

Explaining Christianity to the Unchurched

(originally published as "Talking to Strangers After 9/11")
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Books discussed:

Visions: The Soul's Path to the Sacred, by Eddie Ensley (Loyola Press, 2000)

Spiritual But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America, by Robert C. Fuller (Oxford University Press, 2001)

Dematerializing: Taming the Power of Possessions, by Jane Hammerslough. (Perseus Publishing, 2001)

The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life, by Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon (Abingdon Press, 1999).

Preaching to Skeptics and Seekers, by Frank G. Honeycutt (Abingdon Press, 2001).

The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies, by Robert E. Lane (Yale University Press, 2000).

Raising Faith-Filled Kids: Ordinary Opportunities to Nurture Spirituality at Home, by Tom McGrath (Loyola Press, 2001)

Broken Tablets: Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves, edited by Rachel S. Mikva (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999).

Quantum Change: When Epiphanies and Sudden Insights Transform Ordinary Lives, by William R. Miller and Janet C'de Baca (Guilford Press, 2001) .

Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion, by Wade Clark Roof (Princeton University Press, 1999)

The Zen Commandments: Ten Suggestions for a Life of Inner Freedom, by Dean Sluyter (Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Putnam, 2001)

Circle of Grace: Praying With--and for--Your Children, by Gregory and Suzanne M. Wolfe (Ballantine Books, 2000).

The Doonesbury cartoon for October 6, 2001, recounts a conversation between Boopsie, the erstwhile actress, and the Reverend Scott, concerning Jerry Falwell's interpretation that the September 11 attacks were God's punishment for America's growing willingness to recognize and include gay people (You can see the whole cartoon at www.doonesbury.com by searching their archive.)

"God hates suffering so much," Scott explains, "that he allowed his only son to suffer and die, to show how much more powerful love is than evil." "I know, Scott," she replies. "I know that to get through this I'll eventually have to invite him back into my life . . . Him, and Oprah, and lots of Mint Milanos."

"I think He'd be okay with that," Scott concludes. Scott knows what a dimwit Boopsie is, and so do Doonesbury readers." Gary Trudeau uses Scott's gentle response to point out that God's love is also more powerful than the easy narcissism of a prosperous society." If Boopsie does invite God back into her life, cookies will have to give way to Communion, and the ersatz chumminess of talk shows give way to real communities." Boopsie may be speaking Trudeau's mind when she confesses a need not simply for God but also for solid theology at times like these." It has been decades since the Doonesbury strip has spoken so astutely about contemporary life.

As we all know, church attendance surged after September 11 and, as of this point in mid-October, that trend has continued." If Gary Trudeau of all people is rethinking religion in some personal way, who knows what's going on generally? So I have scanned my shelves looking for books useful in the effort to minister graciously to all the unlikely people who may be giving God another look in these times." More than once I have chuckled grimly that my part in a national emergency has been to sit drinking tea and reading books, but that does seem to be the case." And yet, as I read my way through these books, I realized what bounty I had found, ripe for harvest." It's an eclectic mix, but surely there is grace in that as well.

Robert Fuller's *Spiritual But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* recounts the long and vibrant history of unchurched spiritualities in the US. "It is no post-60s phenomenon, and no passing fad either." It's as American as our egalitarianism and "frontier" spirit, as deeply seated as our suspicion of the corrupt "old world" and its hierarchical ways. Fuller's historical sketch is quick, accurate, readable, and engaging: all the makings of a classic. "To engage the American seekers who see themselves as "spiritual but not religious," religion ought to make use of modern knowledge generally, including science, technology, and world religions; religion ought to attend to what makes for a solidly meaningful life in the here-and-now rather than devoting all its energies to the vague hereafter, and, finally, religion should speak to and from the vital encounter with God (pp. 98-99). Surely Christianity can do all of that! *Spiritual But Not Religious* is indispensable reading for anyone interested in the future of Christianity in America."

Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* contends that contemporary religious practice has changed in response to the spiritual quest both for the experience of the sacred and for a unified self. "The "spiritual marketplace" of Roof's title is the array of competing resources for that quest--not just churches but also personal social networks, the publishing industry, and the media." Chapter Five, "A Quest for What?" is particularly important for how carefully it construes the relationship between the (subjectively) spiritual and (institutional) religious in our times. "Like Robert Fuller, Wade Clark Roof refuses to impugn the motives or the maturity of individuals honestly seeking a deeper and personally transforming understanding of life, whether or not they have a rigorous, skillful command of systematic theological discourse."

Frank G. Honeycutt, *Preaching to Skeptics and Seekers*, recounts his experience in a D.Min project endeavoring better to understand what both unchurched skeptics and new converts heard in his sermons. "His creativity and courage are remarkable; so is his pastoral sense." This is an intriguing book in many different ways. "I was astounded that he was astounded by how negatively his agnostics

responded to traditional teachings about sin and grace, but I suppose that may reflect how often I am in conversation with highly educated, sharply critical skeptics."Honeycutt's panelists strike me as quite representative, and if this very fine priest was surprised then surely others will be as well."Sitting in a back pew, I have often wondered whether preachers hear what they are saying in any plain, literal, logical way."

Any seeker coming to church again or for the first time arrives not only in the wake of terrorist attacks but also burdened by the deeper suffering of trying to live without conscious connection to God."One can see the enormous "God-shaped hole" in various utterly secular accounts of the contemporary malaise which underlies or motivates so many spiritual seekers.

Two remarkably parallel volumes of this sort are Jane Hammerslough, *Dematerializing: Taming the Power of Possessions* and Robert E. Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*."Hammerslough argues that our culture "exults in the tangible as a means of expressing the deepest feelings," which is to say that we try to make possessions compensate for deficiency in various kinds of feelings--self-esteem, understanding, belonging, love, control, etc."Although *Dematerializing* is light, popular fare, Hammerslough is also persistently, uncommonly astute."This may be a useful, thought-provoking book in many kinds of parish contexts.

The God-shaped hole emerges from this book if one takes her claims one step further."We are not simply buying stuff rather than honestly face our own submerged emotional needs."That's true enough; but there's more to it."Consumerism also serves to mute the human yearning for God."Glitzy consumerist stuff serves as an idol, as a whole pantheon of false promises that what God gives freely is also for sale at the mall if only we shop with enough persistence and skill.

Robert E. Lane, the Eugene Meyer Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Yale University, has written a massive scholarly tome essentially on the same subject, implicitly delineating the very same God-shaped hole with quite an array

of sociological and economic statistics."Although disposable income has been going up, he explains, measures of subjective well-being have been going down."Once past the level of real poverty, having more money does not make for more happiness."In fact, at ever-higher levels of earnings, work can more actively interfere with what does make for happiness."Since in a free market democracy people can change their choices if what they have doesn't please them, or no longer pleases them, neither economics nor political science seem able to account for this increasing unhappiness."

The foundations of human happiness, according to his empirical evidence, are affectionate personal relationships and supportive community."Neither are available for purchase, and so the market system per se fails to track them along with all the other transactions it monitors."No wonder socio-economics cannot account for nor facilitate happiness! More deeply yet, he worries, people seem not to know what will make them happy in the long run, or they are somehow unable to make the choices necessary for maintaining relationships and community allegiance in their own lives."Lane offers not the least hint that he knows how theologians might account for his findings--although of course that silence may due to be "professionalism" within his subculture."Either way, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* is incredibly strange and more than a little sad, but it certainly documents the abiding unhappiness and isolation afflicting many of those strangers standing in church doorways all over this nation

On the other hand, immediate, inexplicable encounters with God's love and reassurance are known to be commonplace during and after disasters of any kind."Surely some of those showing up in churches for the first time have been rattled to their bones by such moments."Two very sophisticated new books examine such moments with a wonderful mix of sympathy and insight."

William R. Miller and Janet C'de Baca take a professionally psychological angle on the issue with *Quantum Change: When Epiphanies and Sudden Insights Transform Ordinary Lives*."In what I suspect was Janet C'de Baca's doctoral dissertation, they interviewed people whose lives had changed for the good in

some permanent way after an utterly unexpected inner experience, and they studied these people and their various stories from a whole variety of critically intelligent ways.”

They ask all the questions I would want to ask, and then some.”They do so with real grace, with deeply professional, compassionate respect, and without either presuming or excluding the possibility that at least some of these experiences are encounters with the Sacred.”That’s an extremely delicate rhetorical balance, and in places the text fairly glows with the polish of careful and repeated revision.”Because they are not insisting upon God as the only explanation, readers who try to rule God out *a priori* are by implication being a bit simple-minded, a bit defensively narrow-minded.”That’s a useful starting point for all sorts of conversations.”

The other must-read on this topic is Eddie Ensley, *Visions: The Soul’s Path to the Sacred*.”Ensley is a Native American and a Roman Catholic layman with substantial theological education.”Visions, Ensley argues--encounters with the numinous, broadly considered, not necessarily visual experiences--are both commonplace in human experience and quite specifically sacramental.”By that he means that the form of what is experienced is fully human and intrapsychic in origins; the content or the meaning is “of God.”

Disentangling the two or articulating the meaning is (a) never entirely possible (b) subject to serious error and (c) possible only within the social and intellectual tradition of those experienced with spiritual discernment.”Visions are not “hot lines to heaven.” But they are both real and absolutely central to Christian tradition through the ages.”If post-Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism lead us to neglect or ignore such moments, we impoverish our own awareness of the immediate presence of God.”Chapter Fifteen, “On spiritual emergencies” ought to be part of clinical-pastoral education across the board.”Ensley’s book is also one of the wisest and most consoling things I have read in years.”

Although either of these books might generate lively discussion at a retreat or for small-group ministry in spiritual formation, I would advise caution.”Both poetic

and mystic traditions warn that there can be something overwhelmingly powerful, irresistibly persuasive, and sometimes utterly terrifying about the fusion of unconscious and genuinely sacred “stuff” in what William Wordsworth called “spots of time.” In some situations, Ensley’s lovely exercises might get badly out of hand.”

It would be a serious mistake if a leader allowed group dynamics to pressure people to open themselves to such experiences.”But group dynamics are notoriously difficult to control, and their impact on vulnerable individuals is unpredictable.”Leaders should not use these exercises in group situations unless they are both thoroughly trained and personally gifted in how to maintain safe psychological boundaries and how to cope with the consequences if such boundaries fail and someone is assaulted by more unconscious material than he or she can manage.”Even the usual run of psychobabble-self-help, in the hands of a mere busy-body of a retreat leader, does enough damage already.” We have all seen that.”These books are incomparably more serious in their potential for good and for ill in that regard.”

What about adult-ed programming in the wake of all this? Here is a stunning trio of books that could carry Sunday mornings from here to Memorial Day: Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life*; *Broken Tablets: Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves*, ed. Rachel S. Mikva; and Dean Sluyter, *The Zen Commandments: Ten Suggestions for a Life of Inner Freedom*.”

Hauerwas and Willimon contend that “The commandments are not guidelines for human life in general.”They are a countercultural way of life for those who know who they are and whose they are.”Their function is . . . to produce a people who are, in our daily lives, a sign, a signal, a witness that God has not left the world to its own devices” (p. 18).”The chapters that follow engage a lively array of classical teachings in a manner that reliably down-to-earth and intended for congregational readers.”I was both intellectually engaged and personally challenged: what more can one ask?

Mikva's collection of essays by scholars and rabbis offers short, learned, intensely imagined engagements with the Commandments. Midrash stories and parables abound."I learned a lot that I am very grateful to know, particularly in such vividly accessible terms."This, for instance, from the commentary on the Second Commandment: "It would be idolatrous to assert that any human creation is the 'one true religion.' Judaism simply insists on faithfulness."... You can never know whose wife (or religion) is the fairest of them all, anyway, since such knowledge requires the intimacy of a life lived together (or the journey of a religious life)."The purpose of religion is not to learn what is good, but to learn to do what is good, not to disclose secrets but to achieve persons."This is the discipline of living in faithfulness" (p. 19).

Despite the flip title of his book, Dean Sluyter is also quite committed to the idea that only by disciplined lives can we escape the mundane misery, anxiety, and low-grade hostility that so often seems to characterize human experience."But he insists that these disciplines do not require any particular belief at all."This is "just do it" pseudo-Buddhism."

Despite his many lively and useful insights, Sluyter makes two serious mistakes."The first is how he fails to recognize that he is in fact making a doctrinal, metaphysical claim when he asserts that the ultimate nothingness of everything is nonetheless compatible with absolute moral responsibility for the immediate impact of our behavior in the here-and-now. Despite his "believe whatever you want" relativism, classical Buddhist teachings do in fact fund his argument--or else he loses the essential anchor to his basic claim that his methods can alleviate our suffering."

Secondly, he fails to appreciate the cost of what he is asking, and/ or the futility of thinking that anything much can come from meditation pursued as a technique in the absence of belief (Buddhist or otherwise)."Maybe you can lower your blood pressure or circulating levels of cortisol, but it is far more complicated than he realizes to develop the moral wherewithal to resist greed, deceit, self-centeredness, hostility, etc."

There is something all-too-common about such psychologically naive misappropriation or simple mangling of Buddhist teachings about “nothingness.” But the inability to achieve such spiritual goods by mere technique may ultimately encourage a return to serious belief (Buddhist or Christian) by those seeking something not only more substantial but also more fruitful.

Finally, new visitors may claim to be more worried about their children than themselves.”Fine.”Hand them a copy of Gregory and Suzanne M. Wolfe, *Circle of Grace: Praying With--and For--Your Children*. (Greg Wolfe is also editor and publisher of the journal *Image*.) We can ourselves learn to pray, they argue, by praying with and for our children.

“Children are born with sacramental vision,” they explain. “It’s standard equipment for them.”Their imaginations are always seeing the humble stuff of life--from tattered dolls to grubby building blocks--as standing for glorious realities that transcend mere appearance.”. . . The sad truth is that as we grow up, we lose our sacramental vision and become cynical literalists” (p. 43).”Such clear and gentle explanations take up about a hundred pages, followed by 150 pages of simple, articulate, non-syrupy prayers from a global collection of sources.”This is *the* book to give as a baptismal gift!

Of course anxiety about children in these days is hardly limited to spiritual-seeker newcomers.”Plenty of established congregants are going to be anxious about providing their children with a stronger faith foundation from which to cope with today’s anxieties--or tomorrow’s tragedies. An excellent choice here is Tom McGrath’s *Raising Faith-Filled Kids*.”What we want for our kids, he argues, is to live fully, which is to say accepting the pain that cannot be escaped in this life.”To do so, they need a faith that “enables us to go through and even transcend the pain and disappointment” (p. 19).”For McGrath, long-time editor of *U.S. Catholic* magazine, we can do that if we “see those moments within the give-and-take of daily living as ways in which God is present and calling [us] to live life more abundantly” (p. 5).”That recognition will be good news for parents and for children alike.

Although I started reading this stack of books with post-attack newcomers in mind, I found myself feeling progressively more grounded, more sanely balanced, and more confident about life-in-general as I went along. The familiar line has never felt so very true: “The measure by which you give is the measure by which you shall receive.”

May that prove true for all who minister in these uncertain times.”And meanwhile, thanks be to God for writers like these, who have given so generously.

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