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An interspiritual approach to peace

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

We've all witnessed the worst of religion, how organized religion can hurt us, turn our leaders into cruel, power-hungry authorities, and bless war not peace. Yet many of us continue to plumb the depths of all that is good and positive in religion and spirituality in our search for the Divine, and this proves to be a great blessing. In this search for God and the common good, at some point, many of us have joined local, national and international interfaith programs and projects in our work for peace.

Our hope is to reach out to those of different religions in a spirit of respect as we seek a more just and peaceful world. Interfaith peacemaking is a necessary component of every movement of justice and peace. A new book, however, suggests we can go even deeper, to explore an "interspiritual" approach to life.



God of Love: A Guide to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Monkfish

Books, 240 pp. \$15.95) by Mirabai Starr walks us through an interspiritual approach to the Abrahamic traditions and invites us to seek not just dialogue, but the God we worship together as members of the Abrahamic faiths. These beautiful reflections on Judaism, Christianity and Islam open up the personal and spiritual dimensions at the heart of these religions as a way to deepen our own spiritual life and make

greater peace with others.

Starr, my friend of Taos, New Mexico, has previously published acclaimed translations of the *Dark Night of the Soul* by John of the Cross, and *The Interior Castle* and *The Book of My Life* by Teresa of Avila. Here she shares overviews of essential teachings of the Abrahamic religions, stories of their saints and spiritual masters, their prophetic calls for justice and peace, and examples from her own spiritual journey to offer an interspiritual perspective that calls us to the practice of universal love at the heart of these religions.

God of Love reminds me that our religious practice should not lead us, of course, into anger, oppression, hatred, intolerance, violence or war. Instead, it should help us become mystics! It should lead us into the presence of God. Religious life, including Christianity, especially Catholicism, should inspire us to open our hearts wide in our search for God so that in the process we embrace every human being on the planet with unconditional, nonviolent, universal love.

That has certainly been my experience of the best of the Abrahamic traditions. I recall the joy and consolation I felt, for example, attending a Shabbat service with my friend Rabbi Michael Lerner, and a Muslim wedding, where I was the best man. On those luminous occasions, and many others, I felt the presence of God.

‘I profess the religion of love,’ the poet Rumi wrote long ago. ‘Love is my religion and my faith. My mother is love. My father is love. My prophet is love. My God is love. I am a child of love. I have come only to speak of love.’ This poetic sentiment, Mirabai writes, can be the attitude of everyone in these traditions. It’s surely the ideal Jesus taught and embodied. ‘Love one another as I have loved you,’ Jesus said. ‘They will know you are my disciples by how much you love one another... Love your neighbor as yourself ... Love your enemies then you will be sons and daughters of the God who makes the sun rise on the good and the bad and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.’

Christianity summons us to the heights and depths and breadth of unconditional, universal, nonviolent love. So does Judaism and Islam. Many of us have forgotten this, which is why *God of Love* and other new books like it help awaken us to the spiritual life of universal love and global peace. In her introduction, Starr writes:

The ‘interspiritual’ perspective encompasses a much broader scope of shared religious experience than does its predecessor ‘interfaith’ movement, which focuses more on the dialog between the established institutionalized religions than on the intermingling of their common heart. Genuine interspiritual dialog demands that we draw deeply on our inner knowing and show up for the hard work of understanding. It requires that we not only study and discuss religions other than our own, but that we commit to a disciplined practice in more than one tradition, immersing ourselves in the well of wisdom they offer, allowing these encounters to change us from within.

The sacred scriptures of all faiths call us to love as we have never loved before. This requires effort, vigilance, and radical humility. Violence is easier than nonviolence; hate only perpetuates hate. The wisdom teachings remind us that love—active, engaged, fearless love—is the only way to save ourselves and each other from the firestorm of war that rages around us. There is a renewed urgency to this task now. We are asked not only to tolerate the other, but also to actively engage the love that transmutes the lead of ignorance and hatred into the gold of authentic connection. This is the ‘narrow gate’ Christ speaks of in the Gospel. Don’t come this way unless you’re willing to stretch, bend, and transform for the sake of love.

In *God of Love*, Starr walks us through the great themes of the Abrahamic traditions, with chapters on the search for the divine, stewardship of the earth, the prophetic voice, faith and wonderment, welcoming the stranger, compassionate service, mercy and forgiveness, the feminine face of God, and contemplative prayer. She offers a pastiche of insights, stories and quotes from the mystics and saints of these three religions.

‘Many of us have been tempted to toss out the traditions of organized religion as we try to make our own way home to Spirit,’ she concludes.

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Many gifts have emerged from this revolution: liberation from patriarchal dominance, increased awareness of the importance of psychological health along the path of awakening, and an abiding regard for indigenous wisdom ways. But we have also found ourselves spiritually bankrupt in some significant ways. The world’s religious traditions have collected a series of vital tools to help us build a life that includes heightened consciousness of the sacred and a shared sense of accountability to all beings, and we would be foolish to reject them out of hand.

In spite of the undeniable history of abuses committed in the name of religion, the monotheistic faiths offer innumerable points of access to the realm of love. We would do well to revisit the teachings and practices so carefully engineered over millennia to invoke the God of love and bring God into our midst. By saying yes to the best of our own heritage and entering the holiest grounds of one another’s faith traditions, we may be able to usher in an age of love within our own lifetime. We can only do this together. Through a process of perpetual discernment and ‘prayer unceasing’ we may dive into the well of each faith and emerge with the treasure that connects us all.

This graceful book reminds me that at the center of life -- through our hectic day-to-day lives, in our work, families, and commitment to social justice -- is our search for God. Given the busyness of life today, as well as the negative media barrage of electoral politics, the depressing power struggles within the church, the military/corporate plutocracy that dominates us, and the sad state of the world, it’s easy to give up on the God of love who calls us to the life of universal, nonviolent love.

The three Abrahamic traditions, Starr reminds us, urge us toward an ordinary mystical pursuit of God, that we might take time with God every day, ponder God’s love and peace, even feel God’s loving presence toward us that we might share that disarming love with others. Those who work to end poverty, war, weapons and injustice need to hear this call most of all, because the mystical experience of our loving God goes hand in hand with our pastoral work, our prophetic work and our public service. Open yourself to God, seek a direct experience of the God of love and peace, the traditions assert, and you will become authentic instruments of God’s love and peace, and have a true gift of love and peace to offer.

This is what we want -- to encounter the loving, nonviolent God who loves us and cares for us and gives us peace, and to radiate that love and peace so that it spreads through a disarming movement that will transform the world. But that process is devilishly hard. Peacemaking, the saints and mystics of the Abrahamic traditions testify, requires the daily practice of the presence of God, that we may be disarmed and healed by God if we want to be disarming, healing peacemakers.

God of Love concludes with concrete suggestions: Choose at least one religious tradition different from

your own and participate in a service. Make an extra effort to explore the beauty of Islam. Study the holy texts of other traditions. Look for the unifying teachings, rather than the dogmas that separate us. Consider observing the Jewish Sabbath as a day of rest or the Muslim season of Ramadan as a special time of prayer and fasting. Such spiritual outreach will help us to grow and deepen our own Christian journey.

Starr's illuminating book, *God of Love*, suggests that an "interspiritual" attitude toward the Abrahamic traditions can help us experience new mystical wisdom ways and feel God's disarming, loving presence more abundantly. An interspiritual approach can nurture our journey to God, and help us offer the hand of peace and friendship to sisters and brothers in the Abrahamic traditions. That broad spirit of nonviolent love will one day bear the good fruit of peace.

John Dear will speak on May 19 in Portland to the Rotary Club of Oregon; May 22, in Milwaukee to the National Association of Catholic Chaplains, and May 24, in El Paso, Texas, on his new book, *Lazarus Come Forth!* To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to: www.johndear.org. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book, *Challenging Empire* (www.fosna.org). He is profiled along with Daniel Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels*, by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books, 2011). *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and other recent books, such as *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com.

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