

How to Use This Discussion Guide for *Speaking of Faith* Facilitator Notes



From Krista Tippett

I'm delighted that you've decided to use this Discussion Guide. I hope you find it a meaningful extension of your experience reading *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters—and How to Talk About It*.

These Discussion Guides were developed with a number of possible settings in mind—places of worship, schools, religious education study groups, family discussions, and informal gatherings such as book clubs. Our aim is to help you find ways to carry on the ideas you read in my book and conversations you hear on Speaking of Faith—to trace the intersection of religious ideas and real life in your family or community. In my experience, when we do that, we also learn how to walk that line together more imaginatively and practically.

Feel free to adapt this guide to your particular needs and interests. Don't feel compelled to refer to it as a textbook, or to work through every single question. We've composed a wide range of topics and questions so you can choose the most important, most resonant, and most appropriate for your group. You might focus deeply on a single question or move through many. You may work through the topic in one discussion, or extend it over two or more.

This guide is designed to be useful whether or not you have read the book or listened to the program. But it may enrich your experience to read the appropriate chapter or listen to all or part of a program reference before you gather for conversation.

Programs are available at speakingoffaith.org—you can stream the audio or download an MP3 of each program.

What comes next? I'd love to hear from *you*. I'm excited to learn where this guide leads you, and how your group experiences and discussions make each conversation smarter, wiser, and more fruitful. I will use your feedback as we explore the many ways we can keep working and talking together. Write to me at mail@speakingoffaith.org.

Visit speakingoffaith.org

For more information about *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters—and How to Talk About it* and the topics of this discussion guide, or to sign up for a weekly e-mail newsletter or free weekly podcasts, visit speakingoffaith.org.

Genesis: How We Got Here

Discussion Guide

Chapter 1

Krista recounts her journey from the religious certainties of her Evangelical upbringing, to the conviction that politics alone held the answers to the world's problems, to a realization that spiritual and religious insights had just as important a role to play. And now the world has realigned itself, bringing religion back into the center of global affairs and American life.

Possible discussion points:

- The idea that John Kennedy's Catholicism and Martin Luther King Jr.'s theology were as pivotal to our culture as their politics. (4)
- The "heartbreaking and life-giving realities" in human experience that politics cannot analyze or address. (8)
- Explore how religious identities and spirituality-fueled passions are shaping the post-Cold War world as ideologies did previously. (9)
- The possibility that religious people and traditions contain the most powerful critique and correctives against religion's excesses. (10)

"It is possible to be a believer and a listener at the same time, to be both fervent and searching, to nurture a vital identity and to wonder at the identities of others."

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Remembering Forward Discussion Guide

Chapter 2

The title of the chapter derives from a line in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*: "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards." It encapsulates a core activity of religious traditions, looking back in order to move forward. Krista takes this as the starting point for looking back at her own formative years "in and out of faith between frontier Protestantism and secular global politics." In the process, she outlines a trajectory from simple, organic belief to a more nuanced, creative approach to religion.

Possible discussion points:

- Barriers and challenges that stand in the way of religion living up to its best ideals. (20)
- The role of faith in mediating the tension between the boundaries of our lives and the inner sense of something greater. (24)
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer's idea that new forms and vocabulary are needed to keep religion alive in the center of culture and human life. (34)

"Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians because these Christians are talking where they should be listening."

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Rethinking Religious Truths Discussion Guide

Chapter 3

Here Krista delves into the substance of religion, its connection to art, poetry and beauty yet grounded by the human condition with its myriad mistakes, questions and catastrophes. These often-misunderstood qualities embodied in great religious traditions offer the possibility of new ways of thinking – and talking – about religion, that could feed a theology “in which we might all engage.”

Possible discussion points:

- Religion as an art form as suggested by Karen Armstrong’s comparisons of theology to poetry and theater. (42)
- Rainer Maria Rilke’s statement: “I believe in everything that has not yet been said.” (46)
- What knowledge of biblical history, or the history of any religious tradition, can bring to a discussion of difficult topics. (55)
- How biblical stories like that of Jacob help bridge the gap between real life and religious ideas. (53)
- The premise that Charles Darwin’s discoveries liberated humanity from belief in a God responsible for every flaw and injustice. (73)
- Quantum physicist John Polkinghorne’s assertion that the nature of God and the insights of science align and complement one another. (81)

“There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one...”

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About Speaking of Faith

Speaking of Faith is public radio’s conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. It is produced and distributed by American Public Media. Each week, Krista Tippett and her guests ask how perspectives of faith might distinctively inform and illuminate our public reflection.

Speaking of Faith learning materials are developed with major funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

Speaking of Faith

Discussion Guide

Chapter 4

The origins of the unique narrative approach of the *Speaking of Faith* public radio program starts off this chapter, which illustrates the powerful potential for understanding when we reframe some of our most difficult public conversations. Krista traces her own learning curve as she asks large questions about Islam, the role of religion in public life and religious conflict have risen to the surface in recent years.

Possible discussion points:

- The view that Islam is not primarily a religion of beliefs, like Christianity, but of practices – and how that difference might contribute to misunderstanding. (137)
- Theologian Martin Marty’s determination to draw attention to the variety within traditions in order to avoid ideological boxes. (155)
- Separation of church and state as “a line that has shifted many times” rather than a “wall” that divides. (163)

“When I mention public life I don’t mean only politics. A lot of people equate the two. Politics is one branch of it. Public life is town meeting, it’s the mall, it’s the supermarket, it’s the college...”

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Exposing Virtue Discussion Guide

Chapter 5

Identifying and elevating virtue forms the core of this chapter, which explores how attention to life-giving spiritual ideas and practices might address modern anxiety in the face of overwhelming problems such as poverty, inequity and ecological degradation.

Possible discussion points:

- The difference between spirituality and religion based on the example given by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso Moses. (174)
- Examples of “thick” and “thin” religion from your own experience and in your own community or tradition. (175)
- The role of human frailty and faltering as a source of inspiration. (179)
- Ways that new religious and spiritual worldviews – what scholar Manuel Vasquez calls “the globalization of the sacred” – are changing U.S. culture. (190)
- The concept of ubuntu, or humanity; that I am through you and you are through me. (195)

“Those perpetrators — and I’ve met some bad ones, of all kinds of political persuasions — when you sit down and you talk, they are human beings.”

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Confessing Mystery

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Chapter 6

In this chapter, Krista explores the need for a renewed appreciation for mystery as an antidote both to relativism and to extremism. She describes the “creative tension” between ambiguity and certainty that religious traditions help us cultivate, and which could help reform our common life.

Possible discussion points:

- The role of the physical in the spiritual; that the more completely we live in our bodies, the more compassionate we become toward all life. (220)
- Writer Annie Dillard’s idea that God is self-limited by his creation, and by extension, each of us. (221)
- Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s assertion that “nothing which is true, or beautiful, or good, makes complete sense in any immediate context of history.” (224)
- The “exacting, creative tension” between earthly certainties and transcendent mystery in religious traditions and how it can reform our common life. (226)

“There are so many things we don’t know. I just have to honor what I don’t know. And I can’t — there’s so many things I cannot explain, because explanation is something about headiness.”

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Notes

Resources

For additional resources about any of these topics, review Program Details at <http://speakingoffaith.org/index.shtml>