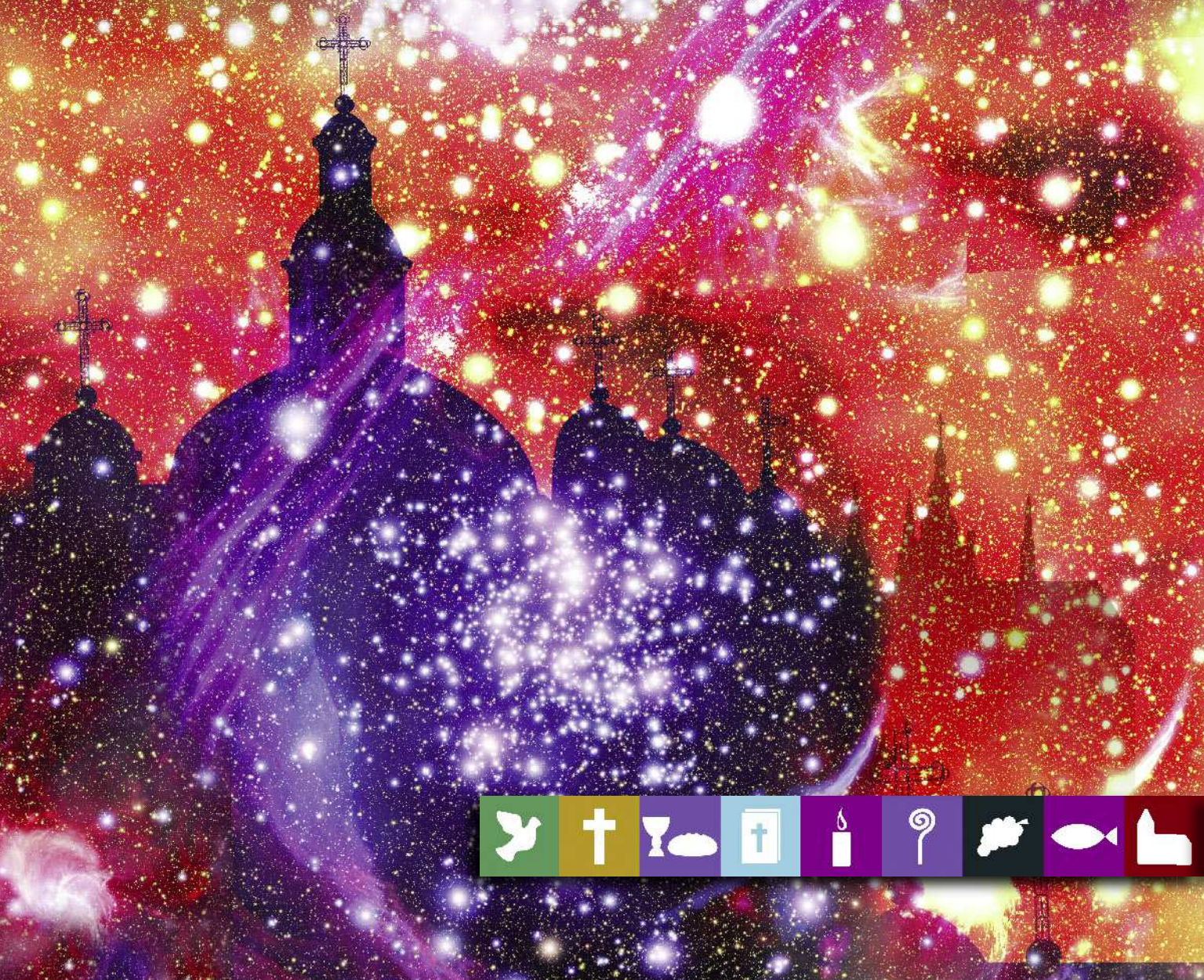


God... MORE THAN A "CHRISTIAN"?

BY BRAD JERSAK



After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

—Matthew 2:1-2

dropped by a Saturday morning garage sale today. It felt a bit creepy to me because one table was stacked high with occult books about Tarot cards, witches' spells and astrology manuals. But it also reminded me of the Eastern-religion Magi who tracked down the Christ-child, using astrology. They didn't merely use the star as GPS; somehow their divinations "told them" to look for the "king of the Jews." We often call them "wise men," but "magi" is actually the plural form of "magus"—i.e. magician or sorcerer (as in Acts 8:9-24).

Holy Pagans

In the Bible, we sometimes have interfaith run-ins with "holy pagans"—people of other faiths who are recognized as knowing God. And not just seekers; some were even priests, like Moses' father-in-law, Jethro (Exodus 2, 18)—a priest of Midian revered in the Druze religion. Or Melchizedek, to whom Abram offers a tithe and the Epistle to the Hebrews recognizes as a "type" of Christ (Hebrews 2). From Job to Cornelius, we have God-fearing outsiders who nevertheless "had God's ear." The biblical tradition of holy



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pagans includes all those who sought and found God "beyond the box." To state the obvious, none were Jewish or Christian when they first found God.

God Is Not a Christian—Bishop Desmond Tutu

A book containing some of Desmond Tutu's talks is titled *God Is Not a Christian: And Other Provocations*. Provocations indeed! Bishop Tutu is one of history's most significant peacemakers. He is known for his key role, alongside Nelson Mandela, in dismantling apartheid in South Africa. He established the historic "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," averting a looming civil war. Yet this advocate of tolerance is also not afraid to "poke the bear." It's what makes him one of the few authentic national prophets of our era.

"God is not a Christian." Provocative, yes. But worthy of serious consideration. How might that claim be true?

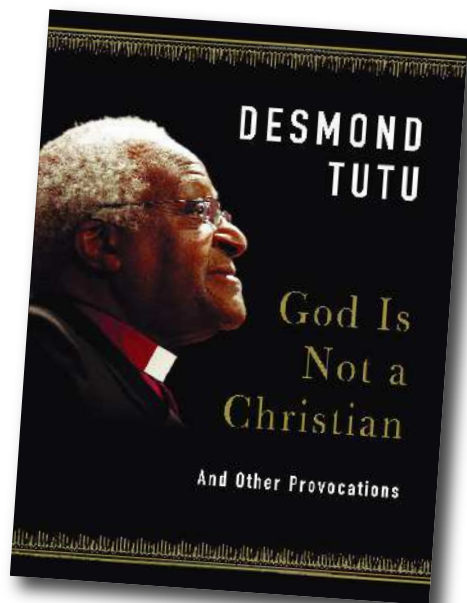
Not that God is anti-Christian, or that faith in Christ is misplaced. Not at all. But considering the magnitude of Christ's saving power and the breadth of his divine love, then the enormous embrace of his outstretched arms does intimate God is *more than a Christian*.

God Is More Than a Christian

"God is more than a Christian." Provocative, yes... if we regard Christian faith as an exclusive, us-them religious monolith. Tutu crosses those boundaries repeatedly. He chums and *fellowships* with the Dalai Lama, which of course leads to charges of pluralism and heresy.

"God is more than a Christian." Notice: when Tutu claims God is not a Christian, he doesn't say, "*I'm* not a Christian." He remains a robe-wearing, creed-citing, liturgical bishop in the Anglican Church! How does he maintain his particular faith while also





HE REMAINS A ROBE-WEARING, CREED-CITING, LITURGICAL BISHOP IN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH! HOW DOES HE MAINTAIN HIS PARTICULAR FAITH WHILE ALSO BELIEVING GOD IS BIGGER THAN THE CHRISTIAN LABEL?

believing God is bigger than the Christian label?

How might we imagine a God big enough for everyone—*more than a Christian*—while holding high the unique truth claims of Jesus Christ? Can we

you are born in Pakistan, you will probably follow Islam. In India, most are Hindu. These demographics should undermine our dogmatism. We are so sure our faith has the monopoly on truth. Why? Isn't one factor our place of birth? Be honest.

I was born to sixth generation Baptists. That had *some* influence on why I "chose" Baptist faith and baptism. What if I was born to Buddhists in Tokyo? Tutu warns, "You could so easily have been an adherent of the faith that you are now denigrating, but for the fact that you were born here rather

rule applies to faith as much as to ethics. Christ's love takes us beyond violence against other religions and destruction of others' shrines.

Like Paul in Athens (Acts 17), we dialogue as careful listeners and joyful sharers of good news. Paul didn't leave the gospel of Jesus Christ behind. Nor does Tutu, as we'll see.

3. **"We must hold to our particular and peculiar beliefs tenaciously, not pretending all religions are the same."** Genuine respect for other faiths does not pretend we agree on everything. We mustn't ignore the unique core of our own faith or dilute the distinctive convictions of other religions, just for the sake of a bland pseudo-unity. Tolerance is expressed in genuine openness that shares who we really are. If we all water down our convictions to a vague

HOW MIGHT WE IMAGINE A GOD BIG ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE—MORE THAN A CHRISTIAN—WHILE HOLDING HIGH THE UNIQUE TRUTH CLAIMS OF JESUS CHRIST? CAN WE PROCLAIM CHRIST'S EXCLUSIVE LORDSHIP ALONGSIDE HIS INCLUSIVE LOVE?

proclaim Christ's exclusive Lordship alongside his inclusive love? I propose a generous "Christ alone, but not Christians alone" faith that stays tethered to our own convictions.

In 1989, Tutu addressed other faith-leaders in Birmingham, England. He suggested five points on how *God is more than a Christian*:

1. **"Accidents of birth and geography determine to a very large extent to what faith you belong."** That is, if you are born in Italy, you will likely identify as Christian. If

than there." So humility is in order, and empathy for those whose faith was born elsewhere.

2. **"Acknowledge others for who they are in all their integrity, including their conscientiously held beliefs."** Tutu exhorts us to welcome others as they are, respect them for who they are, and "walk reverently on what is their holy ground" (metaphorically and literally).

We should respect what is sacred for them, as we would want them to honor our most precious beliefs. The golden

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common ground, we are either being dishonest or we've actually lost our faith. If so, fine, but don't expect that of others.

4. **"We should in humility and joyfulness acknowledge that the supernatural and divine reality we all worship transcends all our categories and imaginations."** Without



surrendering the unique truth claims of Christianity (that Jesus Christ alone is God incarnate), we also acknowledge that our faith, like others, seeks to worship the transcendent God, who is beyond anyone's comprehension—big enough to love all of us and welcome our seeking, even when it's wildly misinformed and poorly directed.

Jesus, speaking to the Samaritan woman, saw beyond the religious monopolies of particular temple establishments:

"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and *has now come* when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:21-24).

True worshipers might even call God by the wrong name, believe he has too many arms, or that he's a white male! Whether our prayers are cries of desperation or hymns of adoration, the voices of God's many children reach God's attentive ears and stir his parental care.

Jesus promised, "Those who seek will find." Can we at least believe God will find those who seek him (and already has)? Riffing off John 1:9, Tutu says,

"Surely we can rejoice that



**"DOES THAT MEAN THAT ALL PATHS LEAD TO GOD?"
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the eternal Word, the Logos of God, enlightens everyone—not just Christians, but everyone who comes into the world; that what we call the Spirit of God is not just a Christian preserve, for the Spirit of God existed long before there were Christians..."

5. "We have enough that conspires to separate us; let us celebrate that which unites us..." Tutu notes that "in the classics of various religions in matters of prayer, meditation, and mysticism, we find substantial convergence, and that is something to rejoice at." In fact, the resemblance across the mystical and monastic traditions of different faiths is uncanny—as if "those who seek shall find" were true on a universal scale! Who knew?

Many faiths (when healthy) also hold in common the centrality of love and compassion. Apparently, "love is more than Christian" too.

1 John 4:7 is clear: "Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." John didn't say, "any Christians who love," for like God, love is far grander than my spiritual tribe.

***The Shack*—Do All Paths Lead to God?**

Is God more than a Christian? We conclude with a scene from the bestseller, *The Shack*, by William Paul Young.

"*The Carpenter*" (Jesus) is speaking in very inclusive terms, even about other faiths. The protagonist, Mack asks, "Does that mean that all paths lead to God?" Jesus replies, "Mack, most paths don't lead anywhere, but I will go down any path to find you."

Said another way, when the Good Shepherd descended into our ditch, that doesn't mean our ditch led to him. But he can hear the sound of bleating anywhere. He seeks and saves the lost sheep, because they are his to begin with. □

