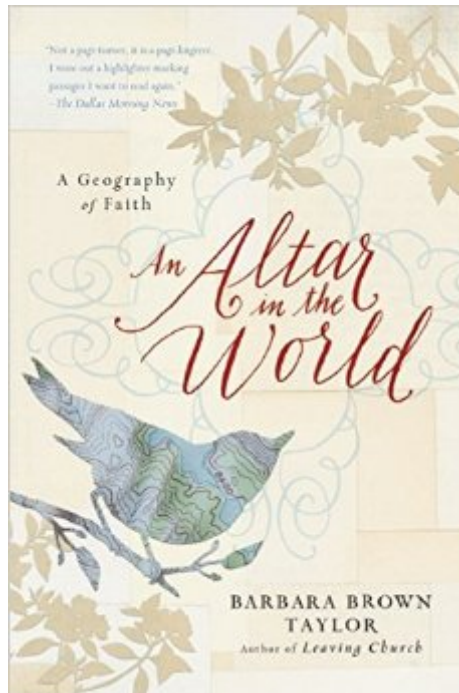


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# An Altar In The World: A Geography Of Faith



## Synopsis

In the New York Times bestseller *An Altar in the World*, acclaimed author Barbara Brown Taylor continues her spiritual journey by building upon where she left off in *Leaving Church*. With the honesty of Elizabeth Gilbert (*Eat, Pray, Love*) and the spiritual depth of Anne Lamott (*Grace, Eventually*), Taylor shares how she learned to find God beyond the church walls by embracing the sacred as a natural part of everyday life. In *An Altar in the World*, Taylor shows us how to discover altars everywhere we go and in nearly everything we do as we learn to live with purpose, pay attention, slow down, and revere the world we live in.

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## Customer Reviews

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest, professor of religion, and author of *LEAVING CHURCH*, a book that resonated with many of us, in her latest work, *AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD*, does what she does so well: she gives advice and counsel to those both inside and outside the church on how to become more human and have a richer spiritual life. She reminds us that we need not travel to the shrines of seers in foreign lands but rather that we cannot see the red X that will free us because we are standing on it. In 12 chapters the author covers vision, reference, the Sabbath, physical labor, vocation, prayer-- a different topic for each chapter. One of the things so endearing about Taylor's writing is that she is so brutally honest about herself, revealing details about her life that many people would never talk about: that she shakes hands like a man, that she may like Bombay Sapphire gin martinis too much, that she is a "rotten" godmother, for instance. The most surprising

thing I learned about her is that Taylor considers herself an introvert. I would never have suspected that. In addition to her forthrightness, Taylor, an English major somewhere in her studies, always writes eloquently so it is easy to wallow in her words. She is just as much at home quoting Wendell Berry or Rumi as the Old Testament character Job. There are so many beautiful passages here chockfull of truths: her account of when she was seven, watching falling stars with her father from whom she learned reverence as well as her description of the first church she loved, in the Ohio countryside, where the pastor "was the first adult who looked me in the eyes and listened to what I said. He was the first to tuck God's pillow under my head." (You can tip your hat to that image as it is so beautiful!

The author is a well-known Episcopal priest, teacher, and author. She was recognized in 1996 by Baylor University as one of the most effective preachers in the English-speaking world and received the Emory medal in 1998 for distinguished achievement in education. She is a remarkable story-teller and I have always enjoyed her sermons. Her most recent writings have a very different feel to them and are more like collections of essays than the sermon collections of the past. Taylor wrote a memoir of her shift from parish ministry to teaching in a book entitled *Leaving Church*, and her latest work is *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. These later works seem to target the spiritual but not religious segment of the reading public and are filled with the same skilled prose that marked her earlier writings. *An Altar in the World* reviews a variety of spiritual practices with the laudable goal of showing the reader that the treasure we seek requires no lengthy expedition, no expensive equipment, no superior aptitude or special company. For the author, there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experiences of human life on the earth. She states, "If you have run out of breath yourself or out of faith then this book is for you." Her hope for the book is that it will help the reader recognize some of the altars in this world—ordinary looking places where human beings have met and may continue to meet up with the divine More that they sometimes call God. Taylor is very comfortable writing about themes in spirituality from a progressive viewpoint. In an interview given in 2000, she observed, "I am on the edge of Christianity, and I expect to get a letter telling me I've been kicked out any day."

In her memoir called *Leaving Church; A Memoir of Faith* (2006), Barbara Brown Taylor told her story of how after ministering for nine years on the staff of a large Episcopal church in urban Atlanta, where she had lived half of her adult life, she moved to Clarkesville in northeast Georgia, a town of

1,500 people and two stoplights. The prospect of serving Grace-Calvary Episcopal with its tiny sanctuary that seated 85 people was a dream come true for her, or so she thought. Her passion and competence spelled success, and after five years the church had expanded to four Sunday services. In the process she nearly lost her soul, and so she resigned, left church, and in 1998 took an endowed chair of religion at nearby Piedmont College. Since then she has lived with her husband on a working farm, become a regular speaker of note on the Christian circuit, and continued to write. For those who might wonder, Taylor might have left church but she has by no means left the faith, and in this book she self-identifies as a Christian. This is an important point because her newest book is not exactly or particularly Christian. This is not a criticism but a simple observation. One of her goals is to abolish the distinctions we make between church and world, sacred and secular, spirit and flesh, body and soul. Any place or thing can mediate the sacred, and so we can make an altar in the world as well as in the church. Taylor draws upon her Christian experiences and tradition, but she also incorporates her knowledge and expertise from having taught a world religions course at Piedmont College for ten years--the Buddhist Eight-Fold Path, the Muslim notion of pilgrimage, rabbinic wisdom from Judaism, or the Sufi mystic poet Rumi.

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