Come-to-Jesus Meeting [1]

January 29, 2018 Writing and Faith [2]
Diversity [3]

Essay by Donna Cameron

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In the spring of 2009, I was taking an evening flight home from Washington, D.C., after three long days of meetings. I changed planes in Denver, where equipment malfunctions delayed the connecting flight to Seattle. It was late. People seated near me in the semi-darkened waiting area looked as disappointed and weary as I felt. We smiled at one another, shrugging in the universal way that means “What can you do?”

I offered my cell phone to an elderly woman who voiced concern that her daughter wouldn’t check arrival times before

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heading to the airport and would wait for hours at SeaTac. A man sitting nearby pulled out his phone to let his wife know his flight was delayed. After we'd all called our loved ones, we got to talking. The man—his name was Malik, I believe—was about my age; he'd been on the East Coast visiting his dying brother. Speaking softly, Malik said he knew he had seen his brother for the last time. We both expressed our sympathy.

The woman was in her eighties, frail-looking, with a halo of soft white hair framing her lined and powdered face. As I recall, her name was Norma, and she told us she was flying from her Minnesota home to see her first great-grandchild. They both pulled photos from their wallets, she displaying a legion of grandchildren, he proudly showing his beautiful daughter on her wedding day. I cooed appreciatively, but had no photos of my own to share.

We talked companionably for a couple of hours—about travel, family, food, gardening, our home cities, and the uncomfortable seats in airport waiting areas. The gate representative interrupted periodically to provide updates on our delayed flight. Two hours became three, and three became three-and-a-half. We chatted with resigned patience.

Somehow, the conversation turned to religion. Malik, who was Muslim, noted that he'd made it a practice to read about other religions beyond his own, and he found something of value in them all. There were, he said, far more similarities than differences.

“But only Christians believe in Jesus,” said Norma, our new friend from Minnesota.

Malik replied that he believed in Jesus, just as he believed in Moses, Buddha, and other holy figures.

“In fact,” he said, “Jesus is considered a prophet in my religion.”

“Do you believe he’s the son of God?” asked Norma.

“No, I believe he was a very good man who set an example of goodness for all of us.”

Norma’s lips tightened; she looked to me for help. She found none.

The home I was raised in was one in which God was thoroughly absent. My parents had both been brought up in deeply religious homes, and the God they had been raised to worship was intolerant and punitive. They wanted nothing to do with Him. They were quiet, contented atheists. That was pretty much how I saw myself as well—though it might have gone otherwise.

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When my sister was eight and I was four, our grandmother implored her son and daughter-in-law to introduce their children to Christianity.

“Let them choose for themselves,” she said.

Avoiding conflict was a high priority for my soft-spoken parents, so they acquiesced, just as Grandma had intended. But neither of them would ever consider exposing us to the churches they'd been raised in—the strict Lutheran creed of

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my mother's Scandinavian foster parents or the Christian Science beliefs my grandmother held to so firmly, which had denied my father needed medical care as a child on more than one occasion.

A neutral place of worship was found. Every Sunday morning, my father dropped my sister Kim and me off at a stately Presbyterian church. He waited in the car, reading the Sunday *San Francisco Chronicle*. Mom would stay home, preparing a brunch of bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches.

Kim found school friends to sit with on the dark wooden pews, while I was sent downstairs to a classroom where younger kids attended Sunday school. A nice woman told stories; we sang songs and drank juice. I mostly looked out the window at the large expanse of perfect lawn and lush gardens.

After a few months, I told my parents I felt sufficiently educated and wanted to stop going to church. They suggested I give it more time, but soon after, when I ditched Sunday school to play in the lavish church gardens, my dad—relief in his voice—said, "I think she's made her choice."

I stayed home subsequent Sunday mornings, a BLT my only remaining ritual. Grandma was disappointed, but not deterred. One day, she sat me down and told me it wasn't so important that I go to church. The important thing was that I believed in God and trusted that He loved me.

"You do believe in God, don't you?" she asked.

I didn't want to disappoint my grandmother, the woman who played card games with me for hours every time she visited, often letting me win.

"I don't know," I said.

It was the best I could do. I'd recently stopped believing in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, and I likened God to the myths I'd grown too big to believe in.

"Don't worry," Grandma said. "One day, you'll know. On that day, you'll see that God loves you, and if you love Him and believe in Him, He'll always be with you. You'll join Him in heaven when you die."

Over the years that followed, I kept an open mind, waiting for God to make Himself known to me, but He remained as elusive as ever. I stopped waiting.

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When Norma turned to me for help, all I could do was shrug.

I offered what I could: "I believe Jesus lived as a man—a remarkable man—but I don't believe he was the son of any God."

Norma looked at us in turn, her expression unreadable.

"You're both going to hell," she said.

Her vehemence stunned me. "Are you saying only people who believe in your God, and that Jesus was His son, only they will go to heaven?"

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"Of course. That's what the Bible says."

"Why is the Bible any more correct than the Torah or the Qur'an? Why are Christians any better than Jews, Muslims, or Buddhists?"

She looked at me as if I had asked why fish live in water. "Because the Bible is the word of God. There's only one God—the Christian God. If you don't believe in Him and His son, Jesus Christ, you will not go to heaven."

I didn't want to argue religion. I knew better. I was genuinely curious, though, and wanted to understand. Perhaps weariness obscured my good sense. I glanced at Malik, saw his impassive expression, then forged ahead.

"Do you mean that good people—like Gandhi or Anne Frank or Albert Einstein—are in hell?"

"Yes," Norma said. "If they didn't accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior, they can't go to heaven."

She looked from Malik to me, then added matter-of-factly, "It's not too late for you."

I pondered Norma's offer of salvation. Even if I believed in God, could I believe in one so spiteful, so churlish? If a person lives a good life, a life of kindness and contribution, a just God would welcome that person to heaven regardless of their beliefs. I said as much.

Norma's jaw thrust forward. "You don't understand. You can't *be* a good person unless you believe in Jesus."

"I am a good person." Even as I said it, I wondered if I was getting a bit too much satisfaction out of sparring with this old woman.

"Are you as good as Jesus?" she asked.

"Well, no…from what I've heard, very few people are as good as Jesus. But that doesn't mean we can't still be good people, does it?"

"As a matter of fact, it does. Jesus died for our sins, so unless you accept Him, you are a sinner."

Was I really debating my virtue in the Denver Airport? I took logic in college and got an A. There was something fundamentally unsound in Norma's reasoning.

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The summer before I started high school, my best friend, Christine, invited me to a going-away party. She and her family were moving to Peru for a Mormon church mission. As it turned out, I was the guest of honor at this particular party. Besides Christine, the only others present were three elders from her church, three fatherly men who spoke with the assurance of car salesmen or school principals. They told me Christine's dearest wish was that I'd join their church before she moved away.

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I had accompanied Christine to church a few times after Saturday night sleepovers and had joined her on a few church outings. Her church seemed to be populated by friendly people who liked Rice Krispies Treats and chocolate chip cookies. If I tuned out the talk about Jesus, I generally enjoyed myself.

Why on earth would I go to your church when Christine has been the only reason I ever stepped foot in it? I squirmed with discomfort. This was not my idea of a party.

They laid it out as if it were a logical proposition. “We believe salvation and everlasting life will come to everyone who accepts the teachings of our church. So, by that reasoning, what must one do to enter the kingdom of heaven?”

I knew what they wanted me to say. “One would need to be a member of your church.”

They smiled. As they moved in for the kill, however, I spoke again.

“But I don’t believe what you believe. I don’t want to join your church.”

Surprise and disappointment flashed across their faces—Christine’s, too—but they rallied. “Even if you don’t yet believe, we invite you to join us. We’re sure that in time you will come to know our Lord.”

Again, I politely refused, and the evening ended. My friendship with Christine began its decline. Her mother told me how disappointed Christine was, how she’d made my salvation her personal mission when we first met in fourth grade. Christine and I corresponded a bit after she moved; she wrote about her church while I wrote about high school. Our letters grew shorter and shorter, until finally they ceased altogether.

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Malik had been quiet for some time. He’d realized well before I had that Norma was not going to relent. He’d probably known it long before he met her. I wondered how often well-meaning people had tried to save his soul and then damned him for declining their offer.

I needed to make one last comment, though. Perhaps it confirmed that I am, in fact, not a good person.

“No thank you to your heaven,” I said. “I want no part of a place where good people are excluded just because they don’t believe what you do.”

Norma shook her head sadly. I felt a pang. But before either of us could speak, the gate agent announced our flight. We gathered our carry-ons and lined up to board.

I didn’t sleep on the flight, despite the hour and being seated solo in a three-across row. That was a luxury I hadn’t experienced in years, one that could almost spark in me a belief in a merciful God. And yet, I sat awake in the darkened cabin, wondering about the comfort faith offers to some and why it arouses such a need to convince or condemn others. Why isn’t the quiet custody of your own beliefs enough?

Later, as I trudged off the plane in Seattle at nearly 3 a.m., I saw Norma hugged by a kind-looking woman. I watched Malik walk swiftly toward baggage claim. I wished for them—for us all—something I couldn’t quite formulate then. Acceptance seems paltry, yet still too big to hope for. What is it that gives us grace?

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Donna Cameron has spent her career working with nonprofit organizations and causes—where she regularly sees kindness in action and is awed by its power to transform. Her second book, *A Year of Living Kindly*, will be published in 2018 by She Writes Press. The recipient of multiple writing awards, Donna has also published numerous articles and coauthored the 2011 collection *One Hill, Many Voices: Stories of Hope and Healing* with Kristen Leathers. Donna lives in a suburb of Seattle.

For more information, see Donna's blog *A Year of Living Kindly* [7] or follow her on Twitter at @DonnaJCameron [8].

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