



In Eyes Of God, We're All Minorities, by Barbara Brown Taylor

Krister Stendahl, former dean of Harvard Divinity school, told a reporter shortly before his death in 2008, "In the eyes of God, we are all minorities. That's a rude awakening for many, who have never come to grips with the pluralism of the world."

From my limited perspective in a small college classroom, I believe that increasing numbers of [youth] are coming to grips with pluralism -- embracing it, even -- though they are getting very little help from their elders as they think through what it means to be a person of faith in community with people of other (and no) faiths. No preacher has suggested to them that today's Good Samaritan might be a Good Muslim or a Good Humanist. No confirmation class teacher has taught them that the Golden Rule includes honoring the neighbor's religion as they would have the neighbor honor theirs.

Come to think of it, I do know one preacher who tried something like that - from the pulpit of a cathedral in a major city, no less. I do not remember what the subject of her sermon was, only the response to it. She must have suggested that the Christian way was one among many ways to God (a wave and not the ocean), because afterward a man came up to her and said, "If God isn't partial to Christianity, then what am I doing here?"

I wish ordinary Christians took exams, so I could put that question on the final. As natural as it may be to want to play on the winning team, the wish to secure divine favoritism strikes me as the worst possible reason to practice any religion. If the man who asked that question could not think of a dozen better reasons to be a Christian than that, then what, indeed, was he doing there?

An old story is told about Rabia of Basra, an eighth-century Sufi mystic who was seen running through the streets of her city one day carrying a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When someone asked her what she was doing, she said she wanted to burn down the rewards of paradise with the torch and put out the fires of hell with the water, because both blocked the way to God. "O, Allah," Rabia prayed, "if I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise. But if I worship You for Your Own sake, grudge me not Your everlasting Beauty."

In Christian tradition this comes under the heading of unconditional love, though it is usually understood as the kind of love God exercises toward humans instead of the other way around. Now, thanks to a Muslim mystic from Iraq, I have a new way of understanding what it means to love God unconditionally. Whenever I am tempted to act from fear of divine punishment or hope of divine reward, Rabia leans over from her religion into mine and empties a bucket of water on my head.

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