

God and Other Faiths

- diversity with unity at the heart of the divine purpose and plan

SEA OF FAITHS

Ocean of experience

The tide of history, the story of the waves of humanity that flood the surface of the earth, reveal that faith and religion have always been, and continue to be, a central and all-pervasive characteristic of the human story. This is because spirituality is such an essential dimension of personhood. Faith is to do with the values and meaning that individuals and groups bring to their encounter with living. It is in reality something that you cannot see. While there are temples and cathedrals, rituals and art, their significance can only be discovered in the inner life of those who participate in them.

Added to this is great variety in the concept and form to be found in the beliefs of the world. We really can speak about the sea of faiths born from the ocean of human experience. There are those ancient ways of worship no longer practiced and primal faiths among isolated groups. There are the great religions that have shaped the history of spirituality: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and others. Finally, there are the new religious movements across the globe attempting to apply spirituality to the enigmas of modern life. It has been well said:

'The vast and fascinatingly rich panorama of humankind's religious experience must strike any observer ... as a central feature in the geography of human behaviour. Many of people's deepest feelings are expressed here, and religion is a record of the visions by which people have interpreted the cosmic reality in which they are immersed. No one can understand humankind without understanding the faiths of humanity. Sometimes naive, sometimes penetratingly noble, sometimes crude, sometimes subtle, sometimes cruel, sometimes suffused by an overpowering gentleness and love, sometimes world affirming, sometimes negating the world, sometimes inward looking. Sometimes universalistic and missionary minded, sometimes shallow, and often profound - religion has permeated human life since obscure and early times.'¹

Inter-faith interface

Being Christians in western society finds us a minority in a deeply secular culture. Increasingly people of other faiths have joined our local communities and it seems obvious that we should stand together as allies in witnessing to faith and spirituality in the face of individualism, rationalism and materialism. Surely we should be co-conspirators together with other religious faiths in 'keeping the rumour of God alive'.

¹ Ninian Smart *'The Religious Experience of Mankind'* Collins 1969 p 41



Furthermore, we want to make the members of these other religions, who are often ethnic minorities, welcome and accepted among us.

Questions

In an inter-faith multi-cultural world a Christian is faced with a myriad of deep personal questions that are often not seriously and honestly engaged with in their own local communities:

- “Why do different faiths have so much in common?”
- “Does the spiritual devotion of millions count for nothing?”
- “Will only Christians finally be saved?”
- “Can we listen and learn from other faiths?”
- “Are all religions simply a product of human ingenuity?”
- “Would any spiritual experience be equally valid?”

Many Christians turn to scripture when looking for a guide as to how to think through challenging questions. So that is where we will begin.

ENGAGING WITH SCRIPTURE

A torn book

At first sight the biblical text does not seem to be very helpful or hopeful when engaging with inter-faith multi-cultural questions, especially as it is popularly understood by the majority of Christians. They focus on texts like:

“You shall have no other gods apart from me”
(Exodus 20:3)

“All the gods of the nations are idols / worthless”
(Ps 96:5)

The reality is that the biblical text, on this subject, is actually torn between:

- Nationalism and universalism
- Purified culture and recognizing God moving in all cultures
- Being a ‘holy nation’ (Ex 19:6) and being a ‘light to the nations’ (Isa 49:6)

Historically, Christian churches and missionaries have stressed the nationalism, purified culture and ‘holy nation’ approach. When confronted with different cultures and beliefs they have taken as their starting point that the other people are wrong and their behaviour is sinful and probably evil. Added to which they have usually dumped European culture on them and called it Christian!



However, a closer look at the biblical text tells a quite different story. We will set out the basic elements of this story by identifying some key texts. These must not be seen as 'proof texts', but simply starting points from which to explore a quite different way of both viewing and understanding those of other faiths and beliefs. We shall set the scene under three headings:

- Foundations
- Explorations
- Consummations

Foundations

The opening biblical creation story concludes with God issuing a clear command to humanity:

'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.'
(Gen 1:27-28)

This is an unambiguous and awesome text – people are to fan out across the land-mass of the earth, exploring, discovering, learning at all times to live and weave their cultures in harmony with wild nature wherever they are able to make a home.

However, according to the biblical story, they refused and instead chose to band together and build what they hoped would be a sky-scraping tower to demonstrate their arrogant independence in the face of the creative possibilities God offered them:

Therefore it was called Babel,
Because there the Lord confused
the language of all the earth;
and from there the Lord scattered them abroad
over the face of the earth
(Gen 11:9)

Babel is not a divine 'curse' - as is usually taught - but rather an action that demonstrates both the gift of God's 'grace' and how vital it was for people to spread out across the surface of the planet. Out of this 'scattering' has sprung the global diversity of language and culture, which was God's original plan and desire. This reality is powerfully emphasised in two important passages in the book of Acts:

God allowed all the nations to follow their own ways;
yet they have not been left without a witness in doing good –
giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons,
and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.
(Acts 14:16-17)

God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth
– subject to the seasons and places that are habitable –
they were created so they would search for God,



feeling after and finding the divine,
though God is not far from each one of us.
For in God we live and move and have our being.
(Acts 17:26-28)²

These texts also make it quite clear that not only was it God's plan for humanity to spread out across the earth, but that at the heart of this experience there was to be spiritual encounter, growth and maturity as they wove their lives and their cultures together in harmony with wild nature and the fabric of creation.

Added to this it is also made clear that God is guiding, leading and moving among all the different nations of the earth in the same way as the divine hand was understood to have been working with ancient Israel. Amos could not be clearer:

Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O people of Israel? Says the Lord.
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,
and the Philistines from Caphor
and the Arameans from Kir?
(Am 9:7)

These texts make it clear that looking out across the world today at the wide variety of faiths and beliefs, we are seeing the results of God's original plan – this is the only logical conclusion of these (and other) scriptures: a rich diversity in spiritual experience and understanding born out of vast human experience.

Explorations

The presence of God flows through the very fabric of wild nature and is at the heart of all human experience.

Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power ...
[has been] seen through the things that God has made.
Rom 1:20

This is 'panentheism' – 'God *in* everything' - present and waiting to be discovered. This is 'nature as scripture' the primary text, the wisdom text, which every person is expected to read and respond to. This is then supported by the written texts that are believed to bring greater understanding and revelation.

Qoheleth, the radical wisdom teacher points to the mystery of the human mind and its persistent questioning about the meaning of existence, which he sees as a divine gift:

² This paraphrase is based on the suggestions of FF Bruce, *The Book of Acts: The New London Commentary on the New Testament*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1965, pp. 357–359; also the translation by William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Daily Study Bible*, St Andrew Press, 1955, p. 139.



God has also put eternity into the human heart,
yet we cannot comprehend what God has done from beginning to end.
Eccl 3:11

This is not God taunting us, but rather joyfully inviting us through thinking and questioning, exploration and discussion, experiment and debate to find ourselves drawn ever deeper into the divine mystery that is life, the nature of being, and the very person of God.

Notice how God takes the initiative, at work in every human heart:

[God is] the true light
that enlightens everyone coming into the world.
Jn 1:9

God's presence and Spirit are relentlessly drawing and seeking to enlighten every person ever to be born. The implications of this truth are both fascinating and remarkable.

We capture just a glimpse of the consequences of 'God enlightening everyone coming into the world', in the observation of the anonymous Hebrew prophet known simply as 'Malachi' (lit: 'my messenger'):

From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations,
and in every place incense is offered to my name, a pure offering;
... for I am the great king and my name is revered among the nations.
Mal 1:11

Attempts have often been made to try and reduce the power of these words, which are uncomfortable for traditional Christians; but their simple truth – spoken firmly in the present tense, not as some broad future hope – their meaning will not be denied.

Together, these texts are profound. They point towards both the mystery and reality of God moving constantly among the peoples and cultures of the earth, inspiring them, provoking them and drawing them deeper into the divine. What that final goal of spiritual reconciliation will be like is hinted at in a number of other biblical texts:

Consummations

The overwhelming biblical picture of the future consummation is one of 'gathering'. Drawing the people, the communities, cultures and nations from across the earth together in a way that affirms their dignity and diversity while at the same time expresses a shared unity and harmony. Everything of worth and value in terms of creativity and culture, faith and belief finds its place in this rich path of destiny:

The treasure of all nations shall come



and I will fill this house with splendour ...
in this place I will give *shalom*
Hag 2:7,9

Biblically this place of gathering is frequently referred to as a 'mountain'. While this mountain points towards the mountain upon which the city of Jerusalem with its Temple at the centre was built; but in reality it is very much more than that. Whenever scripture refers to the 'mountain' in a future sense it always symbolises the totality of wild nature, humanity and the complete cosmos all living and moving in the total harmony of *shalom*:

Foreigners ... I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples.
Isa 56:6-7 (see also Ps 87:4; Isa 25:7)

There are two beautiful passages - one in the Hebrew Scriptures and the other in the New Testament – each of which speaks in broad embracing terms of the godly of the earth ('the wise' and 'spirits of just-righteous people'), including, but well beyond, the limitations of simply the Jewish and Christian communities:

The wise [who] shall shine like the brightness of the sky
Dan 12:3

The spirits of just-righteous people made perfect.
Heb 12:23

Finally, in the book of Revelation we are presented with a number of powerful images that show people of all faiths and beliefs finding their focus in God:

A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation,
from all tribes and peoples and languages ...
They cried out in a loud voice, saying,
"Salvation belongs to *our* God ..."
Rev 7:9-10

The phrase, "... *our* God" is highly significant. Here people of all faiths and beliefs find their own personal spiritual fulfilment in God in a way that authenticates every aspect of their own faith journey in a way that dignifies and affirms everything they have believed that is true. If God exists, then there is only one God. God is *not* a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim or a Hindu – God is God. Everything that is true about God is found in God and finds fulfilment in God. Here we all stand together declaring that in God we have each found the total fulfilment of all we have each known to be spiritually true, and recognising dimensions of truth in other faiths we had not seen before. All of us moving forward spiritually into understandings never before known. This amazing reality is further emphasised in these words:



‘And the city ... the glory of God is its light ...
The nations will walk by its light
And the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it ...
People will bring into it the glory and honour of the nations’
Rev 21:23-26

The ‘Tree of Life’ is a universal global cultural image that has the potential to connect with every living person. Here at the climax of the book of Revelation we see the ‘Tree of Life’ – linguistically: the cross bursting with fruitful life and bringing healing and wholeness between all cultures and nations:

‘The leaves of the Tree
are for the healing of the nations’
Rev 22:2

SPIRITUAL PEOPLE

Looking on the heart

One of the major problems Christians appear to have with other faiths is the fact that they are ‘different’; sadly this ‘cultural difference’ then leads them to say the faith is ‘wrong’ and even, some cases, declaring it as ‘evil’. The fact is that in most cases the issues Christians with other faiths are ‘cultural’ not ‘spiritual’ – don’t confuse the two!

Remember the words of God to the prophet Samuel:

“For the Lord does not see as mortals see;
humans look on the outward appearance,
the Lord looks on the heart”
1 Samuel 16:7

Our starting point in our relationship with people of other faiths and beliefs must always be that we stand together as *spiritual people*. This puts our shared relationship on a foundation of dignity and respect. Of course there are differences but they take their place in the background rather than the foreground of the relationship.

All of this brings us to the very heart of relationships between people of faith. Christians - often more than other faith-believers - tend to take as their starting point whether or not the other person believes the right doctrines: that becomes the dividing-line. However, Jesus himself says quite clearly that it is, “By their fruits you will know them” (Matt 7:16) – for him that is the critical point. We are also told, “To be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Rom 8:6) – these are the qualities of a truly spiritual person. They are to be recognised and acknowledged.



Peter, the close disciple of Jesus, had a deep personal struggle with the universality of the Christian faith; when he met the Roman Centurion Cornelius in Jaffa he was forced to admit:

I truly understand that God shows no partiality,
but in every nation anyone who fears God
and does what is right is acceptable to God.
Acts 10:34-35

Early in Paul's letter to Jewish Christians in the capital city of Rome makes the situation crystal clear:

“For God will render to each one according to their works: to those who by patience in doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, God will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good; the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality ...

“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do instinctively what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God through Jesus will judge the secret thoughts of all.”

Rom 2:6-11, 14-16

God responds to people on the basis of their behaviour and their response to the divine and spiritual found within their deep personal moral structure and conscience and their encounter with God in life experiences and in wild nature.

Remember that Jesus' parable of the 'Sheep and the Goats' (Matt 25:31-46) is about judgement of the nations and people of the earth and it is all about behaviour pure and simple.

God at work

A careful reading of the biblical text begins to reveal examples of God communicating, in a variety of ways, directly with individuals who worship other gods:

- **'stirred the spirit'** - Cyrus (Ezra 1:1)
- **'dream by night'** - Abimelech (Gen 20:3); Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2:1,45)
- **'healing miracle'** - Naaman (2Kg 5:13-14)
- **'graphic vision'** - Belshazzar (Dan 5:5)



- **'verbal message'** - Balaam (Num 22:9)

Even more striking are other individuals who have a clear and significant relationship with God outside of the Hebrew covenant: -

- **Abraham** (Gen 12): a Mesopotamian who came from an idol worshipping family [Josh 24:2] whose encounter with God was direct and personal; there was a slow progressive unfolding in his understanding and experience where faith and obedience were the essential features;
- **Melchizedek** (Gen 14): a Canaanite, an enigmatic character whose name means 'king of righteousness', was king of a town called 'Peace' ('Salem') and a priest of 'God Most High'; he blesses Abraham who in turn gives him a tithe of all his spoils - a godly figure in a pagan environment; who is he?
- **Job** (Job 1): an Edomite sheik who was 'blameless and upright, feared God and turned away from evil'; he was wise and righteous and remained faithful to God in spite of total personal devastation, God calls him 'my servant';
- **Jethro** (Ex 18): a Midianite priest, also father-in-law of Moses, to whom he brought practical wisdom in administering the life of the Israelites; he brought 'a burnt offering and sacrifices to God' and returned to his own country;
- **Naaman** (2Kg 5): a warrior of Aram who came to worship Yahweh after he had been healed of skin disease by Elisha; he chooses to worship Yahweh but is permitted to continue his religious-social obligations when his king worships in the temple of Rimmon.

As we have seen so many times already God is at work powerfully among the nations and the one requirement that is being looked for is authentic godliness and spirituality.

RELIGION AND FAITH

The word 'religion'

'Religion' is a slippery word. We may not like it. We may find the words 'faith' and 'belief' much more acceptable. We may try to use the word 'religion' as little as possible, but however much we try we simply cannot avoid it.

The word 'religion' is given great significance by most people but equally used quite indiscriminately. It comes from the Latin: *religio*, which has obscure origins: possibly meaning 'obligation' or 'ritual', perhaps 'to bind' or 'connect'. For some people it becomes a clumsy alternative to 'spirituality'; for others religion implies an organised and authoritative system of belief, usually involving God, with rituals, doctrines and ethics that must be accepted. However, in Asia philosophy, faith and lifestyle are so fused together that the word 'religion' becomes confusing because it is not some separate aspect of life that could be opted in or out of. In indigenous communities



spirituality is so integrated into daily life that the idea of religion is virtually meaningless. I would argue this should also be true for those who choose to live from a Jesus perspective.

Religion and culture

'Religion' is culture from a faith-belief perspective. It begins to emerge at that point where spirituality and culture touch and come together.

This understanding is understandably broad, so people will continue to give the word 'religion' whatever meaning they wish. It is nevertheless a reminder that spirituality and faith are always clothed in culture whenever you express them personally or meet them in the lives of others on the street.

True spirituality will always find expression through culture, which must be used to enhance spiritual expression and never pervert it. At their best religions are social-cultural forms and practices developed to nurture and express spiritual need and desire, with a life-giving faith that looks to depths beyond itself.

Nevertheless, religion has a tendency to produce mixed and negative effects:

- Conformity rather than liberty
- Exclusion rather than inclusion
- External activity not inner spirituality
- Hierarchical, patriarchal, legalistic structures

However, the word 'religion' also helps us to remember that there is a long history of spiritual journeying in the human story. We are not alone, and there remains a vast amount to learn from people in the past as well as from our faith friends in the present.

GOD AND FAITHS

God's desire

Scripture is quite clear that God's desire is 'to bring many children to glory' (Heb 2:10), 'that everyone will be saved' (1Tim 2:4) and that God is 'unwilling that any should perish' (2Pt 3:9). This being so we should have confidence that 'the judge of all the earth (will) do right?' (Gen 18:25).

God of gods

For the Lord God is God of gods and Lord of lords,
the great God, mighty and awesome
Dt 10:17



One big question, usually left unexplored because of its huge challenges, is “How are we to understand and respond to the God or the gods of other faiths?” It is a subject that needs to be approached with wisdom, sensitivity, humility and integrity. Historically Christians have rejected the God or gods of other faiths (with the exception of the God of the Jews!) almost dismissively, as definitely false and probably demonic. However, we have already seen that the truth must be much deeper, more subtle and nuanced, and far more profound than that. It touches the very heart of the way in which scripture is ‘torn’ over this matter.

This big question also cuts both ways. People of other faiths and beliefs must be asking, “How are we to understand and respond to your Christian God in the light of our understanding and experience of our God?”

There is no simple answer to our question. However, we propose to address it with two sets of observations:

The first set of observations are made in the light of the biblical passages we have already looked at supported by reflections on the experience of other faiths:

- On meeting someone from another faith ask yourself, “Here is someone made in the image and likeness of God, what can I learn from their experience of God?”
- If God exists, and there is only one God, then – in the light of what we have seen - God must be much bigger than any one expression of faith. Each person can know God intimately, personally and speak of ‘our God’, but God is clearly much greater than any single understanding or experience of God. Remember, ‘Your God Is Too Small’³ and ‘God Is Not A Christian’⁴
- If there is only one God then everything that is good, life-giving and in harmony with divine character must come from God, whatever faith or belief it is expressed within or through.
- Because God has shaped the world in such a way that the divine can be found in both creation and conscience (Rom 1:20; Acts 14:16-17; 17:26-28) we must expect diversity in understandings – we are *all* learning about God.
- All faiths are not the same - especially in the area of ‘worldviews’ – while this is not insignificant, there will be whole dimensions of that faith that are profound and truthful.
- Other faiths are often speaking truths about God but from different perspectives.
- When there are different gods within any particular faith – when it is properly understood – they are often personifications of different aspects of God who is one, rather than an actual belief in many gods.

³ See JB Phillips, ‘Your God Is Too Small: a guide for believers and skeptics alike’ Touchstone Books 2004

⁴ See Desmond Tutu, ‘God Is Not A Christian’ Rider 2013



- The whole dimension of the divine and the spiritual is a deeply complex mystery; God is to be found in both awesome light (1Jn 1:5; Job 12:22; 1Cor 4:5) and deep darkness (1 Kg 8:12; Ps 18:11; 97:1-2; 139:11-12). We must be *very* careful about what we dismiss as being wrong, evil or not of God. We must be vigilant about our warnings that 'cultural and spiritual prejudice' often leads us to dismiss the divine as the demonic (see Mt 12:22-24; Mk 3:22; Lk 11:14-15).
- The final acid test is once again the words of Jesus, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matt 7:16) we are also told to, "Test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1Jn 4:1).⁵ "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Mt 10:16)
- The extent to which you will personally feel comfortable worshiping God in the context of another faith will depend on many factors, including personal integrity, being true to your understanding of God and respect for your faith friends.
- On meeting someone from another faith ask yourself, "I am someone made in the image and likeness of God, what can I share from my experience of God?"

The second set of observations are made in the light of the biblical passages that challenge idolatry and other gods; we will use Psalm 82 as a case study:

God sits in the divine council;
 in the midst of the gods holding judgment:
 "How long will you judge unjustly
 and show partiality to the wicked? ..."
 They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
 they walk around in darkness;
 all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
 I say, "You are gods,
 children of the Most High, all of you;
 nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
 and fall like any prince."
 Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
 for all the nations belong to you!

- The 'gods' here are best understood as 'angelic powers', sometimes called 'princes', spiritual 'beings' or 'forces' who had authority over nations but misused it (see Isa 24:21; Dan 10:13, 20-21).⁶ Similar to the New Testament references to 'principalities and powers' (Eph 6:12).

⁵ Granted these words are being spoken about in relation to potential false prophets in the church, nevertheless the principle remains true across all faiths and beliefs

⁶ See both GR Beasley-Murray 'Word Biblical Commentary: John' Word Books 1987; 176 and D Kinder 'Psalms 73-150' Tyndale Commentaries, IVP 1975. There are a range of views on how the reference to 'gods' should be interpreted but this seems the most widely accepted.



- They were created good, they will all ultimately be redeemed (Gen 1:31; Col 1:15-20), but they are currently hostile to God.
- Idolatry in its many forms is symbolic of their perverting impact.
- The spiritual can be perverted by evil. There is 'bad fruit' in character (Lk 6:43-45) and spiritual evil in experience.
- They influence all faiths and beliefs: we all have a personal responsibility to withstand their spiritual and moral influence.

All this being so, it is important to remember that different faiths turn on different axes.

Every religion, including Christianity, has within it ...

- Elements that come from God, with spirituality that is truthful, honorable and inspiring
- Elements that come from human struggle with life and aspirations after truth
- Elements that are false, destructive and on occasions even demonic in influence

All this leads us towards the need to explore the significance of Jesus ...

Questions

1. What are the implications of the statement, “[God is] the true light that enlightens everyone coming into the world” (Jn 1:9) and everyone being “made in the image and likeness of God” (Gen 1:26)?
2. What are the gods of the 21st Century world and how ought a Christian relate and respond to them?
3. What spiritual understandings and moral behaviour can a Christian learn from people of other faiths and beliefs?

