

tian.” I was happy to be able to open her eyes but sad to find out she had Catholics *within her own family*.

I felt good about this grass-roots type of ecumenism. If there is to be formal reconciliation, there have to be personal reconciliations, concrete manifestations of our family bond. Christian friends and neighbors need to see in each other what God sees in them. Our bonds of friendship can grow into bonds of prayer and facilitate the mutual understanding needed among denominations.

The Mystery Deepens...

As I said before, the Tribe wasn't made up of only Christians. I experienced brotherhood – the sharing of work, play, successes, and even deep pain – with men who did not recognize Jesus as the Way to the Father. And yet, they loved me. I mean *really* loved me; I could have asked them for anything, and if it was even remotely in their power, they would have come through. I found this kind of love exceptional, even among Christians. I could not explain it except to wonder if the God Who *is Love* had somehow come into their lives too. In loving me, hadn't they loved Jesus “in the least of His brothers” (Matt.25:35-45)? Could Jesus have somehow joined them to Himself without their even knowing it?

Yan was a member of the Tribe I felt especially close to. He had grown up as a Ukrainian Jew under Soviet rule and knew religious persecution first hand. He had immigrated to New York at age twelve and lived in a Hassidic¹⁵⁷ neighborhood for a time. Investigating his Jewish heritage meant a great deal to him, and lucky for me, he let me share it with him. I was invited to Rosh Hashanah (New Year) and Passover and was able to help him start a chapter of Hillel on our campus, a group for Jewish students. We even studied some of *Exodus* together.

We discussed Jesus quite a bit too. For Yan the thought of becoming a Christian was impossible though; in his mind it would be a betrayal of all the men and women who died *as Jews* in the Holocaust and then under Soviet persecution. That said, you can imagine how shocked I was one Sunday morning when, after finishing breakfast, he joined me for Mass. For me to celebrate Jewish feasts was one thing (because Jesus and His first disciples

¹⁵⁷ Strict, Orthodox Judaism.

celebrated them, I considered them part of my heritage); but for my friend to attend Mass (mind you, he didn't join in the prayers) was an amazing show of his affection for me. It has been fun over the years, hearing subtle shifts in the way he speaks of the Christian, and in particular the Catholic, Faith. I can tell that while he doesn't agree with it, he respects it. He will kid me, "Any religion that thinks a Jewish man is God can't be all bad."

There was another member of the Tribe who made me do a lot of thinking. He was the one guy that initially I did not see myself becoming close to - the stories he told and some of the remarks he made. (Which, with the words and innuendos that have/do come out of my mouth, was extremely hypocritical.) It didn't take me long to find out the size of his heart though: loyal, trusting, generous, hard-working, thoughtful. His friendship is one of the most valued of my entire life. He was not committed to a particular faith, but when you got him into a serious conversation he would let slip these spiritual jewels. I didn't think he had reached a firm decision as to who Jesus was; but there was an obvious depth to him and that, coupled with his treatment of others, compelled me to think that God was already at work in his soul. He seemed interiorly oriented toward loving Jesus "in the least of his brothers and sisters." The question had to be asked - what if he never came to an explicit recognition of Jesus as God the Son?¹⁵⁸

...and the Circle Widens (the Salvation of Non-Christians)

The message of the New Testament seemed crystal clear: union with Jesus is the only way to overcome the damage of sin and attain union with the Father. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

The Apostle Peter taught that, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Jesus had sent Peter and the Apostles with the mission, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to all creation. The man who believes in it and accepts baptism will be saved; the man who refuses will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16, NIV). So wouldn't all non-

¹⁵⁸ In time he did; both he and his wife call the Catholic Church home.

Christians stand condemned? There are Christians who answer “yes,” and stop right there.

I, and many other Christians, however, have reached a different conclusion. The above passages cannot be treated superficially; they require a great deal of consideration. Take the last for instance, “the man who refuses [baptism] will be condemned” (Mk.16:16, NIV). First, what does it mean to “refuse” baptism? Wouldn’t a true refusal necessitate an understanding of what was being offered - being convinced as to the truth of the Gospel, the need for baptism, *and then* refusing it? Second, what about the hundreds of millions throughout history, both before and after the coming of Jesus, who have lived and died without hearing His name? God loved them and brought them into being; surely He provided a way for them to participate in the salvation Jesus brings. What about the mentally handicapped who are unable to comprehend the Gospel or give adult consent to baptism? What about those who have never given the Gospel a fair hearing because of the evil perpetrated by those calling themselves Christian? Surely God, the God Who *is Love*, will look at all these with eyes of compassion, for He “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). I believe Scripture and Tradition give us sufficient reason to hope, but it will require patience of us if we wish to hear them speak.

We begin in the Old Testament, where we find examples of individuals outside the People of God, outside the usual channel of blessing, who were nonetheless pleasing to the Lord.¹⁵⁹ In *Genesis* we find Melchizedek, the king-priest of Salem, who blessed Abraham and offered a thanksgiving sacrifice of bread and wine on his behalf (12:18-20). Speaking of this event, Scripture says, “it is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior” (Hebrews 7:7). Melchizedek – greater than Abraham! Then there is the character of Job, the man tested through suffering. Even though he was not descended from Abraham or living under the Mosaic covenant, God

¹⁵⁹ For this reminder I owe thanks to Depuis, Jacques, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), pp. 36-37.

boasted that “there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8).¹⁶⁰

Then in the very first chapters of the New Testament we encounter the Magi, the astrologers who followed the light of a star to the Christ-child. “Did not their religion kneel before Christ, as it were, in their persons, recognizing itself as provisional...as proceeding toward Christ?”¹⁶¹

The Apostle Paul made statements that cry out for consideration. When speaking to the people of Athens, Greece, he built upon their *already-existing* religious impulses:

I note that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, *having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him.* Yet he is not far from each one of us, for

“In him we live and move and have our being;”

as even *some of your poets* have said,

“For we are indeed his offspring.”

And then, moving from this already-existing foundation of nature and culture (note the quotation of the poets Epimenides and Aratus).¹⁶² Paul challenged them to give up the distortions in their belief and come further into the truth:

¹⁶⁰ The majority of Scripture scholars view the *Book of Job* as an extended parable, not history. That doesn't impact the point made here, however – the character of Job is that of a non-Israelite who is nonetheless a friend of God.

¹⁶¹ Ratzinger, Joseph, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), p.20.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, pp.49-50.

Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:22-31).

We find parallels to Paul’s thought in Athens expressed in his *Letter to the Romans*. First, that nature serves as part of God’s revelation, “what can be known about God is plain to them [the Gentiles, pagans], because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made (Romans 1:19-20). And second, an echo of the idea that the Gentiles were to “seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him”:

When Gentiles who do not have the law keep it as by instinct, these men although without the law serve as a law for themselves. They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts. Their conscience bears witness together with that law, and their thoughts will accuse or defend them on the day when, in accordance with the gospel I preach, God will pass judgment on the secrets of men through Christ Jesus (Romans 2:14-15).

The prologue in the *Gospel of John* forms a nice complement to Paul’s thought. John tells us that, “in the beginning was the Word [*Logos* in Greek], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... all things were made through him” (John 1:1,3). The Word is “the true light that enlightens *every* man” (John 1:9; emphasis added). John’s expression, inspired by the Spirit, formed a bridge between Jewish and Greek thought. For the Jew, God’s powerful word had brought all things into being (Genesis 1). The Greeks, beginning with Heraclitus in the sixth century B.C., “asserted that the world is governed by a firelike *Logos*, a divine force that produces the order and pattern discernible in the flux of nature;” human reason was thought to “partake of the divine *Logos*.”¹⁶³ John’s prologue

¹⁶³ Brumbaugh, Robert S., available at < <http://mb-soft.com/believe/text/logos.htm> >