

The Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness:

Finding Our God in the Other | BY SAMIR SELMANOVIC

ILLUSTRATION BY MAX SEABAUGH



Chomina, chief of the Algonquin tribe, lost all his men protecting an expedition of the French colonizers of Quebec as they traveled fifteen hundred miles to the Huron Mission. A cruel winter, a brutal attack, capture, and torture by another Native American tribe resulted in a mortal wound for the chief. 🖐 Sensing the end, **Father Laforgue**, Jesuit priest and leader of the expedition, said to the chief, "When I die, Chomina, I will go to paradise. Let me baptize you now so you will go there too." 🖐 "Why would I want to go to your paradise?" Chomina responded. "My people, my woman, and my boy would not be there." 🖐 The next day, as the chief lay dying in the snow, Father Laforgue made one more attempt: "Chomina! My God loves you. If you accept his love, he will admit you to paradise!" 🖐 "Leave, my friend, leave," Chomina murmured as he died.¹

For many of us, the problem was not immediately apparent. Discovering the God of the Bible felt like puzzle pieces of all that is truthful and beautiful coming together. A flat world turned 3D, the grayscale turned to color, as if someone had turned on the light. We were bathed in light. In time our eyes adjusted and we became aware of shadows.

It has always been that way. Every generation of those who decide to follow Christ learns that there are Bible texts to be reinterpreted, theologies to be reconstructed, faith communities to be reimagined. Those of us who are a part of the conversation about the emerging church believe such transformations are God's doing. And for our generation, the shadow is not to be seen in the flaws of Christian people or the dysfunction of Christian institutions, as flawed and imperfect as they may be. Our shadow is the idea of Christianity itself.

Our religion has become a Christ management system.

We have experienced great joy in God's embrace of humanity through Jesus Christ. It has filled our lives with light. But Christianity's idea that other religions cannot be God's carriers of grace and truth casts a large shadow over our Christian experience. Does grace, the central teaching of Christianity, permeate all of reality, or is it something that is alive only for those who possess the New Testament and the Christian tradition? Is the revelation that we have received through Jesus Christ an expression of what is everywhere at all times, or has the Christ Event emptied most of the world and time of saving grace and deposited it in one religion,

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namely ours? And more practically, how can we have a genuine two-way conversation with non-Christians about our experience of God if we believe that God withholds his revelation from everyone but Christians?

Because we believe that there are no shadows in Christ, we want nothing less than to reinterpret the Bible, reconstruct the theology, and reimagine the church to match the character of God that we as followers of Christ have come to know.

When I put myself in the moccasins of chief Chomi-

scendent sweep over our existence and it seems to me that humanity has been squandering this gift. One just needs to look at what we are doing to each other. But in the midst of the mess, I see grace of a new beginning all around me. And within me, I often fail to respond to it. I participate in the madness instead. Whenever in my inner life I do turn to this grace to look for a second chance, I am always granted one. I think I want to spend the rest of my life being a channel of that same goodness to others." This view embodies the doctrine of creation, sin, salva-



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na, I feel God's Spirit asking me, "What would you choose, eternal life without your loved ones or eternal death with them?" Chomina knew his answer. He would rather die than live without his beloved. Moved by the Holy Spirit, people like Chomina reject the idea of allegiance to the name of Christ and, instead, want to be like him and thus accept him at a deeper level. This choice between accepting the name of Christ and being Christlike has been placed before millions of people in human history and today.

One does not need to believe in God before living in God's presence. God is present whether we believe in him or not.² And people do respond to him. Mark, a non-Christian friend of mine from New York, says that for him "to become a part of Christianity would be a moral step backwards." Yet, he would say things like this to me: "To live is to be given a gift. I believe that there is a tran-

sition, and new life. That's Christ, embedded in the life of Mark, present in substance rather than in name.

The Chominas and the Marks around us leave us wondering whether Christ can be more than Christianity. Or even other than Christianity. Can it be that the teachings of the gospel are embedded and can be found in reality itself rather than being exclusively isolated in sacred texts and our interpretations of these texts? If the answer is yes, can it be that they are embedded in other stories, other peoples' histories, and even other religions?

Idolatry of Christianity

Questions that seek to differentiate Christ and Christianity seem less and less absurd than they once did. Commonly defined, Christianity is "a monotheistic religion centered on Jesus of Nazareth, and on his life and

teachings as presented in the New Testament.³ It is worth being reminded that Christ never proclaimed, "Christianity is here. Join it." But Christ did insist, "The kingdom of God is here. Enter it."

The emerging church movement has come to believe that the ultimate context of the spiritual aspirations of a follower of Jesus Christ is not Christianity but rather the kingdom of God. This realization has many implications, and the one standing above all is the fact that, like every other religion, Christianity is a non-god, and every non-god can be an idol.

Acts of greed, hatred, and neglect of people aligned with Christianity that have littered the world throughout history are a result of their loving something else more than God. Sin is always a result of this displacement of one's heart. Someone or something else, a non-god, becomes the focus of one's love. An idol is generated when something grabs the functional trust of an individual or a social group. It happens when, in a relationship with God, something other than God becomes a non-negotiable value.

Has the supremacy of Christianity become our non-negotiable value? Every sin is a result of some faith commitment to things, people, or forces other than God, which are ultimately commitments to self. Religion, any religion, is not exempt from these dynamics of human experience.⁴

Scripture frequently describes other religions as idolatrous. Although worshiping idols would often result in violence, suffering, and degradation, these were only the symptoms of the larger issue God had with idol worshipers—their attempt to manage God. It was the sovereignty of God that was in question.

In the Old Testament, God repeatedly rebuked his followers for treating him as a manageable idol, someone they could actually avoid through the means of religion. Christians can conceive of things like money, sex, and power being idols. But the Christian religion itself being an idol? Certainly, if we proclaim that Christianity is immune from

idolatry, then we have come to believe that, finally, God has become "contained" by Christianity.⁵ We do believe that God is best defined by the historical revelation in Jesus Christ, but to believe that God is limited to it would be an attempt to manage God. If one holds that Christ is confined to Christianity, one has chosen a god that is not sovereign. Søren Kierkegaard argued that the moment one decides to become a Christian, one is liable to idolatry.⁶

Religion, whether in its traditional or personal forms, is the way we approach the power and mystery behind life, and since all humans have to approach the power and mystery behind life, we are all religious. This includes skeptics who say, "I don't believe in God. I don't have religion." That's a religious statement, a statement of dogma. Religion is a way we justify our existence, an explanation of why we matter. It is our "immortality system."⁷ So for us to survive, for our meanings to stay intact, we have to dismantle or discredit the meanings that are contradictory to ours. No wonder that for many of us considering the possibility that Christianity could itself be an idol in the biblical sense of the word is a thought too traumatic to entertain.

Is our religion the only one that understands the true meaning of life? Or does God place his truth in others too? Well, God decides, and not us. The gospel is not *our* gospel, but the gospel of the kingdom of God, and what belongs to the kingdom of God cannot be hijacked by Christianity. God is sovereign, like the wind. He blows wherever he chooses.

Taking a Backseat

Christianity cannot regain credibility or recapture human imagination until it learns to exist for the sake of something greater than itself. People are rightfully afraid of any religion that will not accept its place at the feet of the Holy Mystery. If the Christian God is not larger than Christianity, then Christianity is simply not to be trusted.

Our religion has become a Christ management system

In the eyes of an increasing number of people seeking God, Christian or not, Christianity has developed an inordinate sense of self-importance. In contrast, there is potency and beauty to a religion that is able to place the good of the world above its own survival.

Paradoxically, Christianity professes to trust the most peculiar deity of all religions, the God who has incarnated, become a servant, and died for the sake of something more important to him than his own life.

The future of Christianity depends on its willingness to

possibility of a relationship with the God of the Bible, along with the Hebrews of the Old Testament who were without a knowledge of Jesus Christ—the person. The question begs to be asked: would God who gives enough revelation for people to be judged but not enough revelation to be saved be a God worth worshipping? Never!

God enlightens every human ever born and opens a way for a relationship with him. The Bible says that if a person talks like an angel, but acts like a devil, his actions mean more than his words. His deeds trump his



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serve something larger than itself. If Christianity is to be resurrected into a new life, it must aspire to be like the God it professes and take a backseat to something more dear than its own life. And what can be better than Christianity? The kingdom of God, of course. This kingdom supersedes Christianity in scope, depth, and expression. This is true regardless of whether we talk about “Christless” or “Christfull” Christianity. Even in its best form, Christian religion is still an entity in the human realm.

When we say that only Christ saves, Christ represents something larger than the person we Christians have come to know. He is all and in all. And Christ being “the only way” is not a statement of exclusion but inclusion, an expression of what is universal.⁸ If a relationship with a specific person, namely Christ, is the whole substance of a relationship with the God of the Bible, then the vast majority of people in world history are excluded from the

faith. In the same way, one can deny a faith that is evident in one’s life.⁹ My friend Mark from New York serves Jesus in substance rather than in words, living out a wordless faith in God.¹⁰ This is only to say that there are no indications in the Bible that this dynamic applies only to individuals and not to groups. Religions live under the spiritual laws of the kingdom of God. Talking about other religions, theologian Miroslav Volf says, “God may employ their religious convictions and practices, or God may work apart from those convictions and practices.... That’s partly how the giving and forgiving God works in Christians too, often using but sometimes circumventing their convictions and practices.”¹¹ To put it in different terms, there is no salvation outside of Christ, but there is salvation outside of Christianity.

For the last two thousand years, Christianity has granted itself a special status among religions. An emerg-

ing generation of Christians is simply saying, "No more special treatment. In the Scripture God has established a criteria of truth, and it has to do with the fruits of a gracious life" (see Matt. 7:15–23; John 15:5–8; 17:6–26). This is unnerving for many of us who have based our identity on a notion of possessing the truth in an abstract form. But God's table is welcoming to all who seek, and if any religion is to win, may it be the one that produces people who are the most loving, the most humble, the most Christlike. Whatever the meaning of "salvation" and "judgment," we Christians are going to be saved by grace, like everyone else, and judged by our works, like everyone else.¹²

Becoming Master Learners

Wisdom is so kind and wise
that wherever you may look
you can learn something about God.

Why would not the omnipresent teach that way?

St. Catherine of Siena

For most critics of such open Christianity, the problem with inclusiveness is that it allows for truth to be found in other religions. To emerging Christians, that problem is sweet. In fact, instead of being a problem, it is a reason to celebrate. We don't want to just tolerate the godliness of "the other" as if we regret the possibility. The godliness of non-Christians is not an anomaly in our theology. Instead of adding it as an appendix to our statement of beliefs, we want to move it closer to the center and celebrate it as the heavens certainly celebrate it. The gospel has taught us to rejoice in goodness we can find in others.

Moreover, if non-Christians can know our God, then we want to benefit from their contribution to our faith. Because God is sovereign, present anywhere he wants to be, our attitude of merely accepting the possibility of the salvation and godliness of others without an attitude of learning from them is simply lazy, a sin born of pride. Besides rejoicing, to celebrate means to

learn about our God from others.

In fact we have been doing it every week in our churches. We use sermon illustrations from all aspects of life under the sun to illuminate the gospel of the kingdom of God, but we stop short of using and crediting such illustrations when they are part of someone else's religion, such as a life of Muhammad or a Zen story. Why? Is it because we are afraid we might find our God there like we find him everywhere else? Christ, the apostle John, and the apostle Paul were not afraid. They used the terms, concepts, and sources of the religions of the time to convey the meaning of the gospel. They could do it, and we cannot, simply because Jesus, John, and Paul were not about Christianity but about the kingdom of God.

This explains another phenomenon. If we believe that the ultimate method of spreading the Good News is through loving people, why do non-Christians so rarely feel loved by Christians? My thesis is that love accepts what others have to offer and we think non-Christians don't have much of anything to add to what is most valuable to us, namely the gospel. Although we accept their virtues with admiration and their brokenness with compassion, we do not seriously expect them to add to what matters most to us—our knowledge of and our relationship with God. We withhold from them the possibility of being our teachers. Without an attitude of learning, we have not entered a sacred "I/Thou" relationship. And that's why they hold back. The world is withholding from us what we are withholding from the world.

We want to provide for them what they lack, care for their needs, and teach them what they need to know. The position of giver affords us a sense of control. But true love means knowing how to take. You love your grandma when you take her recipe; you love strangers when you need their company; you love your parents when you need their advice; you love your children when you need their forgiveness; you love your friends when you hear their stories. We don't truly love someone until we take what they need to give

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us. Although we often think of God as self-satisfied, needing nothing, God does honor us by needing us. This need of God for us is symbolized in the Sabbath commandment that has no other purpose than creating a space in time when God can enjoy our full attention, when a lover can simply be with his beloved. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explained once how the greatest human need is to become a need. God needs us to participate with him in healing the world.¹³

We too love others not only by giving but by taking. I

allow for a real possibility that we have something to learn from them and be changed by what we learn. It is fear and not the strength of our convictions that stops us from learning about our God from other religions.

Identity Worries

If we accept the possibility that other religions have redeeming stories or truths in them, then what is going to become of our identity? Would this kind of reckless humility drive us into one big stew pot of religions



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was a Muslim, then an atheist, then a Christian. I became a follower of Christ because another Christian found the footsteps of God in my story and my religion of the time. He loved me by learning about God from my story. Before teaching me, my friend took what I had to offer.

The followers of God are not called to be the master teachers of God, but to be master learners. Pursued correctly, this attitude does not relativize what we believe. In fact it radicalizes what we believe because it establishes God as Sovereign one, one who "shines in all that's fair."¹⁴ Humble learning and strong convictions are not mutually exclusive because humility is not a sign of weakness but of strength. Genuine regard for what others can add to our faith does not compromise our Christian commitment but rather expresses it. That's why evangelism is to be a two-way street. If we expect others to learn from us and be changed, we must first

where the meat of the gospel can get lost among the potatoes and carrots of other religions?

Humility is the most powerful force in the kingdom of God. One needs only picture God kneeling before his creation in the person of Jesus washing our feet (see John 13). Through the humility that is at the heart of the incarnation and atonement, God evangelizes us (see Phil. 2:4–11). That's why humility holds such promise for the future of Christianity. It does not exclude evangelism but vastly improves its prospects.¹⁵

Humility is the ultimate expression of courage. In the context of the kingdom of God, a sheer display of power is simply too weak to be effective. We have created a false tension between keeping our Christian identity intact and approaching the world in humility. Humility is to be our identity. When we open ourselves to be taught by "the other," we don't become less the

followers of Christ but more so.

We have come to the place where we have accepted the depravity of individual human beings and the necessity of repentance for every person, but the moment we group ourselves into Christian denominations, or the Christian religion at large, the doctrine of depravity suddenly vanishes from our consciousness. In fact, behaving like we hold all the truth about God and doing away with healthy self-doubt is the ultimate form of conformity—because every religion has a superiority complex—and thus a loss of a true identity. In the world as a whole, no group or religion is repenting of anything much today. That's why being "chief repenters" would not be a loss of identity; it would be a first step in becoming "chief learners" and the renewal of our identity as a Christian community. We are to be those who convert first, those who lay down their arms and submit to Sovereign God, those who put nothing before the kingdom of God, even if it is our beloved religion.

My friend Mark from New York asked me more than once, "Why do you Christians want Christianity to win all the time? You don't seem to know how to live in a world where you aren't in charge." This made me think about the history of Christianity and its aspirations to be in charge. Looking back nostalgically to the times when Christianity was an empire, we tirelessly monitor our power, our growth, our numbers, our financial success, our political strength. Maybe the time has come for Christianity to lose.

To lose one's life is to gain it. It would not be the first time that God has broken out of religion, which carries his message, and made something new. If God found it good for his followers to break out of the confines of a religion two millennia ago, why should we expect God not to do such a thing in our time? Maybe Christianity should be thinned out and broken up, spent like Christ who gave himself for this world.

If we seek first the kingdom of God, then maybe even our beloved religion, saved from ourselves, will be added to us. ■

Notes and References

1. This scene is from the 1991 movie *Black Robe*. Father Laforgue (Lothair Bluteau) and chief Chomina (August Schellenberg) are characters from the novel by Brian Moore that was adapted for the movie. The story is historical.
2. See the chapter "Postlude: A Conversation with a Skeptic" in Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).
3. See www.wikipedia.org, s.v. "Christianity."
4. Pastor Timothy Keller from Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City has developed this idea of religion as "self-salvation" and conversion as a "trust transfer" better than anyone I know.
5. The notion that Christianity cannot possibly be a candidate for idolatry has been recently expressed by D. A. Carson, whose argument hangs on an assumption that sins of Christianity are always a departure from true Christianity (*Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 201–202). However, evil done under the banner of Christianity cannot be dismissed by declaring, "That was not true Christianity." Christianity is what it is. To dismiss Christianity's sins by appealing to a Platonic idea of some "true Christianity" is both dishonest to other religions and unhelpful to Christians. We simply never had and will never have pure, true Christianity.
6. I paraphrase Kierkegaard here. His books brought me into Christian faith and I recommend *Either/Or* (New York: Penguin/Putnam, 1992) and *Fear and Trembling/Repetition: Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 6 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1983). He manages to criticize Christianity in a way that compels the reader to become a Christian.
7. Ernest Becker, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author for his book *Denial of Death*, writes about this in his last book *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1975). He says: "Each person nourishes his immortality in the ideology of the self-perpetuation to which he gives his allegiance; this gives his life the only abiding significance it can have. No wonder men go into rage over fine points of belief: if your adversary wins the argument about truth, you die. Your immortality system has been shown to be fallible, your life becomes fallible" (64).
8. Inclusivism, a view about the destiny of the unevangelized, holds that all people have an opportunity to be saved by responding in faith to God based on the revelation they have. In contrast to restrictivism on one side and universalism on the other, inclusivism affirms the particularity and finality of salvation only in Christ but denies that knowledge of his work is necessary for salvation. Inclusivists believe that the work of

In the world as a whole, no group or religion is repenting of anything much today.

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Jesus is ontologically (in substance) necessary for salvation but not epistemologically (in name) necessary. Among adherents to the inclusivist view are Justin Martyr, Zwingli, John Wesley, C. S. Lewis, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Clark Pinnock. In the twentieth century, of all traditions, Roman Catholic theology had most decisively embraced inclusivism, with Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christianity" as the most celebrated presentation of it. Presently, among evangelicals, inclusivism is beginning to challenge restrictivism for supremacy. For key biblical texts and a solid treatment of all three views see John Sanders, *No Other Name* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

9. Examples of this include Jesus's parable of judgment in Matthew 25:31–46 and the report about Peter's encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10:23–48.

10. For numerous examples of these dynamics from the Bible, history, and the writings of authors like C. S. Lewis, see Sanders, *No Other Name*, chapter 7.

11. Volf, *Free of Charge*, 223.

12. I discovered this obvious teaching of the New Testament while reading Brian McLaren's *The Last Word and the Word after That* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005). One needs only to look at any discussion of judgment or works in the New Testament to see this truth.

13. For a condensed discussion of this concept, see chapter 23 in Abraham Heschel's *Between God and Man* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

14. This phrase from the Christian hymn "This Is My Father's World" is often used to express the teaching of "common grace," grace that God gives to sustain all the world, differentiated from grace that saves. In contrast, inclusivism (see n. 8) argues that all revelation is saving revelation and that any grace God extends to us is not just to sustain the world, but to save it.

15. Buddhism and Alcoholics Anonymous have already proved the point.

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