How wide is God’s mercy? The Holy Spirit in other religions

Could the Spirit's love be poured into the hearts of people untouched by the incarnation? Could non-Christians be lovers of the only God there is?

by Charles Hefling in the November 11, 2015 issue

Photo by Anna Tamila

Year after year, as students of mine worked their way through the *Divine Comedy*, they found it strange—magnificently strange at times, at times disturbingly so. One feature of Dante’s poem that usually met with resistance is the exclusiveness of paradise. Apart from the Old Testament worthies, it is peopled with Christians only. Hell too has plenty of Christians, of course, but in their case beatitude was once a possibility, now sadly forfeited. Not so the rest of the damned. They never had even a chance. Blameless non-Christians like Virgil, Dante’s guide, may be assigned to one of the less hellish circles, but they are nonetheless shut out of heaven forever.

What is wrong with this picture? As one young woman put it, “That’s just not the sort of thing God would do.”

Hers is an understandable reaction, which would probably be shared by many thoughtful Christian people. Somehow, they feel sure, commitment to Christianity does not commit them to believing that in the judgment of the God they worship every other tradition of religious belief and practice is worthless. Somehow, heaven cannot be a gated enclave to which only Christians are ever given a key. Somehow,

“there’s a wideness in God’s mercy” that reaches beyond the borders of Christendom.

How, exactly? An intuitive sense that somehow God can and does save or reward or welcome persons who profess and practice religions other than Christianity is just that—a hopeful hunch. But hoping isn’t enough. Christians need to have reasons for the hope that is in them (1 Pet. 3:15). That is what theology is for. It does the homely but necessary job of articulating the transition from “somehow it just has to be” to “it is so, because . . .”

What follows is a sketch of the “because.”

The thesis: Perhaps religious affirmations of truth and value that are not grounded in Christianity can nevertheless be recognized as congruent with or equivalent to Christian teaching. That there exist such affirmations could be ascertained only by investigating what particular traditions actually affirm. Meanwhile, a prior question needs to be addressed: How is it that a congruence of teachings between different religions *could* exist? And addressing that question in a theologically responsible way would have to take very seriously what Christianity teaches about God.

What Christianity teaches, first and foremost, is that God are three. The relevance of God’s plurality to the question at hand lies in the distinctively Christian assertion that two of the three who are God have been sent into the created world of space and time. It is these two sendings—*missions*, as theology calls them—that give rise to the narrative by which Christians live.

One of the two missions, the advent of the eternal Son or Word of God, takes up quite a lot of the Nicene Creed: everything from “he came down from heaven” to “his kingdom will have no end.” About the other one, the descent of the eternal Spirit, Christian teaching has been more reticent. The New Testament is informative enough as to when the Word was made flesh and where his mission in the world was carried out. As to the coming of God the Spirit, not so much.

When, for one thing, did it begin to be true that the Spirit has in fact been sent? After the resurrection, at Pentecost? That is the liturgically conspicuous answer, but not the only one; and whether it is the right one is by no means unimportant. For it bears directly on a further question: whether the Spirit is sent only to persons who have already encountered the mission of the Word, as witnesses or through reports. Is some historical, space-and-time connection with Jesus of Nazareth necessary in

order for the other divine mission to take effect?

That is the issue at stake. The first thing to say about it is that God the Spirit was surely not absent prior to the coming of Christ. True, there is not much in pre-Christian scripture about the Spirit's activity, although Genesis is often cited to confirm that the Spirit has been "the Lord, the giver of life," as the Creed says, right from the first. But the Creed also says it is Spirit who "has spoken through the prophets," meaning by *prophets* the likes of Amos and Isaiah, but maybe also the Christian prophets that Paul mentions. Certainly Paul includes prophecy among the "varieties of gifts" given by one and the same Spirit.

In turn, it seems clear that these particular charisms or graces or enablements are to be regarded as evidence that the Spirit not only has been but continues to be sent. If so, such spiritual endowments are not the only evidence, nor even, to Paul's way of thinking, the most important evidence. There is a "more excellent way." Not only are there Spirit-given gifts, each corresponding to a specific ministry; the *Spirit* is given, *is* a gift, in that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (1 Cor. 12:4, 12:31; Rom. 5:5).

This is strong language. Paul clearly expects it to be taken seriously. What then is he talking about?

By God's love, Paul means love *for* God. There may be, as theologians would have it, a sense in which every created being loves its Creator as best it can. But the love Paul speaks of is evidently special—a love so heart-flooding as to be commensurate with a transcendent Beloved. Such a love could only be "love divine, all loves excelling," love that is somehow, in its own way, infinite, unrestricted, without limits or conditions, capable of bearing, hoping, enduring, believing all things, inextinguishable by death or life, height or depth, angels or principalities (1 Cor. 13:7, Rom. 8:38). And it would follow that such a love is not limited by the capacities of the lover, as human loves always are. It cannot be an achievement or a reward but only, as Paul insists, a gift pure and simple, a grace or rather *the* grace of God, grace without qualification.

The suggestion, then, is that a state of being mysteriously, awesomely, boundlessly in love with a mysterious, boundless Beloved is the primary reality within the finite world that registers and corresponds to the fact that the Spirit has been sent. The question is whether the giving of this gift is extrinsically conditioned, confined, or

constrained by its recipients' acquaintance with the Christian story. Is the scope of the Spirit's mission, conceived as loving God with all one's heart and mind and soul and strength, coterminous with the scope of the mission of the Son?

This much is clear: The Spirit, in Christian teaching, is Christ's Spirit, the "other Comforter" whom he prays the Father to send. Nor is there much doubt as to whether Christ in some way committed his own mission to his followers. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). Putting two and two together, it could be argued that the apostolic job description includes mediating the Spirit. In other words, Jesus authorized certain channels—the church or the sacraments or the preaching of the gospel, as the case may be—through which God's Spirit pours. There may be spillovers. Even Dante found two pagans in Paradise. But such exceptions, if any, are rare and probably unrecognizable, since by definition they occur outside the scope of Christian language.

So runs a well-worn argument. It is a stronger argument, theologically speaking, than simply firing off the usual proof-texts about "no other name" and the like. But it is not the only argument about how the two divine missions are related, and perhaps not the most compelling one.

Let it be granted that the mission of the Spirit does depend on God the Son, inasmuch as it is by or through the Son that the Spirit is sent. So far, Eastern and Western Christian teachings agree. That does not necessarily mean that the Spirit's being poured out depends on the Son's having become human or, therefore, on what he was sent to do and say and suffer. It is surely wrong to imagine that when Christ the incarnate Word had finished doing his Father's will by preaching and teaching, founding the church, sending forth disciples, accepting the cross, and all the rest, he simply ascended into retirement. Whatever "Jesus is Lord" means, it can scarcely mean that Jesus is a titular ruler or a functionless figurehead. If he now lives and reigns, as the liturgies say, his sovereignty can perhaps best be understood as exercised in the world precisely by sending the Spirit. And that reopens the question of whom he sends the Spirit to.

A most promising way to approach that question would seem to lie in considering what God *would* do; and the only way to know that, without presuming to second-guess Omnipotence, is to be guided by the "economy" of what the God who are three in fact does. On the present argument, what God does is give, and what God gives—twice over—is God's own self. On the one hand there is the gift of his Son,

given once, given for all; on the other, the gift of his Spirit, given again and again, given individually to each.

It was suggested earlier that the gift of God's Spirit consists in *agape*, that love for which English notoriously has no special word except *charity* in the old-fashioned sense: love as an existential state that is the best analogue we have for what it is to be God. Theologians have commonly said, in keeping with much of the New Testament, that charity is the *unum necessarium*, the one thing that salvation depends on above all others. So, since God is committed to the salvation of all (1 Tim. 2:4), it does not seem unfitting to surmise that God offers, again and again, individually, to each and every one what they need if they are to turn and be saved. What they need is to be drawn out of themselves, their desires, their fears, and to have their hearts set on a good that has no ifs, ands, or buts. What they need is to love with everything they've got. What they need is to be reoriented, led from within by God in person. We are told that all those who are so invited, led by the Spirit, are sons and daughters of God (Rom. 8:14). The crucial question is whether all those who are so led know who is leading them.

Ordinarily, you can't love someone you know nothing about. But in this case the invitation is anonymous. The Spirit, who unlike the Word has no proper name, arrives incognito. Christians, of course, claim to know something about this arrival; it was one purpose of their Lord's advent to disclose in human terms how best to respond to the gift that arrives, what the indwelling love of God requires of anyone who does not refuse it, what being drawn by the Father implies for human living and dying. Yet people do find themselves being moved to transcend themselves, drawn beyond themselves, grasped by ultimate concern, even when the Christian way of conceiving what they have found is faint or ill defined. They respond to strangely heart-warming love, without understanding whom they are in love with.

Perhaps, then, the same love that, in a Christian context, may be ascribed to the God-given, indwelling Spirit of God is sent and poured into the hearts of persons who have not been touched by the incarnation of the Word. To say this indeed happens is not to say these persons are "anonymous Christians," a paradoxical and arguably patronizing term. It is, however, to say they are in principle and in effect, if not in name, lovers of the only God there is, because the only God there is has loved them first (1 John 4:19). They might be thought of as anonymous Spiritans.

To put the same point differently, it is because of this lavish bestowal of God's self-gift that there is such a thing as religion—not only the various Christianities, but also the many more or less stable combinations of "creed, code, and cult" for which "world religions" is the conventional umbrella name.

It is true that these traditions differ, and differ widely. That should not be surprising. Every heart, metaphorical or literal, is embodied. Lovers are always at the same time products of a culture, a community, a history, a language. Their loving cannot but exemplify the customs of their own time and place. It is the same with religious love. Nor is it surprising that religions may develop in sinister ways. A religion is a program of formation, *paideia* for the *polis* of God, which aims to communicate and nurture orientation to a mysterious and awesome gift. But awe is next door to terror, and terror next door to destructiveness. As lovers are apt to be selfish and manipulative, so too religious ritual can morph into magic. Religion has been called "the only known explosive in the economy of that delicate internal-combustion engine, the human mind" (R. G. Collingwood). But engines themselves can explode, and religious loyalties can erupt in fanaticism.

All this applies to Christianity too. And none of it affects the main contention, which is that the wordless transformation for which Christians use words like *Gift* and *Love* and *Spirit* can be, and is, welcomed and responded to under other names, and conceived in diverse contexts, because it is not in itself conveyed by any intermediary, linguistic or conceptual or imaginative. It is immediately, inwardly present, person to person.

It may already be evident that the deliberately Christian conception of religion suggested here has a lot in common with accounts that base themselves on "religious experience." That is deliberate too. The label can be misleading, unfortunately. Religious experience need not be spooky or exotic; it need not be a once-in-a-lifetime Damascus Road event; on the contrary, it may be so intimate and subtle as to go unnoticed at first. It is usually more of a process, a gradual blossoming of compassion or self-sacrifice or mercy, than a datable outburst. There are, in the William James phrase, varieties of religious experience, just as—and because—there are varieties of personality.

The idea that the fundamental element common to all religion lies not in creed or code or cult but in consciousness, in interior experience, began to be taken seriously more than 200 years ago. It has its critics, Christian theologians among them. What

should be pointed out here is that it is, in principle, verifiable. Any appeal to religious experience, the present argument included, implies that this kind of experience of *agape* really occurs. It may not always be discerned, recognized, attended to, appropriated; but it can be. It can be understood and affirmed, in the same way that one can understand and know oneself, because it *is* one's self, in the state or process of becoming a lover.

Not that self-knowledge is easy. Saints and sages have agreed that it is the hardest thing of all. To deceive and hide from oneself, to give in to distractions, to be misled by language that is meant to focus attention but in fact disperses it—that is easy. Mystics, who specialize in introspective honesty, are often reluctant to say anything about their spirituality, perhaps because words often bring with them a surplus of meaning that does more to scramble communication than promote it. *Love* itself is such a word, though maybe no more so than *ultimate concern* or *utter dependence* or *universal willingness* or any of the other attempts to name the experiential mystery in which religions are rooted. But here the point that needs emphasis is that the only way to confirm or verify such a proposal would be to discover in one's own conscious awareness a shift of priorities or a reordering of values of the kind that not infrequently comes to the attention of people who fall in love. A change like that is a gift. It is what grace is.

It remains that there would seem to be no way of knowing whether religious traditions do have an experiential component in common except by letting actual adherents of those traditions learn from one another what they have come to know of their inner life, their spirituality, their motivations and feelings, their repentance and devotion. That sort of dialogue is rare. Without it, though, if the proposals offered here are at all correct, the wider ecumenism, as it has been called, lacks an indispensable component.

Schematically stated, the argument of this essay turns on three propositions:

1. God aids men and women, individually and immediately, changing the direction and goal of their whole existence, irrespective of desert or achievement on their part.
2. The transformation so initiated is analogous to interpersonal human love, but without any prior conditions or subsequent restrictions, so that it may be identified with the love of God given by God the Spirit.

3. This divine indwelling, since it is neither dependent on nor restricted by expressions of meaning, can and does occur in persons who have not met with the meaning of God incarnate that constitutes Christian religion.

Theologically speaking, the first of these propositions is pretty solid. It amounts to a definition of grace. Mostly, God enlists finite instruments in getting things done, but God acts without them in beckoning individuals beyond themselves toward himself. The second proposition can be contested, but reputable authorities support it. The third, however, is open to objections. It seems to separate and privilege the mission of the Spirit over the mission of the Word, and consequently it denies the uniqueness of Jesus, counts all religions as equal, reduces Christianity to just another option, and makes evangelizing otiose.

These are by no means quibbles. The end of a short essay is not a good place to deal with them, but something ought to be said in reply.

In the first place, nothing in this essay contradicts the teaching that anyone who is saved is saved through Christ the Son of God. To repeat, it is he who sends the Spirit, whenever and to whomever the Spirit is sent. Nor, secondly, has the uniqueness of Christ's incarnation been denied in any way. God has spoken "in many and various ways," but only once by a Son.

At the same time, however, this argument does assert that speaking is not the only thing God does, and it certainly implies that *what* God spoke by speaking his eternal Word at a particular time and place is not so unique as to be totally at variance with the utterances of holy persons who have responded in love to God's other self-gift, without themselves being God incarnate. Moreover, this last point goes hand in hand with a certain way of understanding Christ's role in the "economy" of salvation.

It is a mistake to constrict that role to one isolated event, Christ's death, construed as a kind of decoy that fooled the devil or a kind of lightning rod that deflected the wrath of God. Better to take the cross, together with the rest of Christ's life and teaching, as a word, a communication of what loving God and neighbor consists in and calls for in a thoroughly messed-up world. The claim that other religious traditions have no clue that this is how God deals with death-dealing malice and wickedness is simply not believable.

Which is not, of course, to say there is no difference between the meaning that was communicated in Jesus Christ and what has been meant by others. There have always been false prophets. Not every spirit is of God (1 John 4:1). All religions are prone to internal corruption. Are there vast numbers of people who need to hear Christ's gospel, to "test the spirits" by it, to repent? Indeed there are. A lot of them are Christians. Conversely, are there people who have heard and lived by approximations and perhaps even equivalents of that gospel? The gist of this essay is that it may well be so.

Whether it is so, whether there is significant convergence as well as difference, can only be determined empirically, which is to say by dialogue among those whose love for God opens them to listening to neighbors they endeavor to love. And insofar as such conversation happens, it might be regarded as itself a manifestation of the ongoing mission of the Spirit. It is the sort of thing God would do.