



Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe Is Coming Apart

Kathy Escobar

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Hope for spiritual refugees, church burnouts, and freedom seekers.

After years of participating in a comfortable faith tradition, many find themselves in a spiritual wilderness, feeling disillusioned with church, longing for more freedom and less religion in their lives.

If that describes you, you're in good company. Countless men and women are in the middle of a shifting faith—and aren't sure where to turn.

What if you discovered that losing beliefs doesn't mean you have to lose your faith?

Pastor, friend, and spiritual director Kathy Escobar has journeyed with many who have experienced significant shifts in the faith they once considered unchangeable. Through their stories and her own, Kathy has discovered that growth and change are natural parts of life in our relationship with God.

Filled with honest stories and practical insights, *Faith Shift* gives language to what many experience as their faith evolves. With an inviting blend of vulnerability and hope, it addresses the losses that come with spiritual shifts and offers tangible practices for rebuilding a free and authentic faith after it unravels. What feels like an ending can become a new beginning.

Includes personal reflection and group discussion questions at the end of each chapter.

Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe Is Coming Apart Details

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Author : Kathy Escobar

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Believe Is Coming Apart Kathy Escobar

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James says

In 2006, Kathy Escobar underwent a ‘faith shift.’ No longer able to conform to the beliefs and practices of her conservative evangelical church, she went through a time of shifting and unraveling before rebuilding her faith, albeit in a new way. Currently she is a popular blogger, the co-founder of Refuge, a mission center and Christian community in the North Denver area and a spiritual director. As a spiritual director and pastor she has journeyed alongside many spiritual-shifters.

Faith Shift is not just Escobar’s story; it is the fruit of her story and is birthed by her work with fellow-faith-shifters. Escobar has cataloged the process that she and others have gone through as they moved from a faith which was ‘certain’ but narrow toward a reconstructed, generous faith (or a movement beyond faith). By naming the process, Escobar comforts those experiencing the disorientation and disequilibrium of a ‘faith shift.’ The stages she describes are:

Fusing—characterized by believing, learning and doing underscore this stage. People in this stage place a strong value on affiliation, certainty, conformity.

Shifting—discomfort with formulaic answers and beginning to disengage with aspects of belonging with the in-group.

Returning—This stage is a ‘re-engagement’ and a ‘return’ to the faith community we were in, in the ‘fusing stage.’

Unraveling—A letting go of the faith we had in our ‘fusing stage.’ If the fusing stage valued affiliation, certainty and conformity, in the unraveling stage we value autonomy, authenticity, uncertainty (65).

Severing—cutting ties with your past belief system (Escobar observes that most shifters do not give up their belief in God, or their faith totally, but she allows for the possibility).

Rebuilding—In the final stage, new faith (or a new spirituality, even an atheistic one) emerges. In this stage, our values are freedom, mystery, diversity (129).

Along the way, Escobar has a number of wise and compassionate things to say. Escobar validates whatever stage we may be at on our spiritual journey because each stage has peculiar gifts for us. Those who return to their original faith are validated because all our journeys are different, people return or a variety of reasons and the simple certainty we knew at that stage is comforting (see chapter 5). Escobar has a gift for honoring the spiritual lives of others. She knows that even as we change and grow, something is lost from the ‘faith’ we had and it is worth grieving and appreciating. The reflection questions at the end of each chapter allowed me to explore how the theme of the book and make sense of some of my own story.

When I began this book, I felt like I wasn’t exactly her intended audience. Most of the faith shifts she describes were movements from conservative Evangelical to something more progressive (or beyond). Like Escobar and her tribe, I too began my spiritual journey as part of a conservative evangelical church.

Currently, I pastor one. I have made some denominational and doctrinal shifts along the way but still hold to the central doctrines I was raised with. I hold some issues far looser but I also feel more certain about the aspects of faith I regard as essential. Still my own faith journey parallels Escobar’s stages. I moved from a narrow version of evangelicalism to one that is more generous and values freedom, diversity and mystery. I think a lot of what Escobar says will be instructive for anyone moving from a rudimentary faith toward spiritual maturity (not that I necessarily have arrived there yet!) Faith Shift is first and foremost about spiritual and personal growth.

Escobar places no judgment on the outcome of a faith shift. You can move from fundamentalist to agnostic and in so doing, experience more freedom and authenticity. That is growth, and in many respects, growth in the right direction. However, I'm not sure that I want to relativize all aspects of 'faith.' I think it is possible to move towards a belief system that is healthier but falser (or as false). The stages that Escobar describes are individualized and allow each shifter to decide what they still believe:

Each person's journey is unique. While I know some people who are no longer certain of the divinity of Christ, others hold strongly to this belief. While some believe the Bible might be inaccurate and therefore loses parts of his authority, others still believe it is inerrant and take it extremely seriously. While some may have five or more things they still firmly believe, others may have only one. (143)

I am enough of a Pietist to believe we each have to own our own faith, but I am not a relativist and put a higher premium on (capital T) Truth in our spiritual quest. I certainly agree with her that many, whose faith has unraveled, need to pursue growth outside of the communities they are no longer a part of. Honest, vulnerable doubt is preferable to quiet pretense. But personally I hold out hope for God's self revelation in Christ as a shining star in the midst of our wilderness wanderings.

If you forgive me my Evangelical quibbles, I think this is a very good book and I am grateful for Escobar's insights. In the spiritual life we need more openness to mystery and wonder and less slavish obedience to some imposed standard. If it takes a faith shift to open us up into a new way of exploring God and faith, I am in favor. I give this four stars. ★★★★?

Notice of material connection, I received a review copy of this book for the purposes of this review.

glenn boyes says

What do I say? I have been in a faith shift for years. Life has brought it about. I have been angry through far too much of it. In the last year, I have realized that anger was not healthy for me. I've began trying to express my "faith shift" in the positives (still in a early stage, but the shift has happened). Thankful for the "picture" of the faith shift that has helped clarify so much for me. Kathy Escobar's book is a must read for anyone experiencing this, or for those who don't understand the journey of those for whom it has become a reality.

GollyRojer says

There were two things I kept saying throughout as I read this book: "Honey, listen to this!" and, "I've got to bookmark this so I can come back and post it online." Up until the last couple of chapters, it felt as though the book had been written specifically for me.

It is written for and about people who initially became deeply immersed in church beliefs, activities and lifestyle, but at some point began to have questions or doubts, and instead of being nurtured or helped, find themselves marginalized or shunned by the church. The book describes and labels stages the author and others have gone through which led ultimately to a happier, freer, more mature and realistic form of spirituality.

While the author states that she never came to the point of completely losing all faith or belief in Jesus, many of those she knows and with whom she has worked did so, some coming to refer to themselves as agnostics or atheists. This is not approached with horror or disdain, nor as if it were an illness needing curing. The

position taken is that each person's experience is unique, and that this is a necessary part of their dealing with the situation. It is neither bad nor good; it simply is.

The stages identified by the book are Fusing--a childlike, black-and-white, good-or-bad form of belief during which we become involved in church activities to the exclusion of the secular world; Shifting--when we begin to have questions, doubts, cognitive dissonance regarding what was initially perceived as a system with all the answers in life; Returning--when one assesses the consequences of the path of leaving, becomes frightened, and returns to the former church and lifestyle rather than continue this new course; Unravelling--for those not Returning, the loss of everything once held as sacred, the dismantling of a belief system; Severing--cutting ties not only with the church, but also with friends and even family members who will not accept us with this new questioning, doubting attitude; and Rebuilding--once we have cleared away the rubble of the old belief system, determining for ourselves what we believe. This usually involves a willingness to be accepting of those with differing beliefs and views, and to interact with the secular world as part of it rather than considering ourselves separate and "not touching the unclean thing".

The author devotes a couple of chapters to discussing how to care for those in the unravelling stage. Almost half the book is devoted to discussing the stage of rebuilding.

The majority of this book came too late for me. I had my crisis of conscience in 1987. The church itself did the severing for me (Jehovah's Witnesses and their shunning practice), and I spent a long time drinking my way to numbness before finally completing the unravelling stage around 2000. I have stumbled through a rebuilding stage that is still going on. I believe it would have been a tremendous help to me if I'd been able to read this book at the beginning of my split from religious certainty. It would have clarified several things and reassured me that I wasn't alone in what I was experiencing regarding my spiritual beliefs and life.

The book won't be of equal value to everyone. Those who are not in some stage of a faith shift most likely won't be able to identify. For those who are, however, I highly recommend this book.

Tawni Winns says

A breath of fresh air

I'm so glad I found this book. It's been a huge help and it came at just the right time. For a while there I felt like I'd always be lost while I was trying to figure out my faith. This book gave me my hope back. I recommend it to anyone who has broken from the church and Christianity and needs some help.

Red says

Man, this was a good book. Well, it was less of a book and more of a general, gentle guide to finding out your faith is falling apart (in my case because of Science and LGBT rights, and then like pulling a thread out of a rug, pretty much everything unraveling).

I was lucky to have a good friend who supported me when everything started crashing down - and then twice as lucky to find a good church where questions like the ones raised here were welcomed and I was not judged for asking why or saying maybe I don't believe in a lot of things anymore. I found this book after I was pretty deep into the process already, but the author lays out the stages of a faith shift in a really understandable way and I thought - aha, yes, I went through that stage and this stage, and gee, here I am at this one.

It was comforting to me to find out that I'm not alone, that this isn't an uncommon process - the book both Kathy's experience with it and examples of many people Kathy helped through a similar process. I liked all the discussion questions at the end of each chapter - I'd like to work through them sometimes, just to have a record of my own journey, but I am not quite at that point where I want to.

I can see the value of reading this again in another year or two as I keep on this journey.

Justin says

While the concepts in this book are not new to me by any stretch, it was amazingly helpful and refreshing for three reasons - 1) It affirmed that 'You're not crazy, and you're not alone.' That's always refreshing. 2) It gave vocabulary and nomenclature to something that the vast majority of us, myself included, have a hard time articulating. 3) It provides a framework for discussion, processing, healing, etc etc for anyone for whom the content applies. These all made it very applicable and useful.

As the title implies, it is about a shifting/evolving/changing spiritual journey, which is something that I've been on for years. While I generally don't like to talk about my spiritual journey, it is a huge part of me, and this book helped me feel a lot more comfortable talking about it. Usually, I've not wanted to talk about it with non-Christians because anything smacking of Christianity is generally derided as judgy, exclusionist, self-righteous, and generally about as welcome as telling someone you have an infectious disease. I also don't like discussing what my journey has been like with Christians, because of all the same reasons - just the other side of the coin. It doesn't fit in with prescribed norms of thought or behavior, therefore, gets judged, excluded, and ignored in huff of self-righteous rejection.

So, the fact that this book was written for working through exactly this kind of situation, or situations similar, is fantastic. I definitely recommend this book for anyone who has questioned their faith in any way, or is confused, lonely, curious, scared, other adjectives, etc.

Rylie says

I read quite a few books while I was both lost, and expanding on my spiritual journey. Sometimes growth makes us feel like we don't know the way, at all. This book put what was in my brain in to thoughts that I both understood and that helped me bring a bit of direction in to my meandering, spiritual path.

Kate says

I'm not 100% sure this book wasn't written specifically for me. It's like the author hijacked my brain and then wrote about everything she found there. It is both eerie and deeply refreshing.

Benjamin Vineyard says

An approachable, permission giving book about displacement, disruption, and disillusion that happens in our

religious life. Escobar's anecdotes often spoke of people hurt by the church as an institution, especially in biblicistic, evangelical places. Her book gives permission to step away from those deadening places and to embrace a spiritual-religious way of life that is more inclusive of divine mystery, paradox, and vulnerability within community (which might also be called a genuine sense of human struggle shared in confession and forgiveness).

Escobar's spiritual-religious community, "The Refuge," celebrates ten values. These are a helpful map for what an embracing community can be. They might be signs of the future church, of what remains after The Great Departure. She lists:

1. Nature
2. Our senses
3. Ritual and Liturgy
4. Silence and solitude
5. Activism
6. Caring for others
7. Mystery and celebration
8. Contemplation
9. Our minds
10. Recovery (p.156)

The core of Escobar's book is the presentation of stages of faith, struggle, or "shift," as the title goes. These are described well by Escobar. I find myself wanting to explore similar concepts or dig into some of Escobar's sources.

The stages Escobar presents are:

- A. Fusing
- B. Shifting
- C. Returning
- D. Unraveling
- E. Severing
- F. Rebuilding

I have residual questions from my reading. What about "orthodoxy?" Is there an ancient, centered confession of faith that the Scriptures speak to that can be presented without oppression or verbal violence? Can orthodoxy and open, authentic questions dwell together without forced resolve? (Is there such a thing as true "orthodoxy?")

I appreciate St. John of the Cross and his writings. His telling of dark nights of the senses and the spirit have formed a classic understanding of change, shift or development in the soul. Yet unlike Escobar's examples, John speaks of these as coming directly from God. The sensation is similar to what Escobar's examples spoke of, except Escobar's modern examples focused more on disenfranchisement with the church as an organization or people. Many of Escobar's examples were reactionary to experience in community. John of the Cross says such times of renovation may be divine. I wanted to read more about John's perspective in Escobar's book, in part because John of the Cross is hard to understand and I've had to lean on Thomas Merton to understand much.

Might there be a place to talk about the old language of spiritual growth in this topic, a path that walked from

awakening through purgation toward illumination and resting in union? If so, Escobar's book speaks a lot about the purgation process.

Brenda Torres says

This book is more geared toward the person who is struggling with faith in the sense of what they believe about God, rather than those just struggling with the institutional church. So in that regard I struggled to relate to most of the material.

Kerstin says

I found it fascinating to read the faith shifts from people of different faiths. I had no idea there were so many of us from so many faiths with so many differing backgrounds, who are all undergoing faith shifts, seemingly at the same time. So interesting.

Tricia says

This is an excellent book for any Christian person whose faith has unraveled, is unraveling or one with doubts (probably all of us if we are honest). It is honest and real and hopeful.

Matthew says

Really enjoyed hearing from this perspective. It is definitely a very particular perspective (despite the author's attempts to be very inclusive), but one which a lot of people that might be described as faith shifters relate to. While I don't share the postmodern worldview this book is written from, I do believe it represents a necessary challenge to the conservative and fundamentalist worldviews, exposing areas where we have distorted truth into an unhealthy cage that has hurt far too many people. This book was written as encouragement to those recovering from church--for me it was a challenge to put myself in their shoes and try to make the church a more hospitable space where people can truly be free to be authentic and express their passions, questions, and doubts.

Carolyn says

A book that resonated deeply, especially in the first half - indicating that I'm probably not at the rebuilding stage yet. She charts the different stages of a faith journey very well, going back to the first fire of coming to faith and then onwards to what happens as we possibly begin to shift and unravel. She then goes on to look at the way forward, or back, allowing that for everyone the journey is different. Many of her examples are people who lost faith entirely and are making or have made peace with that. Others are those whose faith has shifted or changed for a massive variety of reasons from intellectual challenge through personal circumstances and church issues. There is comfort in this, in seeing that none of us is alone in our

experience, we aren't necessarily weird or sinful for asking questions and doubting much if not all of what we have been taught. I like how Escobar makes clear that all journeys are individual and unique and emphasis taking time and caring for your self and your soul at each stage. I like how she makes note of the positives, both in the things, or one thing, we are still sure of and in finding things to be thankful for in our past. I did find difficult her emphasis that wherever we end up, that is ok, although in a book of this nature that is to be expected, but the total pluralism and almost anything goes openness to outcome, even a different religion or atheism as well as other forms of spirituality was troublesome for me. Overall however this book was so filled with 'oh yes' moments and with thoughts about the process that made do much sense to me, that I would highly recommend it for anyone who finds themselves or their friends/family in a faith shift.

Kim Murden says

Initially a little disappointed but really only because I adore KE's blog writing and I didn't think this had the immediacy or the passion of that genre.

However saying that I have found this book challenging on many levels. Without me initially realising it issues were raised for me that I had been ignoring and now my husband and I are working through the questions together in the pub on a Saturday night. As well as giving voice to a story we have never really told we're learning things that we assumed about each other but never spoke as well as things we never knew before. This book is a good thing.
