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Can Religion Be Redeemed? 3/7 Deadly Sins
The Sin of Pride: Religion and the Self

(Genesis 1:26-2:18; Deuteronomy 8:1-10)

Every spring there seems to be a commencement speech that goes viral. This year it was given by an English teacher, David McCullough Jr. at Wellesley High School. What pearls of wisdom were imparted to millions of people? Four simple words—“You are not special.” David McCullough Jr. repeated this over and over. “You are not special.” He noted how obvious this is at graduation, where everyone is dressed alike in the same ill-fitting black robes, everyone receives the same diploma and in this case, everyone was seated, literally, on a level playing field. McCullough knew his audience well, so he cataloged how counterintuitive his message is.

“You’ve been nudged, cajoled, wheedled and implored. You’ve been feted and fawned over and called Sweetie Pie. Yes, you have. And certainly we’ve been to your games, your plays, your recitals, your science fairs. Absolutely, smiles ignite when you walk into a room and hundreds gasp with delight at your every tweet.” Nonetheless, he insists, “You are not special.”

The irony that an obscure English teacher became an Internet sensation by insisting students are not special was not lost on Mr. McCullough. He tried in a radio interview, to balance his contention, to complete the claim with which he ended his talk, “You are not special,” he added, “because everyone is.”

In our culture, with so much weight on how special we each are, to declare, “You are not special” is almost blasphemous. Is this tough love or a zen koan? Everyone from advertisers to admissions deans, from salespeople to shamans tell us how special we are. And Ross Douthat, author of *Bad Religion: How we became a nation of Heretics* tells us why “You **are** special” just might border on the heretical. He calls attention to what he coins, the gospel of “the God Within”. To make his point, Douthat considers the blockbuster memoir *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*. Elizabeth Gilbert’s book was on the New York Times best-seller list for 187 weeks and was made into a film starring Julia Roberts, so clearly her story resonates strongly with her readers.

I know that many of you are familiar with this trinity, *Eat, Pray, Love*. Although Gilbert had already achieved professional success, she leaves her home, her unsatisfactory marriage and her family to travel, seeking herself or God or balance, and, providing the happily-ever-after ending we all hanker for, she falls in love at the last stop on her journey. But perhaps it is not only the romance, but also the spiritual quest that readers find so compelling. Elizabeth Gilbert has ample spiritual wisdom to impart. “God dwells within you as you, yourself, exactly the way you are.” She teaches, “somewhere within us all, there does exist a supreme Self who is eternally at peace. That supreme Self is our true identity, universal and divine. She affirms the religious obligation that she learns from a guru, “to honor the divinity that resides within me.”ⁱⁱ

Elizabeth Gilbert’s story is an engaging embodiment of the oft-heard contention, “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” So many people who describe themselves this way are allergic to the authority, the claims and the insularity of traditional religion. Yet, like Gilbert, the travel writer, such seekers often visit traditional religious landscapes and leaders in search of their own truth. Paradoxically, it is the very exotic quality of the religious guidance they discover far from home that may make it possible for them to practice those teachings. As one spiritual seeker wrote, “I could learn wisdom from a foreign teacher because his very foreignness lent him an aura of mystery. Take the same wisdom and put it in the mouth of a priest or rabbi, and it seemed not only less exotic, but less pure.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So is there anything that spiritual seekers, be they in India, Indiana or Indio, have in common? Here are some broad strokes of what people mean when they use the shorthand, “I’m spiritual, but not religious”. Spirituality comes from direct encounter, not dogma. God is everywhere. God is within everything, but the most desirable divinity is found closest to home—the God that resides inside your very self and soul. Heaven is here, available to anyone who knows how to let go, let God and let themselves be awash in love.^{iv} Spirituality is universal, inclusive, it belongs to all of us—even though some wise teachings may have been offered in a particular language or culture. Indeed, spiritual seekers embrace the mingling of teachings from different traditions and sources. In the marketplace of religious wares, the seeker picks and chooses the ones that fit, the ones that “work”, and puts down the ones that don’t, casually separating practices and teachings that for generations were fused together. This is not intended to be disrespectful or syncretistic; the supreme Self, the God Within knows what it needs. In religion as in retail, “the customer is always right.”

This affirmation of the God Within comes uncomfortably close to pride or hubris, considered the original and most serious of the seven deadly sins and even the source of all the others. The sin of pride includes the desire to be more important than others, failing to acknowledge the good work of others and, most damning, challenging God. Yesterday's formulation of pride is today's belief that "I am special."

The gospel of the God Within challenges McCullough's contention. The gospel of the God Within insists that "You are utterly special, you are so special that you are Divine."

Far be it from me to dissuade spiritual seeking. I'm in the business of encouraging spiritual questions, faithful practice and religious community. But it is precisely my concern for community that sends out warning flares—there are treacherous moral waters to navigate. I have a lot of questions.

What kind of community or society does the theology of the God Within lead to or support? Who says that the God Within only provides good guidance? Couldn't the God Within say *Amen* to whatever appeals at the moment—greed, lust, gluttony? Perhaps our libido is disguised as the God Within, egging us on and justifying actions we might otherwise resist, an inversion of comedian Flip Wilson's line, "The devil made me do it!" To put it starkly, how is the God Within Mother Teresa different than the God Within Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?

It's true that most of us are neither so lofty nor so lawless. But, Douthat cautions, "for people leading ... ordinary lives, reducing religion to the God Within and only the God Within doesn't create a vast population of budding Teresas of Avila. It just provides an excuse for making religious faith more comfortable, more dilettantish, more self-absorbed—for doing what you feel like doing anyway, and calling it obedience to a Higher Power or Supreme Self." He argues that this formulation of the Sacred is a kind of spiritual comfort food, rather than a spur to moral transformation—[describing] "...religion as a path to constant self-affirmation, heresy as self-help, the quest for God as the ultimate form of therapy."

It seems to me that this form of spirituality begs for a corrective; this religion is crying out for redemption. The God Within needs to be counterbalanced. The notion of the God Within, in and of itself, partakes of a long and illustrious history. Read through the literature of any sacred tradition and you will find ample affirmation for the concept of the God Within. You will find experiences of the unmediated presence of divinity, mystical experiences,

recognition of how sacred, how special, how mysterious and miraculous life is. You don't need texts to teach you this. Surely, each of us who has welcomed a baby into the world knows, with certainty, that when we look into the eyes of a newborn, we see the face of God, we see the mysteries of the universe. We see the sacred. The rabbis say that written on the face of each person are the words, *kodesh l'adonai*—holy to God. You are special. The theology of the God Within is not wrong. What makes it heretical is that it is partial. It is incomplete.

In Genesis text we read, "*Vayivra elohim et haadam betzalmo*" (1:27) And God created human beings in God's image." Each one of us is created in God's image. "*Vayomer elohim ki tov...vayivarech otam elohim.* (1:28) And God says this is "*tov*"—good—and God blessed our creation. Each self is blessed by being unique, equal and infinitely precious.

In the Bible, the self is distinctive, esteemed and a reflection of the divine image—the God Within. But the supremacy of the self does not go unchallenged. Did you notice that we read two stories of creation, two models for selfhood? Just a few lines after the first creation story, a few lines further into Genesis, we learn that something in Creation is "*lo tov*". It is not good. What is not good in God's creation? "*Lo tov lebiot adam levado.* (2:18) "It is not good for human beings to be alone." So God divides that first self into two partners. Until now, this first being was called "Adam"—a human creature taken from "*adamah*"—the earth. Now, for the first time and for always, the essence of the human experience is relationship. We human beings are incomplete without companionship and community.

Listen to the implications of that second creation story. The supreme Self, the God Within, which is affirmed so fiercely in this culture, is ultimately insufficient for the journey of life—a journey that involves meaning and companionship and community. We are challenged to turn aloneness and self-sufficiency into connection and community. For those who have come to know and appreciate the God Within, I'd like to introduce you to another reflection of the Sacred—the God Beyond.

A Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Simcha Bunum used to carry two slips of paper, one in each pocket. On one, he wrote, "*Bishvili nivrah haolam.*"—For my sake the world was created, an archaic way of saying, "I am special" On the other, he wrote, "*V'anochi afar v'efer*"—"I am but dust and ashes." Or as McCullough's reminded us, "I am not special." Two truths, true simultaneously. Two truths to balance one another. The God Within heralds the truth that "for my sake

the world was created.” But, through the God Beyond we comprehend that, “I am but dust and ashes.” The world, and God, will go on without me. We are finite, part of the cosmos, alert to the mystery of what was before, what will be after. To know that we are of the earth, that we will one day return to the *adamah* from which humanity began is a reminder that life is a gift to cherish.

For the past few weeks, I have been watching as my sister-in-law fights for her life. Every morning, she wakes up determined to martial her waning vitality to enjoy the day. Friends and family come by to share precious hours. Despite the hovering of the Angel of Death, the squeals of babies, the laughter of friends and the sweet voices of children pervade her home and keep open our hearts. The reality of “I am but dust and ashes,” is never far from our awareness. Even as the God Within shines forth, we know that there will be a moment when we entrust her to the embrace of the God Beyond.

David McCollough Jr. told his students on their graduation day that they are not special, not because he wanted to diminish their joy, not because he didn’t value them. Quite the contrary. As their teacher, he wanted them to understand that each human being is special; each one of us is precious. He wanted them reach out to one another, to see the radical equality of each of them and every other human being, whatever their station in life. I imagine that in saying, “You are not special,” he wanted to impart the imperishable lesson that the God Within needs to look outward, to seek the balance of the God Beyond. I imagine that he wanted to convey to his budding young graduates humility and appreciation of others, acceptance and self-love. And I’d like to believe that Mr. McCollough’s speech went viral because we, who have celebrated with such gusto the God Within, may be ready once again, to look outward, into the eyes and hearts of one another, and to invite into our lives, the God Beyond.

Joan Baez teaches this, as her voice—clear like the angels themselves—sings “God is God...”

I believe in prophecy.
Some folks see things not everybody can see.
And, once in a while, they pass the secret along to you and me.

And I believe in miracles.
Something sacred burning in every bush and tree.
We can all learn to sing the songs the angels sing.

Chorus:

Yeah, I believe in God, and God ain't me.

I've traveled around the world,
Stood on mighty mountains and gazed across the wilderness.
Never seen a line in the sand or a diamond in the dust.

And as our fate unfurls,
Every day that passes I'm sure about a little bit less.
Even my money keeps telling me it's God I need to trust.

Chorus:

And I believe in God, but God ain't us.

God, in my little understanding, don't care what name I call.
Whether or not I believe doesn't matter at all.

I receive the blessings.
That every day on Earth's another chance to get it right.
Let this little light of mine shine and rage against the night.

Just another lesson
Maybe someone's watching and wondering what I got.
Maybe this is why I'm here on Earth, and maybe not.

Chorus:

But I believe in God, and God is God.

(lyrics by Steve Earle)

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<http://www.wbur.org/2012/06/14/mccullough-speech>

ii Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* p. 192, 122, 120.

iii Peter Pitzele, *Our Father's Wells: A personal encounter with the myths of Genesis* p. xiii

iv Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How we became a nation of heretics*, p. 216.

v Douthat, p. 230