both arms and threw me into their swimming pool. When I surfaced to see all the other laughing people dog-paddling in the water with me, the promise of rebirth became real.

I still miss the pageantry, the silverware, and the familiar ritual of what happens around traditional altars, but the essential actions and intentions of priesthood turn out to be portable. One lays hands on ordinary things, recognizes the holiness in them, says a blessing over them, and breaks them into bits small enough to share. One strives to communicate good news. One recommits every day to the teachings of Christ. One labors with others to build up the family of God.

As I moved from church to classroom, the biggest changes involved my clothes and my vocabulary. I stopped wearing a clergy collar primarily so students would recognize me as their teacher and not their pastor, but also because I wanted to find out how people talked when they did not think there was a minister in the room. They censored themselves less, which I liked. I censored myself less too. It was like being in the swimming pool all the time.

My vocabulary took a lot longer to figure out. The congregational we no longer worked, as in, “We believe.” I could no longer count on a worshipful attitude, familiarity with scripture, specialized theological language, or denominational esprit de corps. The faces in front of me changed every semester. Though the majority were white, they represented a wide variety of religious traditions and none.

I met Jehovah's Witnesses, Messianic Jews, Seventh-day Adventists, Latter-day Saints, and Holiness Pentecostals for the first time in my life, along with Muslims one generation away from Afghanistan, Libya, Mali, and Sierra Leone. A student from mainland China dropped my world religions class as soon as she discerned how many of her classmates still believed in God. For a while there was a small clutch of neo-pagans on campus who prayed to the Goddess. In short order, I realized how limited my experience of the divine truly was, and what a rarified vocabulary I had for speaking of it.

I think of that now as the beginning of my theological humiliation, which was one of the best things that ever happened to me. Whatever high ground I once thought I held was lost on one side to the spiritual depth and devotional energy of the religions we studied in class and on the other side to the candor of young people whose down-to-earth concerns exposed the atmospheric haze of mine. I was a student teacher, in every sense of the phrase, learning on the job how to approach my subject with the humility that precedes all soulful education.

This vocational change brought my writing life to a halt for several years. I continued to accept speaking engagements, trying to figure out the difference between a lecture and a sermon, an audience and a congregation. When it came time to think about a book-length project again, I asked a literary agent to help me write for a broader audience than before.

"Why don't you send me some ideas?" he said, so I did: (1) a book on the Book of Job, (2) a book of daily readings, (3) a book of thousand-word essays, and (4) a book on my decision to leave parish ministry. "In my mind," I wrote, "this volume is called *Leaving Church*, but I don't think I'm ready to write it yet." He wrote back, saying as kindly as he could that there was only one interesting idea on the list, and it was the last one.

The book took another two years to write, during which my mind changed so many times that I have lost track. The congregational "we" of the sermon gave way to the intimate "I" of first-person narrative. The wish to tell the private truth about my ministry surpassed the wish to serve the public impression. The imagined reader who might never have set foot in a church emerged alongside the Christian listeners I knew so well.

I remember the first editor who showed me how much work I had to do. Beside the word *deacon*, she wrote, “Please define.” Beside the word *sacrament*, she wrote, “Can you explain?” When I quoted a passage from the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus tells his followers, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple,” she wrote, “Check source; this can’t be right.” When I said I did not know anyone but Jesus who praises spiritual poverty, she wrote, “If this is true, is there another way to phrase it? This sounds so negative.”

On the same current that had once swept me into narrative preaching, I decided to trust the power of story and to become the most reliable narrator I could. This involved tucking my specialized Christian language into a velvet-lined box where I could find it when I needed it, then taking all the time necessary to recall what kinds of human experience that language was invented to describe.

What was the soundtrack of salvation? How did sin smell? When was the last time I saw someone redeemed, and how could I tell? What did people mean when they said they were filled with the Spirit? Was the feeling dense or airy?

I knew there was more than one answer to all of these questions, which was why I stuck close to my own. It was the sound of the authentic I was after, trusting that readers who recognized it on the page would recognize it in their lives too, whatever form it took.

When one of the first reviews of *Leaving Church* was published (in this very magazine), I received an email with the subject line, “Review of You.” This placed an icicle between my ribs like no sermon review ever had. A small flurry of disapproval followed the book’s publication. I lost a few dear old friends. I gained a large number of new readers and received surprising letters from people in high places who said, “Me too.” Before the book had been out a year, it showed me a whole new way forward, which had a deep connection to where I had been.

“People don’t want you to tell them what they need to know,” the master preacher Fred Craddock once told me. “They want you to say what they want to say but don’t know how.” That became my watchword, providing both the subject matter and the relationship to readers that have remained constants ever since.

My mind is still changing about who I am, exactly, and where I belong. In the language of social location, I have learned to identify myself as a privileged

American boomer, a neurotypical mainline Christian cisgender woman of Western European descent. At the same time, I have felt increasingly at home with people who do not share my demographic. “At home” may not be the right phrase, since I am so often a guest. “Alive and alert” may be closer to the truth. When I am far from home, receiving the hospitality of strangers, I am most alive and alert to the holy communion of the human condition, which takes place on more altars than anyone can count.

When I go back to read about the “death of God” controversy of my youth, I discover that at least one way of understanding God’s demise was the divine willingness to be poured entirely out—into the body of Christ who died and rose again or into the body of the world, full of human beings who would have to stop looking to heaven for their cure and start taking care of each other instead. Altizer saw both the end of Christendom and the rise of secular sensibility as prerequisites to any rediscovery of the sacred.

All these years later, that sounds familiar. My former ideas of church, priesthood, sacred language, and beloved community have all been poured into the body of the world. This has changed my mind about my primary belonging, which is to the human family first and then to the Christian family that teaches me how to be human. It has changed my mind about the divine mission, which is not growing religion but healing the planet with any partners willing to report to the ER. It has changed my mind about Christ’s gift to humankind, which is not about paying debt but about showing what divine life and death look like in the flesh.

Above all, what these changes have cultivated is my devotion to the third person of the Trinity. After years and years of wearing crosses, I am wearing birds instead, knowing full well that a flame, a strong wind, or a pillar of cloud could also fill the bill. That is part of what there is to love about the genderless, image-bending presence of the Holy Spirit, which so easily escapes human capture. The Spirit is God’s wild card, played over and over again when old forms fail and old wells run dry, making way for new and surprising births to take place.

Another thing to love is what bad taste the Spirit has, paying no attention to what I find attractive, qualified, dignified, or smart. The Spirit just keeps choosing the path of least resistance to more life, happy to run over me if I insist on standing in the way.

I also wear Celtic trinity knots and circles with three waves in the middle. But the birds are my favorites because they are pointed down. Heaven has been broken open to allow for their descent. They are pouring themselves out in the direction of earth. I trust them more than I can say, and I hope that never changes.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “At home with strangers.”