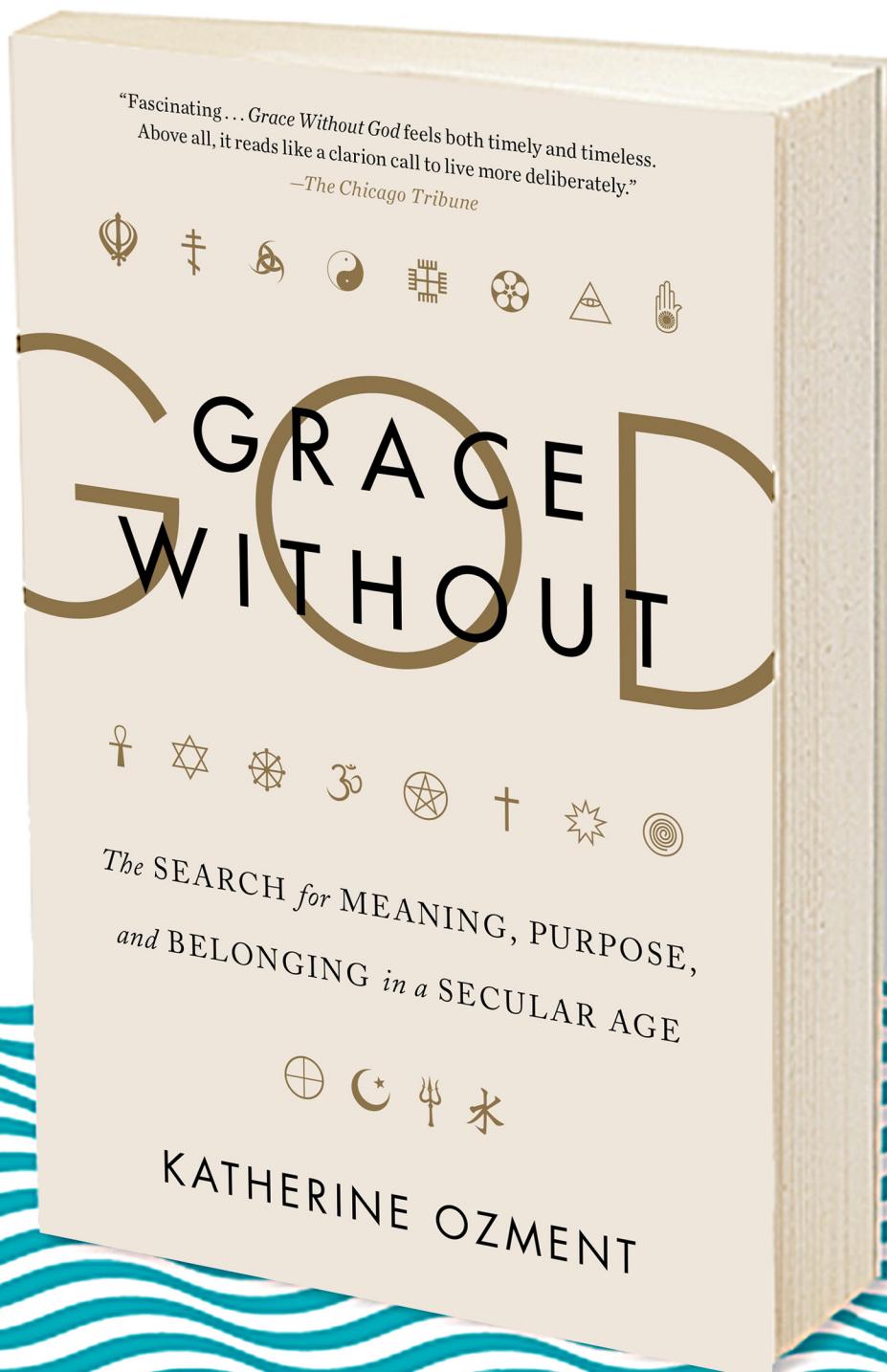


BOOK CLUB KIT

READER'S GUIDE QUESTIONS

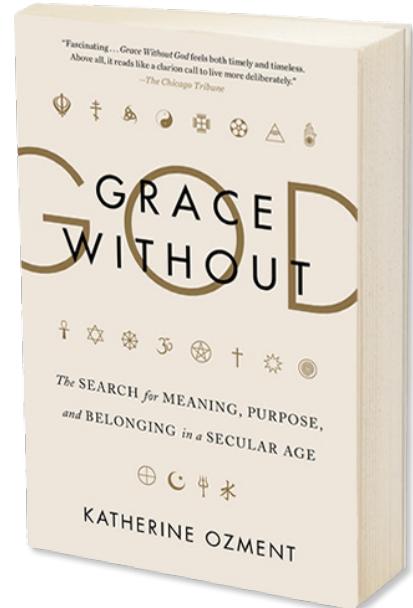
AUTHOR Q & A

CHARTING YOUR OWN PATH



READER'S GUIDE QUESTIONS

Katherine Ozment takes readers on a journey across the country to discover why millions of people have left organized religion and what they're doing instead to form communities, create rituals, and imbue their lives with meaning and purpose. Part memoir, part cultural exploration, part musing on how to live a meaningful life, *Grace Without God* delves into one of the most urgent issues of our time: widespread religious loss and reinvention. Along the way, *Grace Without God* compels readers to consider their own choices on their spiritual path and what part they've played in the seismic changes taking place across our national religious landscape.



FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 In the introduction, Ozment asks, “Could my family and I find valid alternatives to all the good religion provides?” What is the “good” she is looking for? Does she find it? Do the many people she interviews find it?
- 2 Religion offers answers to the big questions—Who are we? Why are we here? What happens when we die? How do the people Ozment interviews answer those questions outside the structure of religion? How do you answer them for yourself?
- 3 For many Christians, saying grace before a meal is a ritualistic practice of gratitude, one that people often continue even after leaving religion. What rituals does Ozment take from religion and make secular in her life? What role do rituals play in your life and how do those rituals express your values and beliefs?
- 4 Religions provide a moral framework, with rules for behavior and structured reminders for how to act. How is this a good thing? How is it a bad thing? Without religious moral structures, how do we cultivate morality for ourselves, our children, and our larger communities?
- 5 Ozment laments the loss of religious literacy, saying, “It’s impossible to understand Western art and culture without religious literacy.” What are Americans, especially younger ones, unlearning about religion, and at what cost? What, if anything, should we teach children about religion?

- 6** End-of-life rituals and beliefs about the afterlife provide solace to many religious people. Ozment says that when her brother died, she didn't have a "container for my grief." After experiencing a loss or moving through your own grief, what rituals, people, or beliefs gave you comfort? Where did turn for guidance and insights?
- 7** Ozment describes how a visit to the Grand Canyon provided a sudden moment of awe for her and her family. How does Ozment use research on awe to develop a framework for what she calls "secular spirituality"? What was a recent moment of awe in your life? Would you describe it as spiritual? What does spirituality mean to you?
- 8** In the Epilogue, Ozment writes a letter to her children in which she lists ten things she most wants them to understand and embody. Of the ten things she lists, which do you think are the most important? What would you add to the list? What would you subtract?
- 9** In a section on identity, Ozment explores the idea of labels as a key component of belonging. Many of the newly nonreligious wrestle with what to call themselves. Marci Olsen, for example, was raised Mormon but now calls herself "an agnostic with atheistic and Buddhist tendencies." What label, if any, would you use to describe yourself? What are the benefits and drawbacks of using any label at all? How does the experience of religious disaffiliation make finding the right label particularly challenging?
- 10** When Ozment asked Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, if the many secular humanist communities sprouting up across the country would eventually replace organized religion for people like her, he replied: "We won't know for another 300 years." Why does he say this? What are the challenges faced by such groups as they try to bring the Nones through their doors? And what do you think the religious landscape of the U.S. will look like in 300 years?

Q & A WITH KATHERINE OZMENT



What has been your most surprising reaction to your book so far?

Honestly, I thought I might get some angry backlash, but, aside from an angry email or tweet here or there, there has been very little of that. In hindsight, I guess I shouldn't have expected anger because I worked really hard to write this book with deep respect for all sides. I'm so thankful that readers have seen that. I've come to realize that most people are hungry for respectful dialogue on the topic of religion. Of course, there are always extremes at either end of the spectrum, but there is a big middle ground of people who are no longer religious but don't hate religion. And there are a lot of religious people who truly understand why people leave even if that's not the choice they've made for themselves. This book is for that big middle, the people who want a deeper understanding of the complexity of these changes without all the judgment.

What has been the best part of the publication process?

Once the book was published and I began giving talks, I realized the book was far more than a physical thing containing printed words. Its true purpose is as a vehicle for connection. For me, this has been the best part of the process—using the book as a means of going out and meeting people I otherwise would never have met and visiting places I wouldn't have normally gone. They say you're not supposed to discuss politics or religion in polite company, but I find myself talking about religion everywhere I go and it is the most surefire way to tap into a person's history, beliefs, and life story. It's now my go-to conversation topic when I meet someone because everyone has a spiritual autobiography that reveals how they think about life's important questions. Publishing this book gave me a kind of calling card to go around the country and strike up deep conversations with people.

What is the meaning of your book's title?

Like a lot language used for profound human experiences, "grace" is often used in a religious connotation, as in "God's grace." One of my arguments in the book is that religion shouldn't get to hold dominion over all such experiences anymore. Those of us who aren't religious can take back some of these terms and use them as our own. To me, the experience of grace doesn't have to be related to a belief in God. Rather, it's a welling up of awe, wonder, and gratitude for this gift unbidden, our very lives. If we peel back the religious labels, these are essential human experiences we all share. So, with the title, I was trying to reflect all that—to state that these experiences are not owned by religion; we nonreligious people have them too, and we need language to describe them.

More Millennials are “Nones.” Do you think it’s harder for them to have a community?

I think Millennials form community in different ways, and time will tell if these ways are as supportive and nurturing as the old ways. Religious groups have a profound sense of responsibility to their communities, for better or worse. Some people call that tribalism, with all the bad that comes with it, but the flip side is these groups do come together in times of great need, and they participate in volunteer activities and charitable giving at higher rates, even outside their own religious communities. My question for Millennials, and really for all secular people, is whether they can come together in community not just for their own benefit but also for the greater good.

Do you consider yourself spiritual?

I’ve always disliked that word, but if you define spiritual as I now do, which is having the sense that you are part of a larger whole, then yes I would say that I am spiritual. Part of being a writer is having a heightened awareness of everything around you. You see stories, you notice details, you watch and listen more closely when people talk. For years I wrote a parenting blog and I had to write a post about some aspect of life with my children once a week. I was constantly scanning my family life for deeper meaning. If you think about it, that’s what religion does too; it reminds you always of the bigger picture, the unseen connections between things. Writing is the same for me, as is being in nature or reading or being with my children. I’d say my spiritual practice is in cultivating a deep awareness of and connection to everything around me.

What is the next story to be told about a more secular life?

There is still a story to be told about how my kids and others of their generation are going to make sense of their world with less influence from religion. I think part of what secular parents like me are giving their kids is an enormous amount of choice to decide things for themselves. Most parents I know and interviewed don’t want their children to be clones or just mimic their beliefs. But will all that freedom be overwhelming for younger generations? Will our kids end up thinking they are “nothing” because it’s too hard to choose any one path? I’ll be curious to see how they come to articulate their values, define themselves, and connect in community.

During your research, what was the one thing people reported missing the most about religion?

There was no one thing. They were all different—singing in a choir, having a community to fall back on, a consoling belief in the afterlife. But though these are all specific to each person, they have the same root—the desire to be part of some larger, lasting whole. This is why the research on awe that I explored in the book was so important to the final, deeper stages of my journey. Once I understood how awe works in our minds and bodies, I was able to see how spirituality can be entirely secular, and we can feel like part of a larger whole outside the framework of religion. We just have to cultivate an openness to awe and wonder so we can feel connected to something larger in our everyday lives.

CHARTING YOUR OWN PATH TO GRACE WITHOUT GOD

You've read about Ozment's journey, and the journeys of many others, to find grace without God. Now it's your turn. Below are the tools you'll need to set out on your own path to create a more meaningful, connected, and reflective life. All the project requires is your own openness as you examine where you've come from, look at where you are, and commit to where you want to be.

You may even consider forming your own Grace Without God group to clarify your values, create new rituals, and come together in community. Twentysomethings, at the outset of their careers, could gather to talk about how to find meaningful work and make a difference in the world. Grandparents might discuss what it means to watch their children and grandchildren step away from long-held religious traditions. And soon-to-be married couples or new parents may explore how to blend different traditions and create new ones as they transition into new chapters of their lives.

The journey includes four phases: Reflection, Declaration of Values, Action, and Commitment. Some stages may take less time than others, and some may become sweet spots where you'll want to dwell a bit longer. These phases are not a rigid set of rules to follow but rather a framework for exploration and discovery that can be personalized to meet your unique needs.

PHASE ONE: REFLECTION

Take time to reflect on your own spiritual autobiography. Consider how you were raised, what your family's belief system meant to you growing up, and how your connection to religious and family traditions has changed over time. Keep a journal, start a blog, or share ideas with friends through a private Facebook group. Writing down your reflections on past and current practices will help you clarify your story, which serves as the foundation for jumping off. Here are more questions, arranged by theme, to guide both your own personal reflections or a group discussion.

Community and Belonging

- What does it mean to belong to a people? Where does true belonging come from?
- What groups have you belonged to in the past, and where do you feel the greatest sense of belonging now?
- What binds you to others? What do you and the people you're closest to hold sacred? How might you deepen and expand your connections within and among your groups?

Rituals

- What have been the most meaningful rituals, religious or secular, in your life? What made them so meaningful? Do you continue to practice them? Why or why not?
- If you grew up religiously, what were the pros and cons of the religious rituals you practiced? If you didn't grow up religiously, what secular rituals did your family or community practice and what did you like or dislike about them?
- Do you think ritual is important in the modern day? Why or why not? What are the most important transitions or milestones you mark with ritual? How do they alter your experience of those moments?

Meaning and Purpose

- When and where have you felt the most alive? What experiences in your life have been the most meaningful to you? Why?
- How do you differentiate meaning from purpose? What gives your life a sense of purpose?
- Where and when do you feel the greatest sense of wonder about the world? How would you describe awe, and under what circumstances have you felt it most powerfully?

Identity

- What are the most important components of your identity? How many of these were passed down to you and how many have you created yourself?
- If someone asked you who you are, what would you say? How is the story of who you are part of a larger story?
- What labels, if any, do you use to describe yourself? In what ways do you find using labels useful? When are they a hindrance?

Morality and Values

- What was the most important lesson you were taught about being a good person when you were growing up? How has your understanding of morality shifted as you've gotten older?
- How do you outwardly express your moral values? When and where do you put them into action?
- Who are your "saints" or heroes, the people who live in a way you'd like to emulate? What values do they express through their actions and what small things can you do to try to live up to their examples?

PHASE TWO: DECLARATION OF VALUES

Once you've reflected on your own spiritual autobiography, take time to create a declaration of values. You may think of your declaration of values as a secular Ten Commandments or Eight-Fold Path, a framework by which to live. These may take the form of a letter to your children (as in the Epilogue of *Grace Without God*), a simple Word document you read each week, or colorfully drawn note cards you choose to review in the morning before work. Whichever form you choose, consider the following questions:

- What are your own absolutes (one may be that you have no absolutes)?
- What are the values that you hold most sacred?
- Where do you find inspiration? Who are your spiritual guides? What concepts, works of art, or stories give you hope?
- What do you think is the most meaningful way to spend time?
- When have you felt a powerful sense of purpose?
- What grounds you in difficult times?

PHASE THREE: ACTION

The next step is to formalize the values you've drawn up so they become a conscious part of your everyday life. This is the stage where all your reflecting becomes concrete. Research shows that when we write down our intentions, we're more likely to follow through on them. Pair actions, big and small, with the values you've declared. Here are some examples of the types of commitments you might make:

Connection. To improve your sense of connection to others, practice gratitude. People who practice gratitude have stronger relationships, are quicker to forgive, and are more compassionate and altruistic. Keep a gratitude journal. Before getting out of bed, consider five things you're thankful for. Ask your partner or children to share what they're thankful for each night at dinner or just before bed.

Meaning. To create more meaning in your life, practice giving to others. Research shows we reap a wealth of benefits, physical and mental, when we give, and charitable acts also contribute to the common good. Find a volunteer activity or cause in your area that you can devote even a small amount of time and energy to each month. Make that activity sacred, something you won't cancel unless it's an absolute emergency.

Ritual. To celebrate meaningful family moments (a child's transition into adolescence, a wedding, or birth), create a secular ritual, invite your friends, and ask them to participate. For a coming-of-age ceremony, ask people to share the most important lessons they've learned in life and make those lessons into a book for your child to keep. For a wedding, ask guests to send scraps of fabrics to be woven into a canopy. At a babynaming ceremony, have each guest state a hope for the child and ritualize those hopes by asking each to place a stone in a jar, which then becomes a keepsake.

PHASE FOUR: COMMITMENT

Once you've come up with a list of concrete actions, fully commit to them by joining up with others. You might form a group that meets once a month to take on a volunteer activity in your community. Or you might create a book group for kids focused on the theme of doing good in the world. Whatever you choose, consider how you can draw others into your project, so you can hold one another accountable, offer guidance and support, and share the joys of this process. And, whatever you choose to do, may your path be filled with grace.

If you or your group would like guidance as you chart a new spiritual-secular path, please contact Katherine Ozment at gracewithoutgod@gmail.com for information on hosting a group discussion via Skype or in person.