

# SCHOLAR'S CORNER

**I have gotten to know some Jews and Muslims who have impressed me with their love for God and their dedication to doing God's will. Frankly, they seem just as spiritual and close to God as the most saintly Christians I have ever known or read about. And yet almost every church teaches that only Christians will go to heaven and that all non-Christians are living in darkness without any knowledge or experience of God. I don't want to be a heretic, but my experience suggests that non-Christians can have a real spirituality and love for God without believing in Christ. Can you help me out of my quandary?**

I sympathize with your sense of being torn between Christian doctrine and your own experience. I don't want to be considered a heretic by the vast majority of Christians either for holding that it is possible for a non-Christian to have a knowledge of God and a heart given to God (which suggests that that individual will continue in faithful relationship to God beyond death).

We know the verses "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6) and "There is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12), and there are other verses that can be cited to support the traditional position that only those who put their faith in Christ before they die end up in heaven.

And yet some of us have met Jews and Muslims and maybe other non-Christians whose love for God and trust in God's love and goodness, and

whose love, joy, and peace, are undeniable. And the idea that such people, however rare they are (and they are rare among churchgoers too, I am afraid) would after a life of living for God and loving God be disowned by God and excluded from heaven does seem extremely unjust and cruel and incompatible with both God's justice and God's mercy.

My approach is to trust my perception of piety and spirituality and nobility wherever I find it and to accept it as a fact. Others may be comfortable dismissing the spirituality of non-Christians as a sham or as hollow, but I am not.

So I am led to conclude that people who have mistaken beliefs (for instance, rejecting the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement and the Resurrection, as Jews and Muslims do) can nevertheless love God (as they conceive of God) and serve God (as they understand God's will) and have a spiritual life that is as deep and real as that of some Christians

THE REV.  
WILLIAM G.  
GARTIG



think I can show you.

Difference of opinion among Christians is a fact. We differ on how Christ is present in the Eucharist, whether or not infants should be baptized and on the correct form of church government—just to take a few examples. And yet many Christians are willing to grant the name and status of "Christian" to at least some people who they do not agree with on every issue. Most Baptists, for instance, will grant that as long as a person has accepted Christ as Savior, they are saved and going to heaven, even if they are, say, a Methodist and therefore are wrong about infant baptism. Such a Methodist's heart is right with God even though they hold a mistaken doctrine.

If we can extend this distinction between a heart that is right with God and a mind that holds mistaken ideas from Methodists to Roman Catholics....

without having any place in their thinking for Jesus and disagreeing with what are for us essential Christian doctrines.

How can this be? If you can stay with me for a few minutes, I

You see where I am going. If a Protestant can accept the idea of a Roman Catholic—any Roman Catholic—ending up in heaven despite holding mistaken Roman Catholic beliefs, might it be possible to do the same with Jews? And if with Jews, who share so many beliefs with Christians, why not with Muslims, who also share many beliefs with us? I have not personally known enough Hindus or people of other religions to have seen undeniable spirituality or felt a spiritual kinship, but perhaps authentic spirituality can be found in non-Christian "farther afield" than Judaism and Islam.

Now I know that this distinction between a heart that loves God and a mind that holds mistaken beliefs does not answer all the theological objections to the idea of non-Christians going to heaven. But I do think it describes an experienced fact: deep spirituality and fervent love of God can be found outside the Christian church. And I believe it should be acknowledged when encountered and respected. This undeniable non-Christian spirituality is a challenge for Christian theology to explain.

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The Rev. William G. Gartig will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects. Send questions to 2146 Cameron Ave. Apt. 5, Cincinnati, OH 45212-3631 or at [gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com](mailto:gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com).