

Faith Beyond Belief: Stories of Good People Who Left Their Church Behind...

...is **GREAT** for discussion groups. A list of discussion questions appears below.

Discussion questions

Introduction

- 1 In what ways does the winners versus losers philosophy represent a spiritual problem?
- 2 In what ways has our general culture strayed from truth? How might our society benefit from a broader sense of religious truth?
- 3 The introduction seeks to warn certain types of religious believer away from this book. Why might that be important? Why would it be important to not disrupt the belief systems of those whose religion is holding their life together?
- 4 Did your religious training invite you to question church teachings, the way the author's high school religion classes did? Is religious questioning a good thing or a bad thing?
- 5 What are the relative benefits of choosing the "comforts" of traditional religious belief versus choosing a vigorous and more truthful path toward personal spiritual authenticity?

Part I

- 6 Valerie. Though Valerie eventually rejected the Mormon faith, her younger belief system was based on seeking personal "witness" experiences from the "Holy Ghost" that supposedly served to validate the beliefs. What was the basis of those witness experiences? If they didn't come from the Holy Ghost, where did they come from?
- 7 Valerie. Biblical elements like the talking donkey in Balaam and Balak's story were most likely meant to be allegorical. Why do some people insist on understanding them literally?
- 8 Abu Ali. Why did it take rejecting his Muslim beliefs before Mr. Ali found his internal moral compass? Can we be literal religious believers and at the same time acknowledge our internal moral compass?
- 9 Jim. How did Jim just know that he would not be punished for his "sin" of having premarital sex in college? Where did that "knowledge" come from?
- 10 Kevin. Kevin said in his earlier years he had compartmentalized his knowledge of religion from his religious beliefs. What does this mean?

11 Can you identify in each story, the circuitous route where the person kept trying to hold on to the belief system after the first questions came up? How was that finally resolved in each case? Is there a way to acknowledge the truth of evolution, while at the same time holding onto religious beliefs? How?

12 Can a person go through the questioning stage like the four people in this section did, and remain a literal believer? Why would this happen?

13 What part did the need for religious certainty (or lack of this need) play in all these decisions?

14 Did courage play any part in the decisions made by each person in this section?

Part II

15 Is it important to have the right answers about religion?

16 If few theologians take the more violent and the blatantly unrealistic Biblical stories literally, why do so many regular people (including 50 percent of the US electorate, as Dawkins pointed out) do so?

17 Had you heard of the spiritual, religious or faith development stages before you read Faith Beyond Belief? What was your reaction the first time you heard of these stages? Did that reaction leave you more interested, or less interested, in reading this book?

18 If you had not heard of the spiritual stages before reading Faith Beyond Belief, what was your reaction to the “Begrudging Wisdom” story? What is behind our reaction to the news that it is possible for adults to “mature” beyond the conventional level in a spiritual or religious sense?

19 What is your reaction to the “Rational” stage as described in this book?

20 What is your reaction to the “Faithful” stage as described in this book?

21 Do we need to have members of the “Lawless” stage in order to comprise a balanced society?

22 Do you believe the “Mystic” level exists? Is this a good thing, or a bad thing?

Part III

23 Nilah. Nilah’s birth religion was very literal and restrictive. Yet her mother’s faith was far more fluid and very deep. Do you think having a single “Mystic-type” influence in our early life would make us more open to the idea of a less literal faith?

24 David. Could the concept of hell actually refer to the remorse we are made to feel when we become conscious enough to realize how our prior thoughtless behavior may have hurt others?

25 David. At this point David’s values are mostly centered on empathy and compassion and his connectedness to others. Without belief in a Supreme Being, can he really be spiritual?

26 Charles. Charles uses the word “worship” to describe time he spends contemplating the overarching unity of our existence. What exactly is he worshipping?

27 Several times, Charles mentions connectedness – to the community, to nature, etc. How does this play into his universal worldview?

28 Charles, Kevin, Abu Ali. These three all claim the events of 9/11 triggered in some way a change in their worldview. Did 9/11 alter your worldview in any way? Was it for the better or for the worse? Do you think the experience of tragedy can trigger growth?

29 Jean. Jean’s spirituality seems to be grounded in the environment, her connection to the earth, and her earth-based spiritual group. Yet, she dropped all of her life plans to care for her nephew and to run her father’s business. Where do we draw the line between carrying out our practical responsibilities in life, and taking the opportunity to express our spiritual yearnings?

30 Catherine. Where is the Higher Power that has been so helpful to Catherine? Is it something inside her, or something outside? Could it be both?

31 Catherine. Does her description of prayer resonate with you? To whom does she pray?

32 Catherine. Catherine expresses gratitude for the many hardships her life has brought her. She has almost fully forgiven those who caused most of those hardships. How do you think she came to see things that way, as opposed to feeling put upon by the life events she described?

33 Inés. The theme of Inés’ story is freedom. She found freedom in a religion that encourages questioning and exploration. Can questioning and exploration be tolerated, and freedom be found, within the more traditional religions?

Part IV

34 What other terms could have been chosen for the Mystic or post-critical level?

35 If a period of doubt is important in reaching spiritual maturity, why do so many religions seem to preach the value of religious certainty?

36 Are there examples of ethnocentrism outside of religion? Is there any correlation between ethnocentrism and patriotism?

37 Does knowledge of (or reading about) the spiritual stages increase unity by introducing us to that end as a goal, or encourage divisiveness by putting people into boxes?

38 Is anything in religion to be taken literally? What? What should not be taken literally?

39 Tolerance of paradox is an important trait in spiritual maturity. What paradoxes must be tolerated or accepted?

40 How does the Spirit speak to us if we are guided by a Spirit Authority?

41 What might acceptance, gratitude and forgiveness have to do with Trust?

- 42 If all these “theorists” have described a similar trajectory in spiritual development, why have they not coordinated their work into a cohesive theory and given it a name?
- 43 Does the general idea of spiritual development resonate with you, or would you rather have never heard of it? What do you like or dislike about it?
- 44 When you think of religion, or of a religious person, are you more likely thinking of the Faithful level, or the Mystic level? Why are these two levels not clearly acknowledged in religious circles?
- 45 Why is it not a good idea to try to categorize people as to what stage they might be in?
- 46 Why might we need people at all spiritual levels to comprise a balanced society?

Part V

- 47 When “most people” use the word God, are they referring to the literal bearded being in the sky, or to some metaphorical understanding of the ultimate reality?
- 48 Why don’t we have a better word to distinguish between the literal sky God and the metaphorical uses of the word God? Should there be a better word to distinguish them, or is the distinction better left unsaid, the way it is now?
- 49 Why did Ricoeur call the need for taboo and refuge the “corrupt” parts of religion?
- 50 Why might emphasis on only one of Ken Wilber’s “Three Faces of Spirit” lead to a distortion of one’s spirituality? Can we be authentically spiritual if we only acknowledge one of those faces?
- 51 Ricoeur’s “Second Naïveté” correlates roughly with the Mystic level. In what ways is the Mystic naïve? Is this type of naïvety a good thing, or a bad thing?
- 52 Do you believe society is transforming in a positive direction? Why or why not?
- 53 If a transformation is coming, what is it that the “imaginal cells” presage?
- 54 What would allow traditional religions (those that still preach a divisive message) to see the value of working toward unity?
- 55 Would you prefer a religious or spiritual leader who was aware of the stages, or one who did not subscribe to them? Which would be the more truthful type of leader?

Margaret Placentra Johnston, author of *Faith Beyond Belief: Stories of Good People Who Left Their Church Behind* is available to Skype into your discussion group, or visit if time factors and geography permit it. Also, she invites readers or discussion group leaders to send her concise (150 words or less per question,) well thought out responses to any of the above questions through the “contact” button on her website - FaithBeyondBelief-book.com.

