

On Loving Jesus While Living Among Those Who Don't

Rebekah L. Miles

Growing up in United Methodist parsonages in southern Arkansas, I lived in a world saturated with the love of Jesus. Jesus was everywhere—his face looked out from a picture hung on the kitchen wall at one friend's house and sat on top of the piano in the living room of another. Jesus showed up in conversations on the playground and in the classroom. At our family reunions, ragged Cokesbury hymnals in hand, we harmonized about the love, the blood, the power, and the name of Jesus. Sure, on occasion, the first and third persons of the Trinity found their way into the conversation—but it was Jesus we lived and breathed, Jesus we ate and drank. With the exception of one lovely Jewish family who owned the best kosher deli in Arkansas, everyone I knew was Christian. If an argument broke out on the school playground about who was not saved or who was not going to heaven, it was not the Buddhists and the Muslims whose eternal destiny was in dispute but the Methodists and the Episcopalians.

Dramatic Changes

When my husband and I look at our first- and second-grade daughters, we see that they live in a very different world. Yes, Jesus' face looks out from over the couch at our house, his name is invoked in prayers over meals and at bedtime, and we still sometimes harmonize over those Cokesbury hymnals, but not everyone they know loves Jesus. On one side of the family their aunt, uncle, and three cousins are Jewish. On the other side, an uncle and his extended family are Hindus from northern India. Our girls have a friend whose Anglo mother does outdoor

shamanic rituals on Saturday nights and another friend from China who doesn't believe in God at all. Our kids are growing up in a very different world from the one I knew as a child.

Things have changed not only in my little part of the world but across the country. Small and large towns across the United States have more of a global religious flavor than they did a few decades ago. I think about a small town in northwest Arkansas that, after two centuries of being populated largely by Anglo

and African-American Protestants, is now the home to significant populations of Laotian Buddhists and El Salvadoran Roman Catholics who have come to work in the chicken processing plants.

According to one respected study, in the years between 1990 and 2001, while United Methodist enrollment was declining, many other religious groups in the United States saw tremendous growth.¹ People identifying

themselves as Muslims more than doubled. Buddhists increased by 170 percent; Hindus and the Bahai faith have more than tripled. The group with the greatest percentage growth in those years was the Wiccans (a.k.a. witches) whose numbers, while still small, increased seventeen fold. Moreover, a significant number of couples in this national survey reported a "mixture of religious identification." i.e., where one spouse adheres to one religion while the other spouse adheres to a different religion or no religion. The world has changed since I was a child. United Methodists are much more likely now to live down the street from people of other faiths or even to be married to them!

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When I was a child and a question arose about the salvation of non-Christians, it seemed somehow very distant and abstract. For many of us and for many in our churches today, these questions hit much closer to home. It's a lot tougher to consign non-Christians to hell when you see them every morning at coffee break, sit next to them in the stands at the Friday night football game, or gather with them every day to eat around the same family table.

Several Approaches

How do we talk with our parishioners, our children, and other Christians about people of other faiths—especially when those people are our neighbors, our friends, and our family? In recent years, when Christian theologians have talked about religious pluralism, they have often focused on the questions: Who is going to heaven? Who can be saved? Scholars have pointed out three very different ways of thinking about people of other faiths—the pluralist, exclusivist, and inclusivist points of view.²

Pluralists generally believe that all (or most) religions are valid and legitimate. A pluralist could say something like this: “There are many different true paths to God. People should take the path that works or is a good fit for them. No one path is better than the other.” Pluralists believe that salvation does not come only through Christ.

Exclusivists (sometimes called particularists) claim that only those who have faith in Christ are saved and have the hope of eternal life with God. An exclusivist might say, “Yes, there are people of other religions who do good things and who are virtuous, but only with faith in Christ is one saved. Without a conscious decision for Christ, a person cannot receive the gift of salvation and eternal life.” Other exclusivists deny that non-Christians could even do good or be virtuous without faith in Christ. Although most exclusivists say that this decision for Christ must happen in this life, the position would not exclude the possibility of God somehow continuing to offer salvation after death.

Inclusivists, like exclusivists, believe that salvation and eternal life come only through Christ, but unlike the exclusivists, inclusivists hold that a person who does not know or does not accept Christ could be saved, but only by Christ's power. In other words, people come to God only through Christ but they do not necessarily have to have trusted in Christ or even have heard his name. Evangelical Clark Pinnock talks about “pagan saints,” those people of other religions who have great faith, and Roman Catholic theology Karl Rahner writes of the “anonymous Christian” who is saved by Christ even without consciously knowing Christ. An inclusivist might say, “Christ has redeemed all of creation. A person can be saved by Christ without ever having consciously accepted Christ as saviour.” Some inclusivists would even go so far as to claim that other religions were gifts of God to help prepare people for the coming of Christ.³

Although these categories can be helpful, there are several problems with the common reliance on them today. First, within each category there are a variety of positions. For example, as we

saw above, not all inclusivists look the same. By focusing primarily on these three categories we can easily overlook the nuances of the many and varied points of view. Another problem is that the labels can be misleading and unhelpful. It will come as no surprise to learn that exclusivists did not come up with the label “exclusivist.” Indeed, some Wesleyan “exclusivists” could rightly think of themselves as inclusivists because they believe that Christ has died for all, that Christ desires that all would be saved, and that Christ has welcomed all to come and receive him.

Perhaps the chief problem is not simply with this way of categorizing the exclusivist, pluralist, and inclusivist responses to the question “Who will have eternal life?” The bigger problem may have more to do with the question itself—particularly the way we have focused so much on the question of the eternal destiny of non-Christians.

What Does Wesley Say?

Do John Wesley's comments offer any insights? At first blush, Wesley appears to contradict himself as he preached about non-Christians and, in some cases, to be downright rude and offensive. For example, in one sermon, Wesley said of the “heathen” that “many of them [are] inferior to the beasts of the field . . . more savage than lions” and goes on to claim that Muslims are “in general . . . as void of mercy as lions and tigers . . . [and] a true disgrace to human nature.”⁴ In other sermons, however, Wesley was remarkably positive about non-Christian faiths. He wrote, for example, that some heathen were “taught of God, by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion.”⁵

So, what did Wesley believe about people of other faiths?⁶ This is a difficult question to answer because in these sermons and others where Wesley appeared to be talking about people of other faiths he was really talking about and to the Christians—particularly the Methodists. He hauled in other religions primarily for rhetorical purposes. In a sermon where Wesley is praising first Muslims and then Jews the point really has nothing to do with these other faiths. The real point was this: See those Muslims and Jews. They have used the light that God has given to them to live virtuously. And you Methodists, who have been given greater light, you do not use the light that you have. In one sermon, where Wesley had been talking about other faiths and other Christian denominations, he suddenly shifted gears, noting that “with Heathens, Mahometans, and Jews we have at present nothing to do; only we may wish that their lives did not shame many of us that are called Christians.”⁷ In this case and others, Wesley praised the virtuous and holy non-Christians, so that he could then remind the Christians—particularly the Methodists—to seek holiness in their own lives.

Perhaps this shift of focus is appropriate for our time too. Certainly there is a place for theological discussions about who will be saved. But perhaps the most pressing question is not about the eternal destiny of the non-Christians but about the destiny of the Christians themselves and about their witness. The more pressing question may be this: How can we as

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Christians grow in love so that we can, among other things, offer a more graceful witness of Christ's love to non-Christians?

And in the end, that is closer to the subject of John 14—the text on which the articles in this issue of *Circuit Rider* focus. John 14 is not so much about people of other faiths as it is a word to Jesus' closest followers about living faithfully. Jesus' teachings in John 14 center not on those who do not know the Father but on those who do.

It is not surprising that our interminable discussions of the eternal destiny of non-Christians do not endear us to many non-Christians. Speculation about who will burn in hell does not win us many friends or tempt non-Christians to enter our open doors or trust our open hearts.

Mohandas Gandhi once said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." Who can fault Gandhi for that assessment? Too often, we as Christians are poor advertisements for Christ. If United Methodists are really concerned about evangelism and witnessing to non-Christians—whether they live on the other side of the world or in our own home, it is surely best if we do not begin by offending them unnecessarily but instead by living more faithfully as a witness to the one who is "the way, and the truth and the life"—Jesus Christ. □

1. Barry A. Kosmin, Seymour P. Lachman, et al, "American Religious Identification Survey," The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, found at http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/key_findings.htm
2. These categories and issues are widely discussed. See, for example, John Hick and Paul Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, New York: Orbis Press; Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions*, Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis Books, 1985; and John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.
3. Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992. Karl Rahner wrote about this idea in many contexts. See, for example, Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Volume 14, translated by David Bourke, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976, 283.
4. John Wesley, "The General Spread of the Gospel," Sermon 63, §§ 2 and 3 in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols., CD-ROM edition

- (Franklin, TN: Providence House, 1994), 6:311-12.
5. John Wesley, "On Faith," Sermon 106, § I.4, *Works of Wesley*, 7:226.
 6. For a more extended treatment of this topic, see my article, "Would You Take This Man to An Interfaith Dialogue? John Wesley as Interreligious Resource," in *A Great Commission: Christian Hope and Religious Diversity*, Martin Forward, Stephen Plant, and Susan White, eds., Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000.
 7. John Wesley, "On Faith," Sermon 106, § II.3, *Works of Wesley*, 7:230.



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