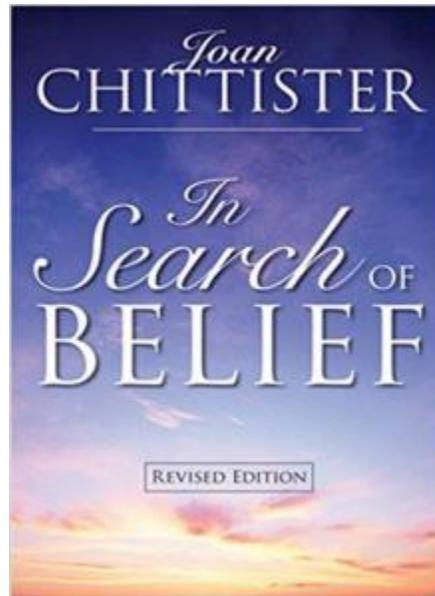


Discussion Questions

In Search of Belief



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Joan Chittister

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Chapter 1: I Believe...

QUESTIONS:

1. “I believe quite differently now than I did in past years. As a result, I am convinced, the faith that lives in me now is a more demanding, more robust variety than it was in the earlier stages of my spiritual life,” Sister Joan confesses. Can you say the same about what you currently believe? Please elaborate.
2. Re-read the section on p.9 that begins, “People are not challenging Christianity. . . “ and ends with “They look for authenticity. . .” Are there sentences in this section that you disagree with today? What are they? Why? Which do you agree with? What are they and why?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Explain why.

Chapter 2: In God...

QUESTIONS:

1. As a sequel to Sister Joan’s assertion on p. 20, namely, “I am not alone in my uncertain certainty,” the story goes that a theology professor declared to her students (more than once!), “I do not know WHO God is, but I KNOW God is. And I call that God “the Holy Mystery.” What do you think was the foundation for her declaration? What was she, in your opinion, trying to teach her students about belief in God?
2. “In our conception of the nature of God lies the kernel of the spiritual life,” claims Sister Joan on p. 21. Has your idea of the nature of God changed over the years? If yes, what provoked the change and how has that impacted your spiritual life? If no, share why not.
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Explain why.

Chapter 3: The Father...

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan insists that “. . . the farther away the Church got from Jesus, the more patriarchal its language became again, not because Jesus was patriarchal, but because we are. Of course God is ‘father’; but God is much more than that” (26). Give three or four reasons why the churches, both Catholic and Protestant, remain unwilling to use inclusive language for God, as do so many women and men yet in the church in this 21st century.
2. “Indeed, we need to learn to listen to the voice of God through the voice of women,” Sister Joan asserts. What women’s voices have opened your mind and heart to the voice of God? Explain how.
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Explain why.

Chapter 4: Almighty...

QUESTIONS:

1. “If there are those who lack the goods of life, it is not because God does not provide them. It is because we do not provide them” (34). Can you name any biases many “God-fearing” Christians have that prove this statement terribly true?
2. What are at least 3 significant things a person must be exposed to in order to engage in an ongoing awareness of why the “almighty” God does not interfere in life the way we want God to?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Explain why.

Chapter 5: Creator...

QUESTIONS:

1. “The point of the Creed is simply that I believe that I am not God” (42). What are one or more life experiences a person must have to realize this? Discuss.
2. “Real perfection” writes Sister Joan “may lie in dealing with the imperfect perfectly well. . .” Have you learned how to do this? What made this possible in your life?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Explain why.

Chapter 6: Of Heaven...

QUESTIONS:

1. “Heaven is not a place. Heaven is a process of growing fully into the fullness of Being,” maintains Sister Joan. Could it be that this “heavenly” process may be creative, unique, unimaginably expansive for each person? After all, if light can be a wave and a particle at the same time, what might that imply for growing into eternal life?
2. “What we think about heaven has something to say about our entire psychological development as well as our spiritual maturity” (48). Regarding your own psychological development and spiritual maturity on the subject of heaven, how would you describe where you are at this point in your life?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Explain why.

Chapter 7: And Earth...

QUESTIONS:

1. Go to Youtube and listen to a presentation by Greta Thunberg, the Swedish environmental activist who was born in 2003. Then share your impressions of her and any impact she had on your vision of “earth.”
2. Carefully re-read the paragraph on p. 58 which begins with, “Nature carries great spiritual messages for all of us. . . “ What spiritual messages have you learned from the natural world? What practices helped you to see and hear those messages?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Explain why.

Chapter 8: I believe in Jesus Christ...

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan has studied and prayed with the Scriptures for over six decades. She is deeply attuned to the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. They give us the truest portrait of the human, historical Jesus who cared deeply for the economically poor, the ill, and sinners. Thus, re-read the last sentence she writes in this chapter. Then ask yourself: “Who do YOU say that I am?” Elaborate.
2. “It was a long, hard journey for me from law to conscience,” Sister Joan admits on p.66. Was it also for you? What? Who? has empowered you along the way? Discuss.
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Explain why.?

Chapter 9: God's Only Son...

QUESTIONS:

1. In this chapter, Sister Joan exposes the exclusivism of “sonship” in relation to Catholic traditional teaching about his identity. She writes, “To talk about Jesus as the ‘only Son of God,’ then, says something to women that it does not say to men simply by what it fails to say to women at all. But it also has said something to men that has deformed them. God does not have daughters. God has sons” (70). How has this teaching affected your self-understanding as a woman? As a man? As other? Explain.
2. Sister Joan speaks the truth when she insists God is not male; God is genderless on p. 74. How has or does this truth impact your understanding of God?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Explain why.

Chapter 10: Our Lord...

QUESTIONS:

1. In his book, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, unequivocally states that “there is a strong connection between images of Jesus and images of the Christian life. Our image of Jesus affects our perception of the Christian life in two ways: it gives shape to the Christian life; and, . . . it can make Christianity credible or incredible” (2). Following Sister Joan’s lead here regarding her critical reflection on the image of Jesus as Lord, what image of Jesus has previously affected or does now, most affect your understanding of the Christian life today? Discuss.
2. In the last paragraph on p.80, Sister Joan says: “My Creed pays homage only to the Lord who . . .” Read the full paragraph more than

once. Then finish this sentence for yourself:

“My Creed pays homage only to the Lord who. . .”

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Explain why.

Chapter 11: He was conceived by the Holy Spirit...

QUESTIONS:

1. “The Creed is clear: Matter and spirit are of a piece,” declares Sister Joan on p.86. As she also points out, under the influence of Greek philosophy, Christianity has often taught the opposite, deriding matter, the flesh, sexuality, and women. Have you been influenced by this over the course of your life? What effects did it have on you? Have you been liberated from this way of thinking? Please share how.
2. Prayerfully reflect on the last paragraph in this chapter. Do you believe what Sister Joan does? Discuss why or why not.
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Explain why.

Chapter 12: And Born...

QUESTIONS:

1. “Bring on the days of our lives. We have a God who has already walked them and found them holy-making” (91). What if you began each day by asking yourself, “How can I make this day holy?” Imagine the possibilities! Can you share three or four?
2. What new insights about the meaning of Christmas has Sister Joan given you in this chapter?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 13: Of the Virgin Mary...

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan declares on P.94: “Mary simply did not appeal to me. She was, they taught me, docile and passive, submissive and unquestioning. . . I had to rethink everything to be able to see her.” Many critical thinking Catholic women over decades have felt the same way as Sister Joan. Are you one of them? Explain.
2. In her essay, “Truly Our Sister” found in her book, *Abounding in Kindness*, theologian Sister Elizabeth Johnson writes: “. . . the notion of Mary as the ideal feminine inevitably leads to the subordination of women and the privileging of men politically, psychologically, and spiritually. . . much of women’s negative reaction to this image of Mary stems from the realization that this feminine ideal functions as an obstacle to personal growth, preventing women from developing a critical intellect, capacity for righteous anger, and other characteristics of a mature personality” (293). Explain why you either agree or disagree with Professor Johnson.
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 14: Suffered...

QUESTIONS:

1. Anselm’s Atonement Theory, sometimes also called the Satisfaction Theory, has infected Christian belief for centuries regarding why Jesus was crucified. Many Christians still cling to Anselm’s explanation. About this Sister Joan asserts: “The atonement model of God leaves us with a vengeful God, an angry God, a manipulative God, a feudal God, or a masochistic God” (103). At the same time, in her recent book, *Creation and the Cross*, Sister Elizabeth Johnson unequivocally states: “In sum, the satisfaction theory makes God morally repulsive” (16).

Describe how this theory has impacted your image of God. How have Sister Joan and Professor Johnson challenged your thinking about this?

2. Succinctly and accurately, Sister Joan insists, “The cross simply cannot be understood separate from the life that preceded it. . . It was the life he lived that led to the cross upon which he died” (105).

Likewise Professor Johnson states in *Creation and the Cross*, “What got lost [in Atonement /Satisfaction Theory] was the importance of the historical events that made Jesus’ death a suffering through others and for others because of his critical preaching and radical behavior “(20).

What do you think lack of knowledge of Jesus’ human life and historical ministry does to many Christians’ understanding of the Christian life? Can you see any examples of this distortion in society today?

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why

Chapter 15: Under Pontius Pilate...

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes on p.115, “Pilate was in the middle – like we are so many times. Justice was on one side; expedience on the other. System was on one side; righteousness was on the other. I remember it well: the struggle with ‘obedience,’ the deference to the system, the sacrifice of the innocent, the concern for approval. Most of all, I remember that I said nothing.” Can you relate to Sister Joan’s experience? Please share.

2. Read the last paragraph in this chapter more than once. What is so very counter-cultural, so extremely rare, about Sister Joan’s brutally honest self-criticisms?

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 16: Was Crucified...

QUESTIONS:

1. “The divine values that Jesus embodied. . . love, mercy, peace, and justice-these are the principles that put Jesus on the cross. These cost.” writes Sister Joan, not unlike Black liberation theologian, M. Shawn Copeland, who herself wrote, “Discipleship costs.” What are the failures, do you think, that keep many Christians of every stripe from embracing this truth: “discipleship costs”? Discuss.
2. Who are today’s “Crucified Peoples?” How do Christians today fail to take them down from their crosses?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 17: Died, was Buried and Descended to the Dead...

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes on p. 125: “The point is that Jesus died and was buried and went among the dead, died the way we do-and that makes all the difference” (125). What “difference” does this make for you?
2. In her book, Consider Jesus, Sister Elizabeth Johnson writes on page 59: “Very early on, believers had the insight that after he died, Jesus descended into hell; we still confess this in the Creed. What does this mean? Jesus had gone down into the realm of the dead, to Sheol, the kingdom of shadows. What this symbolic way of speaking signifies is that even those who die victimized, those who disappear, those who are no longer remembered – all these people are not beyond the reach of the living God. The crucified Jesus has joined them, identifying with them, and bringing the power of the reign of God even there.” What

does Professor Johnson's interpretation mean for you? Discuss.

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 18: On the Third Day He Rose Again from the Dead...

QUESTIONS:

1. "And, I am convinced, if you have never experienced transformation, you can never really begin to understand resurrection either," maintains Sister Joan. (131). Share an experience of transformation you have had. Given what Sister Joan has said about it, do you now have a clearer grasp of what resurrection means? Discuss both questions please.

2. View these artistic representations of the Resurrection by Brother Mickey McGrath on this website:

<https://www.trinitystores.com/mcgrath-collection/images-christ>

Which one spoke most imaginatively to you? Where did it lead your thinking about the Resurrection? Discuss.

3. Powerfully Sister Joan exclaims on p. 135: "Until we find ourselves with new hearts, more penetrating insights, fewer compulsions, less need for the transient, greater awareness of the spiritual pulse of life, resurrection has not really happened for us. Jesus has risen but we have not. Resurrection is about transfiguration." During the Lenten season, the Erie Benedictine community often sings this song: "Transfigure us O God, transfigure us, O God. Break the chains that bind us. Speak your healing Word and where you lead we'll follow; transfigure us O God." Choose one of the examples Sister Joan presents above that reflects an experience of transfiguration you have had. Then pray with the song several times. What does it evoke in

you? Explain.

4. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 19: He Ascended into Heaven and is Seated at the Right Hand...

QUESTIONS:

1. What description of contemplation Sister Joan offers in this chapter impacted you the most? Explain why.

2. Sister Joan writes that a person who seeks “. . . to see the world as God sees the world” is one who is becoming a contemplative. Do you see yourself as such a person? Why? What are you doing in your life that reveals this?

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 20: He Will Come Again...

QUESTIONS:

1. According to Sister Joan, “We nourish hope on memory: Knowing that we have always had in the past whatever it was that we needed in order to survive, to endure, to see, to be more than we ever thought we could become, we claim the right to expect it in the future.” Give one or more examples from your life, of national or global life, that upholds this statement.

2. “Hope and faith are inextricably linked: If I believe in God the Creator, then I must hope in this God’s commitment to the eternally ongoing process of Creation. I am not born finished. I do not live whole. I do not die complete. There must be more” (150). Do you really believe this? Can you explain why or why not?

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 21: To Judge the Living and the Dead...

QUESTIONS:

1. If, as Sister Joan teaches, the Jewish idea about judgment is true “. . . that the judgment of God would be on the nation, or on humanity as a whole, not on individuals” (154), what do you think this portends for the United States of America in 2021? Discuss.
2. Poignantly, Sister Joan states further: “Surely the return of Jesus will be marked by one question: Were you for me or against me? Were you with me or not? This is a binary/either/or question. How do you think most people will answer it? How would you answer it?”
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 22: I Believe in the Holy Spirit...

QUESTIONS:

1. “The question for this age, then, is not “What’ is the Holy Spirit?” as it was in centuries past. Our question is: “ Who’ is the Holy Spirit?” (165) How has what Sister Joan has written in this chapter matured your understanding of the identity of the Holy Spirit?
2. It is common among Christians, especially, to have distorted, limited, erroneous ideas about the Holy Spirit. Professor Elizabeth Johnson, in *Abounding Kindness*, has written that “The Holy Spirit is the forgotten God among Catholic Christians in the West” (227). She adds, “This causes great impoverishment to our everyday sense of God’s presence and activity in the world today, for the Holy Spirit is nothing less than God’s own loving self, present and active in the world. The Holy Spirit is God, present and active to vivify, renew, and bring new life to all peoples and the whole of creation” (227) She later writes that we encounter the Holy Spirit in 1) community worship and prayer; 2) the natural world; 3) in relationships, particularly loving

ones; 4) in healthy self-love, and; 5) in the world of social interactions. (228) Prayerfully reflect on the above for some time. What new or deeper insights about the Holy Spirit has Professor Johnson birthed in you? Please share.

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 23: The Holy Catholic Church...

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan reminds her readers that “it is not that the clergy and the papacy are not the Church. They are, of course. But what has really been forgotten, both by us and by them, is that they are not the whole Church” (171). Has this reality shaped your attitude toward and participation in the Catholic Church? How?
2. On the last page of this chapter Sister Joan shares her vision of the church she “. . . can’t just forget,” and the church she cannot leave as well. What is your response to her declaration? If you are Catholic, and a Catholic woman in particular, why do you remain in the church?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 24: In the Communion of Saints...

QUESTIONS:

1. Read the following short article on the meaning of the Communion of Saints. Then share what new understandings it gave you of this section of the Creed:

<https://uscatholic.org/articles/201412/what-is-the-communion-of-saints/>

2. Sister Joan states on p.178: “ Belief in the communion of saints is a call to immersion in the holy-making project of living out the life of

Christ ourselves as so many have done before us.” Share whether or not belief in the communion of saints has a significant place in your spiritual life, explaining why or why not.

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 25: The Forgiveness of Sins...

QUESTIONS:

1. “Clearly, to be everything we can become, we must learn to forgive,” claims Sister Joan on p. 187. Have you ever wondered what the Holy Mystery’s response to you might be at the end of your life if you say, even then, you still cannot forgive someone for the profound hurt/violation that person inflicted upon you? What might that “conversation” look like between you and the ever merciful God?

2. “Real forgiveness relies, like the forgiveness of God, on full acknowledgement of the act that impaled the heart of a person, full knowledge of the motive, full acceptance of the human condition: People do these things. It is not so much what a person does to us that is the essence of forgiveness. It is what we do because of the sorrow we suffer that counts” (189). What is your response to this?

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 26: The Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting...

QUESTIONS:

1. In this chapter Sister Joan lays bare the harm both Platonic dualism and Jansenism have wrought in Western Christianity regarding attitudes toward one’s body. How have these, subtly or not so subtly, affected you and your relationship with your body, physically, sexually,

emotionally, etc.?

2. Fr. Richard Rohr, in his book, *The Universal Christ*, writes on p. 186: “Resurrection is about the whole of creation, it is about history, it is about every human who has ever been conceived, sinned, suffered, and died, every animal that has lived and died a tortured death, every element that has changed from solid, to liquid, to ether, over great expanses of time. It is about you and it is about me. It is about everything.” How does this impact your understanding of the Resurrection at this point in your life?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.

Chapter 27: Amen

QUESTIONS:

1. “By reminding us that God is the ‘Creator,’ the Creed gives us a glimpse of destiny and an assurance of well-being . . . We learn most of all, that to be human is to be creature – with all the other creatures on earth. Not superior, not independent, but only part of everything that is, all of which is sacred” (200). If you can say “Amen” to this statement by Sister Joan, what life experiences brought you to this affirmation? Please share.
2. What one or more sections of the Creed at the end of this chapter speaks to you most deeply? Discuss why.
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Explain why.