



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

By Margaret Placentra Johnston



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Faith Beyond Belief gives a much-needed voice to the “good” people who have left their church but whose spirituality continues to mature. Johnston uses first-person stories as well as known spiritual authorities in describing various stages of religious growth. Some of these real-life accounts are by nonbelievers; others are by those among the growing numbers of the “spiritual but not religious.” All are thoughtful people with too much integrity to live what they consider a lie.

The stories of the nonbelievers—including an ex-Catholic, a former Mormon, and a clandestine Muslim apostate who left his community after the attacks of 9/11—show how complete confidence in human reason can lead away from literal religious interpretation. But, while that step is a necessary one on the spiritual path, it is only intermediate. Her second set of stories are of people at the “mystic” level who can tolerate paradox and see truth and reality as multidimensional.

Johnston’s book will help doubters to see things in a new light as well as those who are struggling to clarify their own spiritual vision. It also points beyond the atheist/believer controversy wrecking such divisive havoc in our culture today.

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Editorial Review

Review

"What brings people to leave their church, the traditions of their faith - and sometimes even their friends and family members - to embark on a personal journey of spiritual discovery? Can we be "good" without the rules of a church to guide us? And is it still possible to find a spiritual home within a church whose creeds and practices we may have outgrown? In *Faith Beyond Belief*, an ex-Mormon, a Muslim "apostate," and several former Catholics (including the author herself) are among those who tackle these issues, sharing stories to inform and comfort the ever-increasing numbers of Americans who are leaving their church behind.

Margaret Placentra Johnston takes the stages of spiritual growth out of the realm of theory to a rubber-meets-the-road discussion of the very real difficulties, and the joys, experienced by former believers as they navigate critical turning points on the path to spiritual authenticity. Based on the work of 14 spiritual development theorists, including the postmodern philosopher Ken Wilber, Johnston's book shows how moving through the stages of spiritual growth must, by its very nature, include a turning away from the dogmas and creeds of organized religion to something much more experiential, inclusive, and liberating.

Johnston's warm, conversational, and sometimes confrontational book shares her vision for the future of religion and gives even those who do not have a background in theology or philosophy a way to locate their place on the spiritual path and set their sights on a new kind of faith.

"Rather than keep its adherents mired in childish myths, the religion of the future will lead its members toward the more fluid form of faith that can develop beyond belief," she writes. "The religion of the future will be Love."

--*Spirituality & Health*

"In approaching this book to review, I thought the personal stories would drive my commentary. Instead, I found myself intently interested in the organizing rubric Johnston built around the commonalities between them. Her line of inquiry leads her to investigate theories of spiritual development as they have been proposed by such divergent personalities as James Fowler, Saint Teresa of Avila and Adolphe Tanquerey. Johnston attempts to integrate the various theories into an accessible sequence for the average reader. She labels these the "Lawless Stage," the "Faithful Stage," the "Rational Stage," and the "Mystic Stage." Johnston's discussions of the spiritual stages and their implications were thought-provoking and I turned down a number of page corners, especially in the second half of the book. I am looking forward to considering these more deeply as a part of my own spiritual study. There is a part of me, however, that is concerned some may see the hierarchical nature of the stages to be parochial in their insistence that individuals must pass through a period of questioning prior to becoming spiritually advanced. Those who remain in the religion of their birth may presume that Johnston is insulting their faithful constancy, though Johnston does state that leaving the religion of one's birth is not endemic to the process. According to an October 14, 2012 Pew Report, 16.1% of Americans have no religious affiliation. Yet 70% of those believe in God. In this context, it is difficult to see the trend toward personal rather than dogmatic faith as step backward in our moral center. Regardless of your position on this matter, however, *Faith Beyond Belief* provides a framework allowing those without a strong academic background in philosophy to participate in

the discussion." --*Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and *Blogcritics.org*

"What happens to the spiritual lives of people who leave the traditional Christian churches of their childhood? I'm one of those people, and so is the author of this book. She was curious enough about the question to begin researching it. Writing as neither a scholar nor a member of a religious community, she is free to note her findings without restraint. The result is an honest look at spirituality without religious affiliation. She shares her own story as well as stories from a diverse group of individuals. There is no one answer to her question, but there are similarities in what she discovered. For ease of understanding, she has organized the answers using four broadly-defined spiritual stages: Lawless, Faithful, Rational, and Mystic. She thought long and hard about the ramifications of putting her thoughts on public display, but having left a thirty-year career as an Optometrist in order to study the topic, she ultimately decided it was time to begin the discussion. In a world where religion is becoming increasingly divisive, and is often used as a political weapon, many of your customers are asking the same question that Johnston did. Her book will not only provide much-needed insight, it can also serve as a guidebook for empowering individual spiritual growth. It is a different kind of Good News.

" --**Anna Jedrzejewski**, *Retailing Insight*

"In this thought-provoking first book, former optometrist Johnston, who has studied spiritual development, allies herself with the "beyond religion" movement, in which nonbelievers or those who are "post-organized religion" advance toward spiritual maturity through emotional intelligence, psychology, ethics, and critical thinking outside of traditional religious structures and belief systems. Interweaving personal stories from Catholics, a Mormon, a Muslim, Protestants, and others with accumulated core insights from human development experts, including Abraham Maslow, Lawrence Kohlberg, Gordon Allport, and James Fowler, Johnston identifies five stages of "deconversion" and spiritual growth: Lawless, Faithful, Rational, Rational Plus, and Mystic. Understanding this natural movement, indicates Johnston, may shift the expanding "spiritual, but not religious" demographic toward more satisfying spiritual depths. Describing many religious institutions as "exclusionist, ethnocentric, judgmental, and triumphalist," Johnston maps a future for religion that is "post-critical," heterodox, mystery-centered, and teaches moral reasoning rather than doctrinal adherence. Building on what psychiatrist M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* (1978) and *People of the Lie* (1983) did for a segment of Protestantism in the 1980s, Johnston may provide similar direction for the postmodern meaning-starved spiritual seekers who are becoming adults in what philosopher Curtis Carter has termed a "transreligious" world." Agent: Lisa Hagan. (Oct.)Reviewed on: 08/13/2012

--*Publishers Weekly*

"Margaret Placentra Johnston's *Faith Beyond Belief* gives us a good way to know the experience of those who have rejected their own church, but who are nevertheless engaged in a spiritual search beyond the conventional language and categories that left them feeling empty and could not engage them. As such, it is an excellent way to get a feel for what the issues are and the way they are experienced by a growing segment of American society who are 'spiritual but not religious.' You can feel the difference in the openness, the inquiring mind, the caring soul that this book unveils."

--**Rabbi Michael Lerner**, author of *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation* and *The Left Hand of God*

From the Author

Dear Prospective Reader,

Faith Beyond Belief: Stories of Good People Who Left Their Church Behind may not be a book for everyone. If your religion brings you needed comfort against a world filled with fear, or if the thought of questioning religious belief threatens your view of reality, you may do better to steer clear of this book. Not for the world would I want to disrupt the belief system of someone whose religion is holding their world together. Similarly, if your atheism defines your existence, you may want to avoid this book as well.

On the other hand, if you *welcome a challenge* that takes you past the typical believer versus non-believer divide, I invite you on a tour through the *Faith Beyond Belief* perspective. By way of a common human faith process that few others have ever elucidated in language this plain, I point the way *beyond* religious (and atheistic) righteousness, divisiveness and triumphalism toward the higher spiritual goals of inclusiveness, unity and love.

Whether you like what you read in this book, or hate it, I'll bet it presents some perspectives you have not considered before. I hope you will share your opinions - positive or negative - with others - here on Amazon or in other conversations. In my heart I feel our fractured society calling out for the need to consider these issues on a more intelligent level than what currently comes in from certain factions of our popular culture.

Thank you for your interest in *Faith Beyond Belief: Stories of Good People Who Left Their Church Behind!*

Sincerely,

Margaret Placentra Johnston

About the Author

With the publication of *Faith Beyond Belief: Stories of Good People Who Left Their Church Behind*, **Margaret Placentra Johnston** is embarking on her third career*. A practicing optometrist, she has been helping people see better in the physical world for the last thirty years. Now she writes to help people see more clearly in other ways. Captivated by the depth and beauty of the universal worldview described by various spiritual development theorists, Margaret found ten regular, real life people whose stories could show us steps on the way to that worldview. Her book, *Faith Beyond Belief*, is the result of that search. Margaret's blog can be found at Patheos: www.patheos.com/blogs/faithbeyondbelief.

A set of questions for discussion groups, and other information about the book can be found at FaithBeyondBelief-book.com.

*high school French teacher, then Optometrist, now author.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Louise Lewis:

Can you one of the book lovers? If yes, do you ever feeling doubt when you find yourself in the book store? Try and pick one book that you find out the inside because don't assess book by its deal with may doesn't work this is difficult job because you are afraid that the inside maybe not as fantastic as in the outside seem likes. Maybe you answer might be *Faith Beyond Belief: Stories of Good People Who Left Their Church Behind* why because the fantastic cover that make you consider with regards to the content will not disappoint you. The inside or content is definitely fantastic as the outside as well as cover. Your reading

sixth sense will directly direct you to pick up this book.

Esta Banks:

Are you kind of active person, only have 10 or perhaps 15 minute in your day time to upgrading your mind ability or thinking skill actually analytical thinking? Then you have problem with the book compared to can satisfy your short period of time to read it because pretty much everything time you only find publication that need more time to be examine. *Faith Beyond Belief: Stories of Good People Who Left Their Church Behind* can be your answer as it can be read by a person who have those short free time problems.

Jon Cerrone:

Is it a person who having spare time subsequently spend it whole day by simply watching television programs or just telling lies on the bed? Do you need something totally new? This *Faith Beyond Belief: Stories of Good People Who Left Their Church Behind* can be the reply, oh how comes? A book you know. You are consequently out of date, spending your time by reading in this new era is common not a nerd activity. So what these textbooks have than the others?

Paul England:

What is your hobby? Have you heard that question when you got students? We believe that that concern was given by teacher for their students. Many kinds of hobby, Everybody has different hobby. And also you know that little person including reading or as reading become their hobby. You should know that reading is very important and also book as to be the matter. Book is important thing to add you knowledge, except your personal teacher or lecturer. You will find good news or update regarding something by book. Many kinds of books that can you take to be your object. One of them is actually *Faith Beyond Belief: Stories of Good People Who Left Their Church Behind*.

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