

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

In my column from last month, I seem to have “stepped into it.” I received a number of heart-felt and impassioned e-mails from people (including Gary Brusman, my senior warden at St. Michael and All Angels, Cincinnati) who took strong objection to the column. I will try to respond to those e-mails and to the objections and comments that others may have had to it but didn't write to me about it.

I try to be careful with my words in these columns because I know people read them carefully, and I don't want to say anything that is wrong (if I can help it) or something that will be misunderstood. So I strive for clarity (as well as brevity). Please note what I said and what I didn't say in the May column.

I pointed to the fact noticed by many Christians who have friends who are Jews or Muslims or belong to other non-Christian religions that there are some non-Christians who seem to be devout and to have a deep spirituality. I then proposed a possible partial way we Christians might explain this apparent fact of real spirituality among non-Christians: the distinction between a heart that loves God and a mind that holds mistaken ideas. If a Baptist can accept that a Methodist (who believes in infant bap-

tism) can – despite holding that wrong doctrine – still be saved by accepting Christ as Savior, then maybe, by extension, a person could have a heart that is open to God, even though they hold not one but many wrong beliefs and do not accept the basic beliefs of Christianity about Jesus (such as incarnation, atonement and the resurrection).

Please note that I did not say that Jews, Muslims, and other non-Christians are right in their denial of these central Christian doctrines or that Christians should cease to hold them. I did not deny the Trinity, the full divinity and full humanity of the Incarnate Christ, the atonement on the cross, the bodily resurrection of Christ on Easter Day or the second coming of Christ. These are all basic, essential Christian beliefs that distinguish orthodox Christians from heterodox (heretical) Christians and from non-Christians. These beliefs should by no means be given up. To do so would be to place oneself outside the historic Christian faith.

One of the common errors people make is to think that in order to have respectful dialogue with others, one must discard any beliefs that the other people do not share and agree with them on everything. But to do this is not to be honest about

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what you really think. That is no basis for a relationship between people of different religious traditions (or for that matter, for a romantic relationship). You have to “keep it real.” The fact is, there are real differences of belief

between Christians and non-Christians, and these can and should be talked about.

I also did not say that Christians should not share their faith with non-Christians. The things that we believe and know as Christians about God and Jesus and all the rest of Christianity we can and should share with others. Our message is one of Good News and it should be shared. Remember the Great Commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” (Matt. 28:19) and what Paul says, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16).

I started with our experience of the spirituality of some non-Christians and suggested that the distinction between the heart that loves God and the mind

that holds some mistaken beliefs might help us understand from a Christian perspective how it could be possible for there to be real spirituality outside Christianity. I didn't claim to have dealt with all the theological problems with the idea of non-Christians ending up in heaven. I didn't even try to deal with the biblical verses like “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). This is clearly a major problem in the discussion of whether non-Christians go to heaven. My goal was much more modest: to start not from Christology but from lived experience and to ask others better trained in theology to offer us help in understanding the authentic religious experience on the part of non-Christians that some of us think we have witnessed and have wondered how to explain.

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