God’s love embraces all denominations

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Christian de Cherge, the Trappist Abbott who was martyred in Algeria in 1996, was fond of sharing this story: He had a very close Muslim friend, Mohammed, and the two of them used to pray together, even as they remained aware of their differences, as Muslim and Christian.

Aware too that certain schools of thought, both Muslim and Christian, warn against this type of prayer, fearing that the various faiths are not praying to the same God, the two of them didn’t call their sessions together prayer. Rather they imagined themselves as “digging a well together.” One day Christian asked Mohammed: “When we get to the bottom of our well, what will we find? Muslim water or Christian water?” Mohammed, half-amused but still deadly serious, replied: “Come on now, we’ve spent all this time walking together, and you’re still asking me this question? You know well that at the bottom of that well, what we’ll find is God’s water.”

There are important religious truths couched inside that story. First off, all religions worthy of the name believe that the first thing we need to affirm about God is that God is ineffable, that is, God is beyond all human imagination, conceptualization and language. Everything we think and say about God, even within Scripture and our defined dogmas, is more inadequate than adequate. It reveals some truth, but, this side of eternity, never the complete truth. No dogma and no religion ever provide an adequate expression of God. If this is true, and it is, then all religious truth is always partial and limited in its historical expression and cannot claim adequacy. All religions, all dogmas and all expressions of theology, irrespective of denomination or religion, must humbly acknowledge their incompleteness. Only God is absolute, and an absolute knowledge of God lies at the bottom of the well, at the end of our religious journey.

That fact radically changes the way we need to conceive of ecumenism and interfaith dialogue. Since no one, us included, has the full truth, the way of ecumenism and interfaith dialogue should not be conceived, as has been so much the case up to the present, of one side winning the other side over: We, alone, have the truth and you must join us! Rather, the way has to be conceived of precisely “digging a well together,” namely, as each of us, with an open heart, longing for those others who are not at our table, refusing all proselyting, becoming engaged through our own religious tradition in the search for deeper conversion. That search is precisely the search to get to the bottom of the well, knowing that, once there, we, as all other sincere, authentic religious searchers, will find both God’s water and unity with everyone else who is there.

The renowned ecumenist Avery Dulles called this the path of “progressive convergence.” Eventual unity among the various churches and various faiths will not come about by everyone in the world converting to one denomination or one religion. Rather it will come about, and can only come about, by each of us converting more deeply inside our own tradition. As each of us and each faith moves more deeply into the mystery of God we will progressively draw closer and closer to each other. Christian de Cherge’s story illustrates this wonderfully.

And this path, when correctly taken, does not lead us into relativism and the naive belief that all religions are equal. Nor does it mean that we do not enthusiastically and openly celebrate our own religious faith tradition, stand ready to defend it and stand ready to welcome anyone into it. But it does mean that we must humbly accept that, while we have the truth, the truth is not ours alone. God is not a tribal deity and God’s salvific intent is universal. God desires the salvation of those in other denominations and in other religious traditions just as surely as He desires our own. Hence, as Jesus teaches us, God has “other sheep,” loved individuals and loved communities who are not of our fold. God’s love and revelation embrace everyone.

The path to unity among Christians of different denominations and the path to unity among world religions is not then the path of proselytism within which any one tradition, Christianity included, claims absolute truth for itself and demands that union can be achieved only by everyone converting to its side. Rather it lies in “digging a well together,” that is, in each of us, within our own tradition, converting more deeply into the mystery of God and into all that asks of us. As we move deeper into the mystery of God we will find ourselves more and more one, as brothers and sisters in faith.

No religion is absolute, only God is absolute. Knowing that should make us less smug in the practise of our own religion, more respectful of other denominations and religions and more willing to let God’s vision trump our own.

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