

Faith and Society Files: Inter Faith Engagements

A theological exploration of some of the frequently asked questions of inter faith issues, in six sections. Ideal for those wanting explore this issue more deeply, this would be a good resource to use for discussion within a small group setting.



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Introduction

Welcome to this theological exploration of Inter Faith Engagement.

For the past 18 months a working group, commissioned by the Baptist Union Council, has been looking at all things inter faith. This subject has long been of interest to many within the life of the Union, not least through the excellent work carried out by the Joppa group over some 18 years. Today, the Union as a whole has recognised the importance of this subject and been focused on creating some resources and actions around many of the issues raised by the multi faith nation in which we now live.

For many, this is felt like something to be feared, and the churches' response can easily be one of attack or retreat. The working group believe that neither of these two responses are helpful and are looking to a third way, a pathway of encounter, engagement and living positively alongside people - both of other faiths and no faith.

This is the third of the present suite of resources following on from *12 Myths of Inter Faith Engagement* and *Inter Faith Journeys*. In this resource we begin to explore the issues that are being raised by the encounters Baptists are facing.

What we are not seeking to do in this paper is to come with a definitive answer to any of the questions. We do hope that in exploring the issues together, you will yourself find a way forward in your own encounters.

We see this as a dynamic document that many have contributed to, but there may be others who have different views and questions that could be asked and responded to. To this end, we see this as a document that is flexible and can grow as the journey progresses.

Please do note though, that any views expressed in this document are not designed to lead to a particular view, but designed to start a conversation and allow the Holy Spirit to lead you in discerning what is the way forward on these issues.

If you want to contribute something for consideration for a future development or update, we would be pleased to hear from you; you can send any contributions to mission@baptist.org.uk.

Thank you for engaging so far; please watch this space for future developments

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November 2012

Question 1:

Are we all worshipping the same God?

Just the 'one':

Christians are monotheists, we believe in one God. This conviction comes from our heritage, Judaism, so it is our starting point. The Jews were a very distinctive people in the ancient world because of this belief. It is the core of everything, the first of the 10 Commandments: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, you shall have no other gods before me." [Exodus 20:2] God has no rivals and, although it is not completely clear at this early stage in their history, the Jews came to an understanding that anything else that might be called a god – wasn't! There were no other gods – only idols made by human hands.

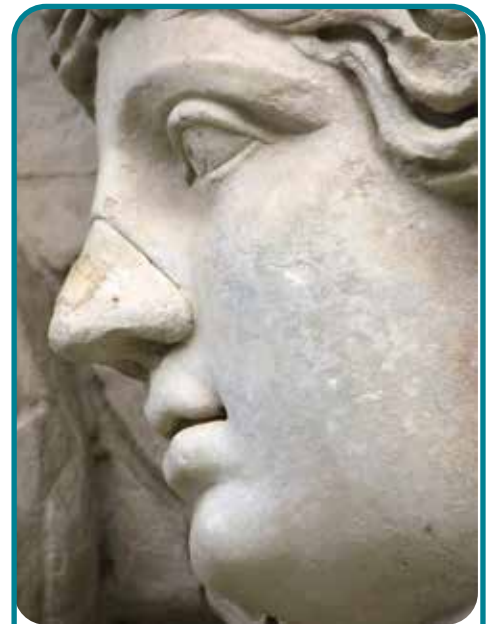
It took them a long time to get there; even in the Babylonian exile the Jews felt insecure. They wondered, "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" [Psalm 137:4] The concept of God being everywhere, rather than linked to a piece of land, was not easy for them. However, the words of The Shema became a resounding statement of faith: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." [Deuteronomy 6:4] These words remain at the centre of Jewish confession, today, as they were at the time of Jesus.

So who is the God of the Jews?

Is this God the same as the Christian God? If 'Yes', then how do you answer the key question? If 'No', then what does that say about our understanding of the Old Testament, and the relationships between God and his chosen people? What are the Jews doing when they worship? Is there only one God?

Dual control?

Early in the history of Christianity people had to grapple with this question. In the 2nd century AD Marcion decided that the God of the Jews depicted in the Old Testament was so different from the God revealed in Jesus that there must be two Gods. He asserted that the creator God of the Old Testament was a lesser god, malevolent and vengeful, preoccupied with Law; in contrast the God



**There were no other gods –
only idols made by
human hands.**

of love seeks to redeem the world through Jesus, by whom this God is made known. The reaction of the Church Fathers was swift and thorough: Marcion's writings were systematically rejected and he was excommunicated in 144 AD. Dualism, in this case the idea of two opposing gods, has always been considered heresy by the Christian Church. There is only one God and this belief gives continuity: Christianity has sprung from Judaism and the God whom Jesus was talking about is the God we worship.

One in Three, Three in One:

Confused? Maybe, maybe not. By starting with the Jews we begin to realise that this question is not easy. Can we say that God remains constant, 'the same yesterday, today and forever' and in Jesus reveals something that the Jews had missed or lost? So when Christians worship God we worship with a different understanding, a Trinitarian understanding, and with different expectations. But would we say that when the Jews worship God today they are not actually worshipping the God of their fathers, of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob? If there is a thread of continuity stretching down the centuries from Abraham's response to the call of God, does it not have two strands?

would we say that when the Jews worship God today they are not actually worshipping the God of their fathers, of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob?

Father Abraham has many sons and daughters:

Or at least two strands. There are three world faiths which trace their roots back to Abraham. Islam is the third. From a Muslim perspective, when the prophet Muhammad first repeated words which had been revealed to him by the angel Jibril [Gabriel], these were the message of Allah, the Arabic word for God. Facing great opposition from the surrounding tribes, Muhammad insisted there was one God, not the many gods represented by the idols in the Ka'ba in Makkah, that God was the only creator and should never be made into any form of statue. Sounds familiar? Muhammad traced the worship of God back to Ibrahim [Abraham], the forefather not only of the Jews but also, through Ismail [Ishmael], Ibrahim's elder son, of the Arab nations. Islam was to be the restoration of true worship, begun by Ibrahim and then continued by all the [Old Testament] prophets, including 'Isa [Jesus]; God's message, had constantly been distorted by each subsequent generations, requiring further prophets to correct it. Muslims believe that Muhammad is the final prophet – and the Qur'an is God's final revelation. Would you be surprised to find that some of the words of the Qur'an are familiar from the pages of the Old and New Testaments? Where does this leave our question about worshipping the same God? When Muslims recite the Shahadah, their statement of faith, "There is no God but Allah..", they mean the God of Abraham through to Jesus – and Muhammad. What do we think they are doing?

Like the Jews, Muslims are absolutely monotheistic: there is one God. No Trinity. Jesus is not the Son of God, he is a prophet. So there are differences – but does this mean they are not worshipping God in any way? Together, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are known as the Abrahamic faiths because of their common ancestor Abraham.

Moving on...

... to the non-Abrahamic faiths, and asking the question again – Can people outside the Abrahamic traditions possibly be worshipping God? Is the understanding they have of the divine in any way close to being 'God'? Perhaps the more important question is whether God recognises the worship of other faith traditions? We need to explore the concept of worship a little more, first by considering Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, whose faith community, although rejected by the Jews, lay within the Abrahamic tradition.

Read John 4:21-24

When Jesus discussed worship with the Samaritan woman at the well he said, *"Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."*

What does he mean?

Can this include people who genuinely seek God, outside the Christian tradition?

The 'God lens'

While we naturally consider this from a Christian perspective, might we turn it round and look at it from God's perspective? What does God see and hear? And how does God respond?

We know that there were times in the Old Testament when God needed to challenge the lifestyle of his chosen people. Their hypocritical lives and blatant ill-treatment of those in need cause God to reject their worship. The prophets speak God's judgement:

*I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn
assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt-
offerings and grain-offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted
animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your
harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing
stream.*

[Amos 5:21-24]

*When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.*

[Isaiah 1:15-17]

God expects lifestyle to reflect worship, and worship to inspire lifestyle, because recognising who God is, the creator of the world, means recognising the place of human beings within that creation. Worship and lifestyle go together. So what of those of other faiths who believe in one creator God and understand human responsibility within creation? When they worship, God will hear. But does God listen – and respond?

Going deeper:

Sometimes a Biblical text which seems to bring light to one person may be understood differently by another. When this is caused by the translation of a passage there is confusion or disagreement. It may depend where you start from, how you understand what is written. This is the case with Malachi 1:11. [Read all Malachi 1 for the context.]

Read Malachi 1:11 in these 2 translations ... What is each saying?

NRSV: *'For 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, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations,' says the Lord of hosts.*

NIV: *'My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations,' says the Lord Almighty.*

They seem to be saying two different things. The problem is that in the original Hebrew the tense of the verb is not given, and so to translate it accurately you have to make some decisions. This is normally based on the overall sense or context of the words. So how have the translators come to two different conclusions?

Read the preceding verse – the NRSV and the NIV are in agreement here. God wants the Temple doors shut now, he is 'fed up' with the empty and worthless worship of a people [the Jews – his chosen people] who think they can cheat and fool him. This speaks about the present situation. How does verse 11 follow this? In the NIV, as well as the NRSV, the words about the Jews are about the present time and Malachi's contemporary situation, whereas the verse about the nations refers to a time in the future. Why the difference? And which is likely to be accurate? Does verse 11 refer to the present time or a point in the future?

For the Jews, the idea that God could accept worship from outside their community and reject theirs was unthinkable. If, today, you take the standpoint that the 'nations' can only worship God once they know Jesus, then the words must speak of a future time, because Jesus had not yet come. But the prophet was speaking into the current situation; therefore his words would be all the more shocking if the time was NOW! The force is far greater than if it is only for some future moment. The present would be a vacuum where no one is worshipping God. Is this likely? Within

the boundaries of people's experience, may they not be worshipping God in the best way they know how? If that is the case we, as Christians, have a point of communication – we share an awareness of God and long to worship him.

Is Malachi 1:11 evidence that God has been worshipped by people of other faiths in the past? Those who want to encourage an openness to Inter Faith possibilities may point to this for affirmation, while those who are more cautious may read the verse differently. It is important to be true to the context of the original verse, not to what we have previously assumed. We know it is possible for God to show us new things if we are open to him, and Inter Faith questions may require us to revisit our previous thinking.

Briefly, in terms of some non-Abrahamic religions, there are certain basic beliefs which seem similar to a Christian understanding of God, although they are expressed in very different ways within their sacred texts and when they come to worship. Sikhs, for instance, believe in and worship only one Creator God who continues to be the source of life to all creation, who must be worshipped exclusively, and without any idols. In contrast, Hinduism is considered to be polytheistic, associated with many gods represented by statues; yet Hindus would argue that all these gods are forms of one Supreme Being, Brahman, from whom all creation springs. Answering the question when we look at Buddhism appears more straightforward - Buddhists do not believe in a personal, creator god, and therefore do not have a concept of worship within their tradition.

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For discussion:

Describe how you believe the Christian God is unique from other gods.

Where did you last see God at work?

Have you ever seen God at work outside of a church or a Christian context?

What is your biggest hope for people of other faiths?

What are your greatest fears for people of other faiths?

How does God view people of faith who are not Christian?

Do we judge people more harshly than Christ did when he walked this earth?

Question 2:

Is there any biblical basis for inter faith work?

Does the Bible have anything to say about Inter Faith engagement?

The Bible's settings are multi-faith contexts: the people of Israel lived alongside people who believed in and worshipped other gods. They were definitely a minority, a very small nation, fairly insignificant in the greater scheme of things. By the time of Jesus the Romans were the occupying force with a vast empire and another set of beliefs. The history of the early church is set in a multi-faith, multi-cultural environment.

So is there evidence that God's people were involved with those around them in any meaningful spiritual way?

The answer is mostly No. While the Jews generally were able to worship God in freedom, they were conscious of the distinctive nature of their faith, set apart as God's chosen people. They were also quite protective of their faith and wanted to keep God to themselves, so that his vision of them being given '*as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth*' [Isaiah 49:11] was not in their plan. There were other times when they began worshipping as their neighbours did. When things went wrong they understood that their apostasy was at the root of their problems. The prophets constantly call them back to God, to worship him alone and live according to his Law. When the exiles return from Babylon, Ezra is determined to prevent further danger and, for example, forbids intermarriage between Jews and foreigners. This situation still prevailed in the New Testament, where only the outer court of the Temple was accessible for Gentiles. Although there were God-fearing Gentiles, who worshipped God, the separatist nature of Jewish religion was well preserved.

In the early church the attitude to Gentiles undergoes a dramatic change. In Acts 10, Peter [after receiving a vision from God] realises that God wants him to accept the invitation from Cornelius, Roman centurion to go and visit him. When the Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius and his household the Jewish Christians are astounded and challenged. But the context is missional, with the purpose of conversion, as the Gentiles become followers of Jesus. Paul's missionary journeys have a similar approach: Paul's visit to Athens is a complex passage, from an Inter Faith point of view, but it does demonstrate that when he engages with people of other faiths it is always with the intention that they should know about Jesus and have the opportunity to become his followers.

So does this mean that there is no Biblical basis for Inter Faith work?

In general terms, the Jews were God's chosen people and wanted it to stay that way, exclusively. The pattern of the first Christians, themselves Jews, is to declare to other Jews that Jesus is the Messiah so that they too may become followers of the Way; when the Christians discover that non-Jews come within the scope of the gospel they associate with these people of other faiths to convert them.

While this is a picture the Bible presents, is it the whole picture? Is the only Christian purpose of Inter Faith work, based on the experience of the Bible, evangelistic, with a big 'danger' sign over anything else which might distract or even cause someone to stray from the truth? Not quite. Throughout the Bible there are examples of people of other faiths with whom God is present. At times those people contribute to the Bible's story and without them the story would be impoverished.

"Now listen to me"

Jethro [sometimes known as Reuel], who was to become Moses' father-in-law, is a priest of Midian, not directly in the Hebrew tradition, although his name Reuel means 'friend of God'. When Moses escapes to Midian from Egypt [Exodus 2] he takes the initiative to protect Reuel's daughters and subsequently accepts an invitation to 'tea'.
Moses stays and then marries Reuel's daughter, Zipporah.

After the Hebrews have escaped from Egypt, Jethro comes from Midian to join Moses.

Read Exodus 18:1-12 and consider this as Inter Faith encounter.

What are the significant moments? How do people relate to each other?

Read on – Exodus 18:13-28. Jethro, as an observer, sees that Moses is struggling to cope with the demands of the wilderness community. Consider what Moses is doing and why Jethro intervenes. How does Moses respond to Jethro's suggestion?

What is happening here will form the basis of the Law - but who instigates it?

What might the interaction between Jethro and the Hebrew community have to say to us about Inter Faith engagement?

When this incident is over Moses sends Jethro back to his own country.

How does Jethro worship there? Does the answer matter? And why?

Does God speak to or through those of other faiths?

The most well-known example in the Old Testament may be Cyrus [2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-11]. As the Babylonian exile comes to an end, Cyrus, king of Persia, who has overthrown the rulers of Babylon to expand his empire, shows extreme benevolence to the people of Judah decreeing that their return may begin and the Temple in Jerusalem rebuilt. More than this, the sacred objects violated by the Babylonians and removed from the Temple are to be sent back. The

writer of 2 Chronicles records that in his decree Cyrus acknowledges the source of his empire is God and his task is to have the Temple rebuilt. God is working through Cyrus, and Cyrus is aware of this. He is not changing his religion, but freeing the exiles to follow theirs in the place and with the objects that are central to their worship. What is this saying about God? It is recognised by the writer of 2 Chronicles and Ezra that God speaks to someone who is outside the covenant community and who remains outside it.

What is going on? Some would argue that when God speaks through someone like Cyrus he does so 'in spite of the person'. It is possible to read *'The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia...'* [2 Chronicles 36:22 and Ezra 1:1] in this way, but is that necessary? If this is the case, Cyrus is simply used, like a puppet, for God's purposes, and Cyrus, of himself, has no contribution to make. But is there any reason why it should be read like this? Is it impossible for God to speak to someone who does not believe exclusively in him? Cyrus makes a decision to behave differently from Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonians, who not only took the people of Judah into exile, but also desecrated the Temple before setting fire to it. Both 2 Chronicles and Ezra record Cyrus' words, *"The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth..."* Here is recognition of the fact of God, of his sovereignty and power, from someone who is not a Jew. But Cyrus, by his actions, is ready to support the Jews in their worship by restoring what has been destroyed. And the Jews are happy to accept this. [Although Romans 13 needs careful reading if it is not to be interpreted as legitimising ruthless dictators, it seems to be saying something similar, supporting the idea that God can work through people of other faiths.]

The idea of 'general revelation' may be helpful here. Is it possible that people can have some understanding of God based on the revelation they have received, but not a complete understanding? How do people know God? And do they all know God in the same way? Some of the Psalms speak of the greatness of God's creation.

*'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;
Yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.'*

[Psalm 19:1-4]

God's glory is evident in creation. The Psalmist is saying that creation itself 'speaks' and gives knowledge of God. More than this, the 'voice' of creation goes out into all the earth, nowhere is deaf to this voice. The response to this voice of creation is an awareness of God as creator, of there being something greater than humanity and greater than the natural world. If this is the case there must be the potential for some common understanding of God across faith communities and beyond.

Looking at this from another perspective Genesis 1 presents a core Christian belief that *'God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'* In Genesis 2, the life-giving nature of the relationship is further revealed as *'the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man*

became a living being.' Human beings carry something of the essence of God because the source of their life is God-breathed, whether they recognise this or not and however much they might mar God's image in the way they live.

This can be seen in Isaiah 42 when the prophet is speaking of the immediate deliverance that Cyrus will bring to the exiles and of a future deliverance which will have a wider scope bringing '*justice to the nations*'. He announces God the creator of heaven and earth, and giver of life to people who live on earth. Breath and spirit reflect two aspects, you could say one more physical and the other spiritual, of the same reality:

*'Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it...'* [Isaiah 42:5]

This understanding, that the breath of God is the life source of every human being, has consequences for the way we think about all people.

**the breath of God is
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God has also given humanity the responsibility for caring for creation. The words of Genesis 1:28 giving stewardship to man and woman are echoed in the wonder of the Psalmist [Psalm 8] that human beings should be made rulers of the works of God's hands. He begins and ends with: '*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*' How is this true today? Where is the evidence that this is limited only to Christians in all the earth?

16th century Protestant reformer, John Calvin, writes of the way humans may have a general knowledge of God:

*'That there exists in the human minds and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead...'*¹



Among his arguments he observes that even those who deny God's existence will suddenly be overcome with a fear of God and that idolatry also provides evidence of an awareness of God – 'why else would 'man' humble himself before an object as an act of reverence to God?'

Calvin reflects that '*... if all are born for the express purpose of learning to know God ... it is clear that all those who do not direct the whole thoughts and actions of their lives to this end fail to fulfil the law of their being.*' Interestingly he then supports this from Plato, a philosopher from outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition '*...that the chief good of the soul consists in resemblance to God; ie when*

¹ *Institutes of Religion 1.3.1* - Book 1, Chapter 3. Paragraph 1

by means of knowing him, she [the soul] is wholly transformed into him.' Calvin is aware of the limitations of general knowledge and the way in which human beings can lose sight of the creator and look to themselves for answers. [20th century theologian Karl Barth called this the 'divinisation of human thinking' and completely rejected the idea of natural revelation.]

Calvin goes on to develop the way in which people come to a full knowledge of God, and of themselves, through God's self-revelation in Jesus, recorded in scripture. So, what happens then, as God becomes 'clearer'? Are others now completely excluded from an awareness of God?

When Jesus comes, the Jews are challenged to rethink their attitudes to 'outsiders'. On what occasions does Jesus come into contact with people who were not Jews? How do these encounters contrast with the existing Jewish views? What basis do they give to Inter Faith relationships?

Although the Bible is generally guarded about involvement with other faiths, Jesus seems to go out of his way to find opportunities to consider the value of those outside the Jewish faith community. When someone asks "*Who is my neighbour?*" Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan [Luke 10:25-37]. The traditional enemy of the Jew, whose religion was considered inferior and flawed, is celebrated as the role model for loving a neighbour. Who might Jesus choose if he were telling the parable today? And what does this say about our attitude to other faith communities where loving concern is demonstrated?

There are other occasions when Jesus encounters Samaritans. Of the ten lepers healed by Jesus it is a Samaritan who returns to say thank you. Read John 4, in which the Samaritan woman talks with Jesus at the well: in what ways is their conversation an example of Inter Faith dialogue, and how might that help us to engage in discussion with those of other faiths?

Although the range of faiths represented in the gospels may be smaller than those known today, from the beginning of Jesus' earthly life there are examples of Inter Faith encounters. The Magi come from the east, looking for '*the child who has been born king of the Jews*' [Matthew 2:2] in order to worship him, but then they return to their own country. What would their religious life and worship be like after that, given that they were not Jews? Yet they have come and have paid homage to Jesus and are remembered for their visit. How do we respond to those who have a reverence for Jesus, but not exclusively?

The Roman centurion gives Jesus another opportunity to widen the thinking of his own faith community [Luke 7:1-10]. The centurion is well-respected among the Jews, having built their synagogue, and so comes with their recommendation; but they probably were not expecting Jesus to go so much further and have this Gentile celebrated, in marked contrast to the Jews themselves, because of his outstanding faith. Luke records Jesus saying, "*I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.*" Are there non-Christians whose faith we would be able to recognise in some way?

**"I tell you, not even in Israel
have I found such faith."
Luke 7: 9**

The Bible concentrates on a particular 'people' at particular moments in their history, both before and after the coming of Jesus. Its focus is on their developing relationship with God, and often appears to have nothing constructive to say about others. But we should not ignore the participation which those outside the covenant community make, and the way some of them contribute positively to the unfolding story. Their inclusion may challenge preconceptions about those who are outside the Christian faith community and give opportunities to build relationships with those of other faiths today.

For discussion:

Describe people from other faiths that you know personally - maybe a work colleague, a friend, neighbour etc:

- their personallity
- their values
- their relationship with you
- their temperament

Could you ever work alongside someone from another faith tradition in the workplace?

Could you work alongside someone from another faith tradition in the community?

What do you know about the hospitality of Sikhs, etc.

Question 3:

Will people of other faiths find salvation?

As we consider this question there are several things we need to think about.

What do we mean by 'salvation'?

Are we thinking in terms of 'going to heaven when you die'?

When Jesus speaks of salvation he is talking as much about something happening in the present time, as about something that is to be experienced in the future, after death. After Zacchaeus has promised to reform his ways, Jesus says to him, "*Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.*" [Luke 19:9-10] Here salvation is about being put right and putting things right 'on earth as it is in heaven', as well as being rescued. The self-destructive path along which Zacchaeus had been heading is transformed when he encounters Jesus.

When Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple as a baby, Simeon holds him and says,
*"for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."* [Luke 2:30-31]

He goes on to say that Jesus by his very presence will cause people to rise or fall, revealing their inner thoughts. For Zacchaeus this was a positive experience of being saved from self by an encounter with Jesus – but for others it would be the opposite.

Salvation, eternal life and the Kingdom of God are all ways of talking about the same thing. Jesus opens up new ways of looking at the relationship between God and human beings – and this is demanding in terms of response. People are constantly shocked by his expectations of them, as 'insiders', and by his inclusion of those they would have considered 'outsiders'.

Another man comes to Jesus with the same question, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" [Luke 10:25-37] As the conversation develops, he asks "*And who is my neighbour?*"

By making connections between 'eternal life', 'loving your neighbour' and the Good Samaritan, Jesus demonstrates a completely different quality of living which moves beyond the traditional boundaries within which the Jews operated. Here the enemy, the non-Jew, the one outside the covenant relationship, as it is understood by Jesus' hearers, is brought into the centre and included. Why?

The Samaritan is the one loving God and his neighbour. How does this relate to 'salvation' from an Inter Faith perspective, given that Jesus chooses a Samaritan to make his point?

Exploring 'Salvation':

Salvation is often interpreted as 'eternal life'. But what does this mean? Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the occasion when a young man asks Jesus, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" and ends up going away sad, at the prospect of parting with his wealth. Often we stop at this point, but there are some very interesting conversations following this incident, including the question "*Who then can be saved?*"

Read one or more of these accounts: Matthew 19:16-22, 23-29; Mark 10:17-22; 23-31; Luke 18:18-23; 24-30. Ask yourself what is meant here by being 'saved', and how this links to 'eternal life' and the 'kingdom of God'.

What exactly does Jesus want the young man to do?

When and where is eternal life going to be experienced?

What is the relationship between the present age and the age to come?

Look at the order in which Jesus anticipates things happening: "*... go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*"

[Mark 10:21] The 'treasure in heaven', then the following Jesus - is that what you would expect?

How does Jesus respond to the question "*Who then can be saved?*" Is this the answer we would give?

And what does Jesus mean when he says, "*But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*" The implication is that not everything will be quite as people think it will be. Maybe there will be surprises!

On other occasions the idea of being saved is linked to healing and wholeness. Greek words for 'save', springing from the root 'σώζω' (sózó), are translated in several ways in the gospels, and different versions of the Bible may not translate them in the same way. In Luke's gospel Jesus says, "*Your faith has saved you*" to the woman who anoints his feet [Luke 7:50], to the woman with the flow of blood [Luke 8:48] and to the blind beggar at Jericho [Luke 18:42]. The words 'has saved you' may be translated as 'has healed you' or 'has made you well'. This is more than being cured of something; it has the sense of being made whole, as well as being forgiven.

And these events happen before Jesus has died on the cross.

Jesus constantly talks about and demonstrates the coming of the Kingdom of God in his teaching and in his actions, and yet there is a tension about exactly how much the Kingdom has come. It is

present – but is still up ahead in the future – in the age to come. It is 'now' as well as 'not yet'. It is 'here' on earth as well as 'somewhere else' – in heaven. It involves action – loving one's neighbours as oneself – and yet relies on God to become a complete reality. While the Kingdom, eternal life and salvation have to be understood in the light of everything Jesus did and said, nothing is finished because the Cross and the Resurrection are still to come. However, if the Kingdom of God is so closely intertwined with salvation, we need to consider how it may be evident in the world today as God's Spirit is at work and what this means for the question.

What do we mean by 'finding' salvation?

In terms of those of other faiths, could we mean, within their own faith? Do we mean by encountering Christ somehow without actually realising it? Perhaps it is something which can happen even after death? Or can salvation only be found by knowingly becoming a Christian?

There are traditionally three basic responses to this question among Christians. They are often referred to as Exclusivist, stating that no one can be saved except by accepting Jesus as Saviour and Lord, the Pluralist, recognising the validity of other religions as ways to salvation, and the Inclusivist, holding in tension the uniqueness of Jesus, as the once for all means of salvation, with a considered suspicion that God's Spirit may somehow reach beyond anything we can grasp.

Exploring who is 'in' and who is 'out':

Towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records Jesus warning against false prophets and saying that people will be recognised for who or what they are by their fruit. [7:15-20]

And then Jesus says – "*Not everyone who says to me ...*"

Read Matthew 7:21-23 with an Inter Faith eye. How do you respond to these words?

What are the characteristics of those who say "*Lord, Lord ...*" yet are rejected? Whom does Jesus place within the kingdom?

Go on to think about these questions:

To what extent is it possible to do the Father's will without knowing him – or Jesus?

How does the Holy Spirit work in the world? And what is the evidence for this?

In what ways might these things contribute in debating this Inter Faith question about salvation?

Exploring the Exclusive approach:

If we now consider the implication of the question – that people of other faiths could find salvation within their own faith, it would be very easy to say 'No' straightaway. People must need, knowingly, to become Christians in order to be saved, and this answer can be supported with key Biblical references.

Peter addresses the Sanhedrin: *"This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."* [Acts 4:11-12]

Jesus said to [Thomas], *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* [John 14:6]

Paul writes, *"For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."* [1 Corinthians 1:17-18]

That makes our task clear, too: we will help people to come to faith by telling them about Jesus so that they are in a position to accept him as Lord and Saviour. To say anything else seems too risky, because it might imply that people don't need to hear the gospel. Worse, if there are other ways to be saved, why did Jesus have to die on the cross? His death would be pointless.

The mission of the early Church clearly supports this approach. Stephen was the first follower to lose his life for speaking out against the Jews' resistance to Jesus and the new message of his followers. Acts 7 records his speech to the Sanhedrin, where he accuses them of resisting the Holy Spirit [Acts 7:51]

What about people who haven't heard of Jesus?

Sometime later, writing to the Romans, Paul develops the theme of salvation [Romans 10]. Having said, *'For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved',* Paul goes on to ask how people can be saved if they haven't heard the message.

But think about what Paul is saying. Where does his emphasis lie? This is a challenge to Christians to spread the good news. It doesn't seem to be a statement that it's just tough if you don't get to hear the gospel, you simply won't have the opportunity to be saved. For Paul, planning to reach much of the known world, the task seemed manageable if everyone who was already a Christian joined in. Down the ages, this has continued to be a vision: at the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference the delegates spoke of "The Evangelization of the World in This Generation."

All that has been considered so far, deals with the situations in which Jesus and then the emerging church find themselves. But other questions can be raised which may help to explore the issues. And if we don't ask the questions, other people certainly will.

What about people who died before Jesus?

Although Paul says quite a lot about the Jews, who are a special case, being the chosen people, and for whom obedience to the Law was, up to the time of Jesus, the way to be in a relationship with God, he says little about dead Gentiles. In Acts 17, Paul speaking of the Gentiles in the past, tells the Athenians *"While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."*

This takes us back to the question: what about people who have no opportunity to hear about Jesus? Paul speaks and writes as if it's possible for all people everywhere to be in a position to repent. Is Paul's perception that the known world is quite manageable in terms of mission?

God's Justice:

Interestingly he says God will judge the world with righteousness – with justice, by Jesus. Jesus has already taught about judgement. Read the Parable of the Sheep and Goats [Matthew 25:31-46] and consider the Inter Faith implications. This is a gathering of all the nations. The kingdom is for those who have cared for Jesus. When they question this, *'the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me".'* So who are these people? To say 'God knows' is not to avoid the issue. If God is a God of justice, he is fair. Is it possible that we need to recognise that we may not know everything, because we cannot grasp the measure of God's love and justice?

Exploring the Pluralist approach:

It is important to understand the Pluralist position. Although it may not be a view that is held by most Christians it raises some questions and makes some observations about humanity which it is only reasonable to consider. John Hick is the key figure who puts forward this view which he developed, from a Christian starting-point, as a result of encountering and studying major world religions. He came to the conclusion that Christianity does not have an exclusive claim on truth about God and that all the great religions have a common core connecting them.

John Hick argues, quite realistically, that people's religious beliefs are most likely to be influenced and shaped by the faith into which they are born. He goes on to observe that God, with limitless love would not deliberately deny salvation to those born in the wrong place. Hick identifies a particular period in time, the 'axial age', stretching over several centuries around 800 to 200 BC when peoples in different places became aware of a Reality outside themselves, the source of life, in a new way. There was a new spiritual awareness which understood that the world was not the way it should be and needed to be different. Hick sees this as a desire to move from 'self-centredness' to 'Reality-centredness'. He uses 'salvation' alongside 'liberation' and 'ultimate fulfilment' to describe the

process by which an individual, rather than a whole community, seeks to be transformed from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.

Thus a pluralist believes that there are many paths to God, and Jesus is one of them. For John Hick, Jesus was a man of God, who pulsated with God-consciousness to such an extent that he was able to share this with others and bring them to the place where they would seek to be transformed and live a new life. Hick argues that there are other religious teachers, in other places, among other peoples, who have done the same.

While the beliefs of some of the major world religions would agree with this conclusion, there are others which cannot sit easily with this view. The key Christian belief that Jesus is the Word who became flesh, the Son of God, God incarnate, challenges the exclusivist stance, as do his death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins.

Exploring the Inclusivist approach:

The most famous advocate of a pure Inclusivist view of salvation is Karl Rayner, who developed the concept of the 'Anonymous Christian'. He describes an anonymous Christian as someone 'who lives in a state of Christ's grace through faith, hope and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ.' Although he does not like the term he maintains it is the only way to explain what he means: 'first, the possibility of supernatural salvation and of corresponding faith which must be granted to non-Christians, even if they never become Christians [anonymous]: and secondly, that salvation cannot be gained without reference to God and Christ [Christian].' This raises many questions, not least on behalf of the 'anonymous Christians', because the concept seems very patronising. It seems, on the one hand, to remove the need for Jesus, because people can be 'anonymous' Christians without reference to him. On the other, if they can become 'anonymous Christians' without Jesus why do they have to be called 'Christians' at all?

The Inclusivist approach does offer some contribution to the difficult questions which are part of Christian human experience about those who seem to behave like Christians, but come from other faiths or none. It also opens the way for dialogue between those of different faiths. But it has the potential to create unnecessary barriers by causing offence to those who consider their own faith 'label' quite adequately describes their relationship with God.

Gavin d'Costa has written extensively on these issues and makes a distinctive contribution which builds some bridges, particularly between the Inclusivist and the Exclusivist, with the 'an open-ended form of Trinitarian Inclusivism'. He says that the Trinity 'affirms the decisiveness and uniqueness of Christ as being the revelation of God' while at the same time 'Christians can affirm the universal activity of the Holy Spirit in history'. He maintains that this open-ended approach allows for 'critical, constructive and committed encounters with peoples of other faiths.'²

2 D'Costa in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed A McGrath, Blackwell, 1994

It is tempting to give simple, decisive answers to the question of salvation in relation to other faiths, but the range of concepts and images involved shows that this is complex if we want to understand the love of God in all its fullness. We may need to wrestle with ideas and re-examine scripture, rather than quote proof-texts which may only consider one aspect of the whole. The history of Christian thought shows that others have had to go through the same processes. We need to look at contrasting Bible passages and think how they contribute to our understanding.

For instance, what does Jesus mean when he says of the centurion:

"Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." [Matthew 7:10-12]

And how would you read these words of Jesus:

"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." [John 10:16]

By doing this, we may be able to see different ways of understanding the scope of God's salvation. Salvation belongs to God, and we may need to accept that we cannot know for sure who is saved, but that God does. The Book of Revelation is extremely complex and has had many interpreters. However because it encompasses everything and everyone within God's activity and nothing is missed, it has much to say: for some there is destruction and for others there is salvation but, without doubt, it declares that those decisions belong to God. Simon Woodman's *The Book of Revelation*³ offers a detailed examination of the way in which God's new heaven and earth become reality, and to whom Jesus makes this invitation:

**we may be able to
see different ways of
understanding the scope of
God's salvation**

'The Spirit and the bride say, "Come."

And let everyone who hears say, "Come."

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.' [Revelation 22:17]

John's vision of the multitude in Revelation presents a gathering which is inclusive, drawing people from the whole earth:

'After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"'

[Revelation 7:9-10]

But who are they? It may be helpful to recognise who they are not.

They are not the same group as the 144,000 who are 'sealed'. Later, in Revelation 14:1-5, the 144,000 is seen more clearly as those 'who have been redeemed from the earth'; they have the name of the Lamb and of his Father on their foreheads and are 'the first-fruits'. As the redeemed they can be identified with the Church which, because of the sacrifice of the Lamb, will not face judgement. But as 'the first-fruits' they cannot be the only ones: there must be more to make up the harvest – the multitude.

If those in the multitude are not 'the Church', who are they? One of the elders asks "*Who are these robed in white, and where have they come from?*" and then identifies them as those "*who have come out of the great ordeal*". Those whose names are already written in the Lamb's book of life do not have to go through further suffering. In 'A non-violent reading of Fire and Burning in the Book of Revelation'⁴ Woodman identifies the multitude as 'that vast swathe of humanity that has given its adulterous allegiance to the beast' [p13] and they have had to experience the 'second death' of the lake of fire. Woodman considers how, in the Book of Revelation, Fire signifies three distinct, yet inter-related, aspects of God's purposes. Firstly as the Sign of Divine Presence, secondly as the Sign of Divine Judgement, destroying 'the satanic systems of evil at work in the world' [p12], and thirdly as the Sign of Divine Purification. The multitude consists of those who have been purified, not destroyed, by fire, and can now stand 'before the throne and before the Lamb'.

Woodman does not deny the complexities involved in identifying 'the people of God': 'There is an inherent tension present within the Book of Revelation, between images ... which seem to indicate a universal acceptance of the Lordship of Christ as the end result of the faithful witness of the Church and other images which indicate judgement on those forces that remain in opposition to the kingdom of Christ.'⁵

If there is a possibility that God's mercy reaches beyond the limits which we might traditionally associate with salvation, then some of the images which have been considered earlier in exploring the question have a contribution to make. Those who confess Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord are those who have salvation, the quality of life which is eternal, and are working as citizens of the Kingdom of God. Using Gavin d'Costa's concept of Trinitarian Inclusivism, is it possible to recognise forces which do not oppose the kingdom of Christ, in people of other faiths? Where the fruits of the Spirit are seen in people's lives can we see or acknowledge that the Spirit is at work within them, just as he is to bring people to Christ? As Christians we know God has not yet finished with us, so he certainly can't have finished with the rest of humanity which is made in his image. To keep an active mind on the issue of salvation is not to sell-out on all that God has done in Jesus, rather it is to recognise that God, by his Spirit, works towards the renewal of the whole creation.

4 In *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haymes*, eds Cross and Gouldbourne, Oxford: RPC, 2011]

5 *The Book of Revelation*, p102

For discussion:

What do you understand as salvation?

What do you believe your hope is?

How do you understand the story of the woman at the well in John 4?

Many Muslims are finding faith in Jesus through dreams. What does this say about God and his plan for salvation?

Would you be disappointed if you arrived in heaven and found Muslims there?

Does God ever work outside of your theology box?

Question 4:

What is the spiritual significance of other faiths?

If there is a point of agreement in considering spirituality, it will be that all religions have a spiritual dimension. What that is, in the case of other faiths, and its implications for Christians will not find consensus. While many Christians would say that all other faiths are false spirituality, others will have found common ground with members of some faith communities.

Some converts to Christianity have particularly strong views about this. Experiencing a new liberty in Christ they see their previous life as the evil from which they have been freed. In some cases they will witness to the spiritual battle which has released them from the presence of demons and the sense of having been possessed. Understandably, where this is their past experience, they will want not only to distance themselves from the past, but also condemn it as the enemy of all that is good. A closely related issue, therefore, is whether interaction with other faiths can cause harm. Is there a risk of being influenced or invaded by powers which are opposed to Christ?

In fairness, a negative response to their former life can be a characteristic of converts from all religions, including those who have converted from Christianity, to warn of the dangers inherent in the spirituality which informed their old beliefs, and to seek to avoid it at all costs.

Is there a risk of being influenced or invaded by powers which are opposed to Christ?

One response to this question is that other faiths are distortions of spiritual truth, and should be shunned and opposed. But, as a Christian you know that God sees the heart, so will know what you are actually thinking, feeling and believing at any point. If that is the case, would it matter if you appear to accept the actions of another faith, even when, in your heart, you don't? Won't God understand?

The book of Daniel has one response and tells a story of determination to remain faithful to God in the face of extraordinary pressure. The Jewish exiles are in Babylon, surrounded by an alien culture and a religion which is dominated by the king and full of idol worship. In the past, the Jews had been tempted by foreign gods, with terrible consequences. There are examples of apostasy, the complete abandonment of their faith in God, and of syncretism, where they 'blended' their worship of God with elements of the religions that surrounded them among the nations. From the beginning, Daniel and his three companions will not defile themselves with food and drink from

King Nebuchadnezzar's table, which may be 'unclean' for the Jews, or have been contaminated by Babylonian worship. This sets the standard which is picked up throughout the book, to give some clear indications about one understanding of the spiritual significance of another religion.

Read the Fiery Furnace narrative in Daniel 3: When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to bow down to the huge golden image which King Nebuchadnezzar has commissioned, or to worship his gods, they face the fiery furnace. The king, offering to overlook their past disobedience if they will comply with his demands, asks what god can rescue them from the fire. Their response to the king goes beyond defiance:

"... If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up."

[Daniel 3:17-18]

There is absolutely no compromise here. God is God whether he rescues them or not.

It could be argued that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego know very well that a statue made by human hands, on the orders of a human king, is nothing but a rather large piece of gold. It is of no significance at all in spiritual terms. Would it matter if they bowed down to it? God would know it meant nothing. Similarly, the gods of Babylon are no gods, they don't exist, so they would not be worshipping anything.

Read Daniel 6 for a second outstanding example of steadfastness. King Darius is tricked into throwing Daniel to the lions because Daniel has openly continued to worship God. Interestingly Darius' reaction, before the ordeal, is in sharp contrast to Nebuchadnezzar's; the latter only acknowledged God after the three men survived his punishment. Darius recognises that God exists and may have power to save even as he sends Daniel to the lions:

"May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" [Daniel 6:16]

Together these stories present a coordinated spiritual response when confronted with the demands of another religion. There is to be no concession whatever the consequences. The overwhelming theme is faithfulness to God, actively and audaciously demonstrated by purity and devotion in worship and lifestyle.

Could they have compromised, if God knows the heart?

No! Firstly, however empty and meaningless the Babylonian religious rituals might be, the 10 Commandments state *'...you shall have no other gods before me'* and forbid the making and worship of idols [Exodus 20:3-6]. Secondly, by demonstrating open commitment to God these Jews are witnessing to their faith. They are showing that they are prepared to put their belief into practice, even if it means martyrdom. Their witness has a positive effect in that both kings, by different routes, acknowledge God as the one who saves and must be respected – even in Babylon.

Here the other religion is seen as a spiritual distortion of the truth about God. As such it has no value and should be avoided. But there is a deeper issue concerning the spiritual harm that might be caused by allowing oneself to become involved with another religion. Daniel assures Ashpenaz that he and his companions will survive on a vegetable and water diet, but after 10 days they are healthier than those who have eaten the royal food [Daniel 1:16]. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego declare that it is better to die in the blazing furnace than worship foreign gods. Daniel prays with the windows open, so that he will be seen, irrespective of the threat of lions. The possibility of physical harm is seen as nothing in comparison to the spiritual effect of apostasy.

The potential for spiritual harm is illustrated in a slightly different example in 2 Kings 5 after Naaman, a commander in the army of the King of Aram, is healed of leprosy. Having confessed, *"Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel..."* he is anxious to clarify how this will work out in the future. He has a potential problem when he returns home and has to accompany the king into the temple of the god Rimmon. He asks for forgiveness in anticipation of what might happen: *"But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count."* [2 Kings 5:18]

Naaman may be forced by circumstances to bow down, but he is declaring that the action will have no meaning for him, as he remains faithful to God. The implication is that, otherwise, bowing down to Rimmon would have spiritual significance: it would show allegiance to something other than God and would have negative consequences. Naaman, with his embryonic understanding of God, feels the need to explain himself. In this situation, the possibility of being present at worship, while not spiritually affected by it, is explored. Are there circumstances where, as Christians, we might need to approach our involvement with other faiths in the same way as Naaman?

Should Christians be cautious about other faiths on account of their potentially negative or harmful influence?

Paul tells the Romans that he is *'convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'* [Romans 8:38-39] Does this mean that, whatever their spiritual significance, Christians should have nothing to fear from other faiths? By putting on 'the whole armour of God' Christians should be equipped to withstand anything that comes their way, discerning what is not of God. However, the existence of Satanism, as the most obvious example, presents a spiritual reality which is extremely dangerous and absolutely opposed to Christ. There are occult-related lifestyles, as well as religious and philosophical systems, which clash with Christian beliefs and spiritual insights. Paul was well aware that his world had similar dangers: why else, at the end of the letter to the Ephesians, would he use the imagery of battle armour? Look at the description of this armour: truth, righteousness, a readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace, faith, salvation and the word of God. These are powerful and positive – together they make up the key attributes of a Christian life. However, there have

been times throughout history where their use has been abused with disastrous consequences and the legacy of such events lives on in people's memories.

In exploring the spiritual significance of other faiths, it is worth considering times when Christians had to face 'principalities and powers' within their midst. The Christian reformers of the 19th century had to battle against political and social systems which justified all manner of atrocities in the misguided belief that God had somehow ordained that society should have different levels of entitlement. Thankfully the verse: 'The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly and ordered their estate' has long been omitted from 'All things bright and beautiful', but it betrays a spiritual bankruptcy, if people could think that this was the way that 'God ... has made all things well'.

Whose 'side' were Christians on when the Bible was used to justify apartheid in South Africa or in the Civil Rights movement in the USA? Martin Luther King, writing from jail in Birmingham, Alabama, deplores the apathy of white Christians:

'In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.'⁶

The idea that Christian spirituality is only concerned with the soul and not the body is often considered to be a characteristic of Western Christian thought. It is seen in other situations where inequality has been maintained. When slaves in the Caribbean and American colonies began to become Christians, a question arose as to whether they should now be freed. Edmund Gibson, a Bishop of London in the early 18th century, justified their continuing slavery by making a distinction between the body and the soul:

"The Freedom which Christianity gives, is a Freedom from the Bondage of Sin and Satan, and from the Dominion of Men's Lusts and Passions and inordinate Desires; but as to their outward Condition, whatever that was before, whether bond or free, their being baptised, and becoming Christians, makes no manner of Change in it."⁷

Later in the century, in complete contrast, another Bishop of London, Beilby Porteus, was one of the leading campaigners for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. He said,

"The Christian religion is opposed to slavery in its spirit and in its principle: it classes men-stealers among murderers of fathers and of mothers, and the most profane criminals upon earth."

Two bishops, one religion and two spiritualities in absolute opposition to each other.

6 Letter from Jail, 16 April 1963

7 Quoted in James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Orbis, 1969

What is spirituality?

What springs to mind? Mysticism, prayer, devotion, contemplation, meditation, worship, creativity, social action? Is there any need to choose one above, or instead of, another? 19th century Prime Minister, William Gladstone, working alongside other Christian reformers said: "The duties of governors [political officials] are strictly and peculiarly religious. Individuals are bound to carry throughout their acts the spirit of the high truths they have acknowledged."

In whatever way the 'high truths' of Christianity have been discovered spiritually, as far as Gladstone is concerned, they have to be made visible in life style and action. Might we develop this idea but 'the other way round' when it comes to discerning the spiritual significance of other faiths?

When Jesus warns the disciples to beware of false prophets, he uses the analogy of the tree:

"You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits."

Matthew 7:16-20

In discerning what is true and what is false, people's lifestyles are often a telling indication.

Experiencing the generosity of other faiths, the Revd Julie Aylward⁸ contrasts the money bowl at the serving hatch after Christian worship, with the Sikh provision of free food for all who enter their Gurdwara, 24 hours a day.

Is it possible that Christians can become fixed in particular ways of thinking so that they don't see the potential, or even the truth, of another's words or actions?

When Jesus tells the paralysed man that his sins are forgiven, the Jewish scribes are horrified:

"Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Jesus' response demonstrates that he is concerned with the wholeness of the individual – the man is forgiven and physically healed. But the scribes could not 'think outside their traditional spiritual box'. When we hear Christians speak of forgiving someone who has deeply wronged them, as Gordon Wilson did in 1987 after his daughter had been killed in the Enniskillen bombings, we see the spirit of the gospel in action. But what about a group of Muslim men, praying openly in a Birmingham street, in August 2011, after the riots, when three of their young men had been killed by a passing car? Taraq Jahan, father of one of the men, pleaded with the angry crowds for calm and that there should be no retaliation and his appeal was heeded. This has been widely acknowledged as the most significant contribution in preventing an escalation of tensions and violence.

8 See Inter Faith Journeys resource available to download from: http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/370321/Faith_and_Society.aspx

Some Muslims began to feel that people were seeing Islam in a different light:

“The dignity of Tariq Jahan and the Muslim community’s response to his appeals for calm, portrayed us how we actually see ourselves. The Muslims you see in the media are so far removed from the reality of how we live. You see Muslims in the news in connection with terrorism or criminality, something that most people have never been involved with - and Muslims are no different - but that’s how people think we are, because that’s all they see.”⁹

Is this a challenge to discern between the false and true prophet?

It would have been possible for the old ‘eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth’ principle to have operated here – but it didn’t. Jesus called on his disciples to ‘turn the other cheek’. When understood properly, this action leads to a de-escalation in violence, it is not a sign of weakness¹⁰. What happened in Birmingham called for inner strength and conviction as well as outward courage to speak and await the consequences. The outcome has been greater understanding and brought others to commit to working together across faith ‘boundaries’. What is the spiritual significance here?

Few would deny the spiritual significance of Gandhi and the achievements of his non-violent protest. He brought together his own Hindu principle of ‘ahimsa’, non-violence, the active avoidance of causing harm, with the teachings and life of Jesus, to guide his actions and lead the campaign against British rule in India. The protests were met with extreme brutality in an attempt to suppress the campaign. Whose was the moral high ground? Where was the spiritual depth? What is the difference between Gandhi and Martin Luther King in terms of strategy? King, taking his inspiration from the teaching and example of Jesus, actually studied Gandhi’s methods in order to plan his non-violent action for Civil Rights. Gandhi had a huge admiration for Jesus, but why would he want to become part of a religion which was synonymous with repression?

Jesus constantly challenges people’s perceptions and introduces some revolutionary ideas. As far as the Jews were concerned they virtually had the monopoly on spiritual understanding, because they had the Law to guide them. By keeping the Law they expressed their devotion to God. Why wouldn’t a priest and a Levite, on their way to the Temple in Jerusalem, make sure they kept themselves ritually clean, by avoiding a mugged man, who was covered in blood, and could even be dead? Why? Jesus, as he continues the story [Luke 10:29-37] makes it quite clear: not only should they, in order to love their neighbour as themselves, have stopped, but – and here is the shocking element – it takes a foreigner, a Samaritan, someone whose religion falls well short of Jewish standards, to demonstrate what loving God and neighbour truly involves. Where are today’s priests and Levites with their outward piety? And where are the ‘Samaritans’ loving their neighbours, whoever they are?

The prophet Micah had reminded the Jews what true worship of God was all about: ‘...and what

9 Aisha Iqbal, Young Muslims Advisory Group, quoted by BBC Birmingham

10 See Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, Fortress, 1992, for a clear explanation

does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' [Micah 6:8] Can a legalism creep into Christian thinking, and make us decide what is right and wrong without looking deeper? Might we judge someone of another faith without finding out more about their beliefs?

Jesus spoke powerfully into a situation where legalism sought to take the upper hand. Early one morning when he is teaching in the Temple, a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery is brought to stand in front of everyone. The trap is set for Jesus – the Law or mercy – either way someone will condemn him. *"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."* [John 8:7] These people had no claim to the moral or spiritual high ground, and their exit follows.

When you read Resource 3 – Inter Faith Journeys, you will find testimony that Christians who have got to know people of other faiths have come to a better understanding and found some common ground in values, and often in spirituality. Sometimes they have had to revise previous judgements. The flip side of this is that they have also, in examining their own beliefs, come to a deeper, stronger understanding of their Christian faith and the demands it makes on their lives.

Another result of these Inter Faith encounters is a clear recognition that there are distinct differences between Christianity and other religions. Some things cannot be reconciled. For example, the Hindu understanding of 'atman', the soul, is that it must pass through many incarnations, or samsara, till it reaches moksha, a state of being released into Brahman, the 'world soul'; this is in complete variance with Christianity, where the uniqueness of each individual, made in the image of God, is at the core of spirituality. The Hindu belief in the journey of the soul lies at the heart of the varna [caste] system which, though illegal in India, is still widely practised and is the source of appalling discrimination against Dalits and other lower castes. The idea that someone's suffering is in some way the result of sin in a previous life, and therefore has to be accepted as a punishment and the means by which the soul makes progress, is completely at odds with Christian belief: God is loving and merciful; in the death and resurrection of Jesus forgiveness and new life is possible for all; and the Holy Spirit works to bring wholeness and healing.

Recognising the spiritual significance of another's faith does not mean ignoring difference, nor does it prevent sharing the gospel and wanting others to become followers of Jesus. In fact, finding common ground may well be the starting point for a conversation. When Paul was in Athens, however he might have felt about what he saw, he deliberately starts from a place where the spiritual significance of what surrounds him is recognised in a positive way: *"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way"* [Acts 17:22] before going on to speak of God. He might so easily have condemned what he saw out of hand, considering that it was a complete distraction from his task. By accepting that there was some common core of spirituality which caused the Athenians to reach out to the divine, the unknown god, Paul has a basis for dialogue.

Recognising the spiritual significance of another's faith does not mean ignoring difference, nor does it prevent sharing the gospel and wanting others to become followers of Jesus.

In the same way today there is evidence of spirituality in other faiths in the way some people come to faith in Christ. From their knowledge of 'Isa [the Muslim name for Jesus] in the Qur'an, some Muslims have come to faith in him through dreams. They recognise him from within their existing spiritual experience. Similarly African theologians having delved into the past history of their peoples discover some aspects of pre-Christian spirituality which, while rejected by the missionaries, did in fact resonate with the message of Jesus. Not everything which is different or unfamiliar is automatically to be discounted. Many Christians have found, once they have spent time with people of other faiths that their own spiritual lives have been enriched as well as challenged by the insights they receive.

Christians may feel they are in a 'minority' situation, where faith is under pressure from the post-Christian culture in the UK today. Some have likened it to being in exile, rather like Daniel, with a need to stand firm. But does this mean having a siege mentality and being defensive towards anything that isn't Christian? It is possible that others have the ability to discern God as Darius did with Daniel. Whatever Christians in the UK might think, many people of other faiths would see the influence of Christianity still as the dominant force which shapes culture. Christians may not see this, especially when the obvious devotion of other faiths is compared with the trends in Christianity. But there are many occasions when Christians have been urged by people of other faiths to stand firm and be Christian, not apologising for their faith. What does that say about their spirituality?

For discussion:

Are people from other faiths spiritual?

How do you understand the prayers and worship of people of other faiths?

Do people from other faiths and new religions have any significant spiritual experiences? Where do they come from?

Is there any influence of God in the origins of any other faiths? Would you say they have deviated from the true purpose of what God had in place? What about Christianity, is this still the true faith as God intended it?

Question 5:

Can we participate fully in shared worship?

This is a very important question, to which the answer is, for almost all Christians, quite simply 'No!' However, it is essential to address the issue: it is this 'multi-faith' picture which is sometimes presented by those who understand little of Inter Faith engagement, and used to dismiss any attempts to relate to other faith communities. The reality of Inter Faith relationships is quite different.

So, focusing on the question, what do you imagine would be happening if members of different faith communities were to be fully participating in shared worship? Who would be involved? Where might this be happening? What would they be doing? How would they have decided what to do? For what reasons might they be doing this? And how would you feel if you were invited to join in?

It is not only Christians who would have difficulty picturing the answers to these questions. There is a vital distinction to be made between 'multi-faith' [which is what shared worship would be] and Inter Faith engagement. While people of different faiths may come together for various purposes, actually sharing worship is not something they seek to do.

For people who are not members of a faith community there may be the feeling that all religions are much the same and can worship together. There have been examples of civic authorities wanting to create multi-faith centres where all religions can worship either together or separately. In reality few practising members of faith communities want this.

And there are other obvious problems in the concept of shared worship. For instance, worship implies an 'object' to whom the worship is directed, a divine being. For Buddhists, no such being is necessary, yet they spend time in reflection and meditation which has similarities to an attitude of worship, in reverence and purpose. Hindus, in particular, use shrines as a way to help them focus in worship, whereas for most other religions this is seen as idolatry, and is completely unacceptable, and for many absolutely forbidden.

What might be done together?

In 1992 the Joppa Group published 'A Baptist Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue'. In this four models of engagement were outlined as approaches to Inter Faith worship, in which a Christian might be invited to participate:

As an observer:

Firstly, one may be an observer, simply being present at an act of worship of people of another faith, either in a place of worship or in a believer's home. In this context, not only would you witness what was happening and hear people speaking or singing, but you would also see the customs linked to the worship. If observers were watching Baptist Christians worshipping they might wonder why everyone stands up and sits down at certain times, but rarely kneels. In the same way other faiths have traditions which have meaning for them. This observational approach allows people to gain insight into the beliefs of another faith community and the ways in which they are expressed.

This is the context in which school groups might visit places of worship, such as a Muslim mosque or Sikh gurdwara, to learn about the religious beliefs and practices of a faith community. There would be no expectation of participation, but an emphasis on respect and deepening understanding. It allows for further dialogue. In order to learn more about another's faith, this may be a helpful level at which to engage.

Here there is an important distinction between being an active participant and a respectful observer.

Here there is an important distinction between being an active participant and a respectful observer. Someone else may be offering an expression of worship, but that is an external event if you are not a believer; it is something to be observed without touching your own spirit.

To think about:

In what ways can you participate fully at someone else's wedding?

Suppose you were invited to a wedding... Would you participate fully in what was happening? You would participate certainly, you would be involved, you would be sharing the joy of the day, you would be witnessing the couple making their vows ... but would that be full participation? It wouldn't be the same as if you were one of the people getting married when your participation would be complete. You would not have prepared for the day as the couple has done. While you can enjoy seeing two people who love each other making a life-long commitment, you don't understand fully what they feel and why they fell in love. You may have experiences of your own which help you to understand something of the significance of the day, but it's not 'your day'. Afterwards you may actively care about how the couple is getting on, but yours will not be the on-going outworking of the promises made on the wedding day. And, of course, there is the possibility that you think the whole relationship is ill-advised and the marriage should never have taken place.

If you can take that analogy over to the idea of worship, most people might say they can see some similarities. We can observe the obvious devotion of another faith. If we allow ourselves to listen to what is going on, we may find points of common ground, which are somehow familiar yet differently expressed. But we don't know from the inside, and remain observers. We may even think they have things completely wrong.

In shared silence:

Secondly, it is possible to agree with others from different faith communities to sit together in silence, each praying or meditating as an individual. This could be a way of coming together in mutual respect, allowing everyone freedom of conscience. The occasion may also involve discussion and sharing of ideas, but while it is creating a space and time for worship, it is not shared worship.

This may be a regular occurrence for some people, but you can imagine specific circumstances in which this might be particularly appropriate. There are occasions when people of different faiths come together to express their unity in the face of adversity, when everyone is wanting to express solidarity following an incident which is affecting the local, national or world community. These are often spontaneous responses to something which has happened, maybe to an attack or a disaster in the local community. In some places 9/11 and the London bombings of 7/7 evoked this type of response, as did the riots of Summer 2011. At these times, people of many faiths and none unite to express something which is beyond words, seeking to demonstrate solidarity with those under attack, or opposition to a particular action. From such silence, from an unspoken yet visible commitment to stand together, creative responses have sprung: people from different backgrounds come together and work for greater cohesion and mutual support within their community.

What happens is not shared worship, yet is there not a sense in which God speaks to the heart and there is a natural human response to look beyond our own limits and seek understanding and strength. Joint statements may emerge from such events. If prayers are offered by individual faith groups, using their own traditions, this does not mean anyone is expecting others to share in these words as an act of worship. However, it is moving to the next level of engagement..

As a contributor:

... the third model. Christians may feel able to contribute to 'serial' acts of worship. In this situation, each faith community offers something, perhaps a prayer or reading from a sacred text, while others listen. A time of silent reflection allows everyone to think about what has been shared. This is clearly a higher level of involvement where participants recognise and respect others' right to worship, and are open to the possibility that some things may be said which in some way links to their own experience, although others will not. A civic setting is an example of the context in which this might happen. In an area where a number of faith communities exist alongside one another there will be occasions where representatives of the different faiths come together. This is planned and agreed beforehand, possibly as an act of commemoration, such a Remembrance Sunday, Holocaust Memorial Day, or the anniversary of a particular event.

The experience and advice of the Inter Faith Network for the UK¹¹ make clear that the idea of shared worship, where people are expected to join in together, is not appropriate because it ignores the integrity of each faith community. There is clear agreement not to have times of shared, spoken prayer where people would be being asked to say things they do not believe or understand. Instead each faith community has the opportunity to offer something from their own tradition while others listen. This approach recognises differences yet respects the sincerity of another's actions.

11 www.interfaith.org.uk

Sharing spoken words:

The last way of engaging is relatively rare: in this situation people of different faiths would come together for a shared act of worship in which prayers would be spoken together. Most Christians and members of other faith communities would consider that such a level of engagement challenged their integrity and the distinctiveness of their beliefs. But it does happen where people have a pluralist view of religion.

In the past there have been occasions where civic authorities have expected that such shared worship should and could happen, and have tried to impose it in places with several different faith communities living alongside one another. These efforts may have been a somewhat naïve attempt to make the 'newcomers' feel welcome and create community cohesion, but they demonstrate a lack of understanding of the nature of faith and worship. Shared worship cannot be externally imposed.

Understanding between faith communities has come over time, as they learn about and from one another and each dares to be distinctive. There is plenty of evidence that other faiths in Great Britain encourage Christians to be Christian, rather than to defer to them in some attempt to be politically correct. This was the case at the time of the Millennium. When The British Red Cross banned Christmas crib scenes from their shops, the letters of protest came from other faith communities! Often they will defend the right of Christians to express their faith, where those without faith wish to silence them.



Finding something to say together:

An interesting and creative response to this 'problem' of sharing words was produced by the Inter Faith Network for the UK at the time of the Millennium which allowed members of different faith communities to come together in a shared act of Reflection and Commitment. But this is not worship or prayer; it's a statement of intention bringing communities together in cooperation. Read this and consider your own response:

An Act of Commitment:

Faith community representatives:

In a world scarred by the evils of war, racism, injustice and poverty, we offer this joint Act of Commitment as we look to our shared future.

All: We commit ourselves, as people of many faiths,
to work together for the common good,
uniting to build a better society,
grounded in values and ideals we share:

Community, personal integrity,
a sense of right and wrong,
learning, wisdom and love of truth,

care and compassion,
justice and peace,
respect for one another,
for the earth and its creatures.

We commit ourselves,
in a spirit of friendship and co-operation,
to work together
alongside all who share our values and ideals,
to help bring about a better world
now and for generations to come.

Why might you be able to say these words – or not? Would there be anything you would want to change?

In what ways does it read like a prayer? How is it NOT a prayer?

In what ways is there value in joining with others in saying words like these together?

Why is it significant that this was produced at the time of the Millennium by the Inter Faith Network for the UK?

Although full participation in shared worship or in the worship of another faith is not a major issue challenging Christians, there are some situations where being present in another place of worship may create tensions.

When a group of Baptists from Great Britain went to India and entered a Hindu temple, as tourists and interested spectators of the local culture, their Indian Christian hosts were very perturbed. For them this was a hostile and dangerous place to be spiritually, and should have been avoided. It is important to be sensitive to others' perceptions and think ahead, anticipating where explanations may be helpful.

It is possible to be confronted with a situation while visiting a place of worship or someone's home which creates a problem. Most Hindus and Sikhs have a very open attitude to worship and can see no reason why, as a Christian, you cannot just join in with what is going on. They believe that there are many paths to the divine and many ways of worshipping.

In a Hindu temple or home you may be invited to share food which has been offered to a god to be blessed. What would you do? Whatever you do, you might feel that your actions could be misunderstood. By eating, are you acknowledging the god, or just being courteous to your host? By refusing, do you maintain your integrity and faith in God, but risk rejecting the hospitality offered for your well-being.

If we look at Paul's advice to the Corinthians, we need to be very careful because he was dealing with a very different context. The Christians in Corinth were surrounded by temples and idols; the market stalls would be selling food previously sacrificed to idols and Christians could be invited to dine with non-Christians serving such food. What should they do? Paul addresses this complex question in I Corinthians 10 and makes a number of reflections as he offers some guidelines. Paul is determined that these Christians, young in their faith, should not return to their pre-Christian ways, worshipping idols and coming under the influence of the powers from which they had been freed in Christ – hence his comments on Israel's failings in the wilderness [verses 1-5] and demons [verses 20-21]. If there is any risk of this they should keep their distance – and make sure they are watching out for those who are afraid of compromising their faith [verse 28-29a].

There are parallels here for people who have converted to Christianity from another faith: some of them may be well aware of the pull of their old life and the spiritual pit-falls if they allow themselves to be involved in any way. This would be especially vital if they had been involved in any occult practices in their former life. However, the relevance for most Christians is Paul's main emphasis: he advises the Corinthians to behave sensitively towards their neighbours, in the certain knowledge that *'the earth and its fullness are the Lord's'* [verse 26]: by giving thanks for the food or drink Paul says his conscience is clear and he is giving glory to God.

If we are to grow in understanding of those of other faiths and the way they understand the question of worship it is important to know what they believe and what they do. This may not just affect Christians, but also members of other faiths. What are their expectations of us: where there

are cultural and religious customs, do we know what to do? Seating of men and women separately is the norm for many faiths. Removing shoes is another common practice showing reverence on entering the place of worship – but for the feet to point towards the front, likely to be the focus of worship, is completely unacceptable. Do we have habits or rituals which need explanation, or are there things we do which are open to misunderstanding? A young Sikh boy was absolutely horrified when he saw a Christian place a Bible on the floor: no Sikh would ever treat the Guru Granth Sahib with such disrespect, and it is always carried and placed higher than any human.

A Tale of Contrasts:

Two RE teachers regularly took their students to their nearest Sikh Gurdwara and built up a good relationship with their hosts. Each year they explained that their students were there to observe and learn more about Sikhism, not as participants; the children had no significant understanding of the writings in the Guru Granth Sahib, and therefore it would not be appropriate for them to bow to the ground in front of it, and 'give their heads to it.' Each year this was greeted with surprise, but gracious acceptance. Similarly, the request that the prashad, the food always offered within the diwan prayer hall to all who entered, should not have been blessed, was met with a basket of sweets, nuts and sugar crystals.

But one year, the Sikh guide had a question for the teachers. Her son attended a local Roman Catholic Primary School, because she wanted him to be educated in a moral, Christian environment. It was customary for parents to be invited to attend the Mass from time to time, and one day she went along. At the point when people were invited to go to the altar to receive the elements, she got up and went forward. She could not understand why her son was vigorously waving to her to sit down, but she did. Why, she wanted to know, was she excluded from taking bread and wine in a Christian church? As a Sikh, used to offering open, generous hospitality, she was bewildered.

What would you say? How would you explain?

The answer to the question of full participation in worship is fairly straightforward: this is not a path taken by most Christians or by members of other faiths. There are alternative and more productive ways to relate to one another and show respect. However it raises a number of issues, not just for Christians but for other faiths. As these are explored, and people learn about the beliefs and practices of the neighbours, understanding and trust can grow and it becomes possible to make informed responses.

As these are explored, and people learn about the beliefs and practices of the neighbours, understanding and trust can grow and it becomes possible to make informed responses.

For discussion:

Is there a difference between shared worship and worshipping alongside one another?

How does this differ from worshipping alongside Christians with whom we disagree?

What are our fears about being in a place of worship of another tradition?

Where are the boundaries? How far is too far in inter faith worship? Design your own boundaries and why?

Question 6:

What is God asking us to do in relation to other faiths?

What is God asking us to do in relation to anyone?

Following Jesus involves taking risks and being ready to be misunderstood as much as to be welcomed. As you read *Inter Faith Journeys*¹² you will be struck by many things. Three stand out particularly as recurring themes: firstly, the largely positive relationships which people have built with those from another faith community, secondly, the ways in which their own faith has been strengthened and enriched by dialogue with others, and thirdly, the great disappointment they experience in the opposition, suspicion and misunderstanding of some Christians about Inter Faith engagement.

The Golden Rule is found in some form in every major world religion; Jesus said, *"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."* [Matthew 7:12] If we are thinking in terms of Inter Faith engagement we have to ask how we want to be understood and how we want to be treated, and transfer that to our relationships with people of other faiths, and none. For those without experience of relating to people of other faiths, this may mean moving outside a comfort zone which feels safe, where we are used to having the answers, and into a place where minds are stretched and our faith is questioned. If Christians live in an area with little or no cultural and religious diversity, they may feel exempt from becoming involved, and yet there is a challenge which all Christians must face.

Do we have a responsibility to have knowledge of other faiths?

Many religions are treated with suspicion by those who know little or nothing of them except from media headlines. This is especially the case with Islam, because of its association with a small minority which embraces terrorism. We have a responsibility to speak the truth: that may mean finding out about other religions so that we can defend them against the ignorant and sometimes hostile criticisms made by those without knowledge. The 9th commandment is *'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.'* If we are silent when we could speak, or ill-informed when we could have found the truth, are we fulfilling the spirit of this law? We need to know about other faiths so that we do not misrepresent them in what we say. We also need to know enough, or be ready to find out, in order to represent and protect people of other faiths against prejudiced views.

¹² http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/370321/Faith_and_Society.aspx

The news can present a distorted picture of all people of faith. How often have you wanted to scream at the newsreader that a particular Christian who is speaking on an issue does not speak for you – in fact you don't recognise that as your faith and you wish other people were not hearing it? How do we feel when a Christian extremist, or who purports to be a Christian, does something horrendous? We want people to see that this is not true Christianity. After 9/11 one of the prevalent views seemed to be that all Muslims were potential terrorists, a judgement that was unfounded, and neglected to listen to the voices of Muslims as horrified as anyone by events which actually violated the teachings of Islam. We have a responsibility to defend people of other faiths against attack.

But why should we engage with people of other faiths when Christians are being persecuted?

There are places in the world where Christians are being persecuted. There are also places in the world where Christians are the cause of oppression and persecution – and history is littered with examples of Christians forcing faith on others, denying them the right to practise their faith [and even other Christians, at times, who worshipped in a different way].

Apart from the teaching of Jesus which insists on loving the enemy and praying for the persecutor, is there anything to be gained, practically, from not engaging with other faiths within this context. It would seem more effective if relationships in the UK between Christians and those who share the same faith as the persecutor could be built up, to bring understanding. This is more likely to bring change than extending the antagonism through silence. By defending the rights of others to practise their faith Christians set an example, rather than answering like with like.

After 9/11 many people of faith, not only Muslims, found themselves being stigmatised by people who did not stop to think whom they were targeting. In their ignorance, people were assuming not only that all Muslims were guilty by association, and somehow responsible for the terrorist attack, but that anyone of a particular ethnic background or skin colour was a Muslim. As a result, in Birmingham, for example, people of different faiths joined together to show a united front in upholding the truth and defending others. They were not prepared to ignore the Islamophobia which threatened peaceable Muslims and those of other faiths caught up in the aggression which was sweeping through communities. Such groups have continued to work together to help dispel ignorance and find common ground.

Christianity stands within a strong prophetic tradition in which God calls for justice. When Christians fail to uphold justice they have misunderstood what God requires. In Germany, in the years before the Second World War, a triumphalist version of Christianity was created which completely lost sight of the teachings of Jesus and the principles of equality and justice. As a result it utterly failed to react to Nazi atrocities and was complicit in the removal of those who were considered inferior. Not all Christians succumbed to this, but their protests were ineffective, their numbers few and many were arrested; some, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, lost their lives. Reflecting on the failure of the church to oppose Hitler, Pastor Martin Niemöller, who had been imprisoned for much of the war, is reputed to

have used these words, or a version of them, at many speaking engagements:

"First they came for the communists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the socialists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a socialist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me."

Loving God and loving your neighbour go together. Niemöller's words confess the failure to do either.

And who is your neighbour?

Jesus made that completely clear - it is impossible to wriggle out of that one and try to exclude anyone from the 'neighbourhood'. Every 'Frequently Asked Question' here seems to have some reference to the Samaritan. But asking the question, 'How do I love my neighbour as myself?' is pertinent in relation to Inter Faith dialogue.

Those who believe that the only thing to do with someone who is not a Christian is to help them become one will answer that the only loving thing is to try and convert them. If we are honest, and true to Jesus' Great Commission, we will readily acknowledge that this is something we would seek to do. In the end we would like someone to become a Christian. We have to recognise that the 'target' of our love may well want to do exactly the same for us. Mutual acknowledgement of this will make for openness and honesty. But, meanwhile ... what are we doing? And if that person does not become a Christian, are we saying that there has been little or no point in the relationship?

Every individual is made in the image of God and is valuable to him. Is a Christian of more value to God than someone who isn't? Do Christians have a monopoly on goodness just because they are Christians? That would seem to be arrogant as well as untrue. Aung Sang Suu Kyi is a Buddhist. She is a source of inspiration in her determination to gain freedoms for her Burmese people. Before her, Gandhi, a Hindu, and Martin Luther King, a Christian, made similar sacrifices, also insisting that non-violence was the only way to win against violent and destructive opposition. This is the message of Jesus. Would we want to deny that the words of Jesus, "*Blessed are the Peacemakers...*" are seen as much in the actions of Aung Sang Suu Kyi and Gandhi as they are in those of Martin Luther King?

These are well-known people whom we can admire from afar. But what about our close neighbours or those we see in the news? Might not the Muslim athlete who gives praise to Allah at the end of a race give us more hope than the athlete who says that self-belief in your own ability is all you need to win [as if there were a limitless number of gold medals or first places to be achieved, let alone a huge support team working for the success].

When someone of another faith or a whole faith community show acts of kindness to others can we see that the Holy Spirit is able to inspire people – that there is something of the image of God being expressed in their actions? In 1999, when Sikhs in Hounslow heard reports of the ethnic cleansing and other atrocities being carried out on Kosovo Albanians and saw the crisis unfolding, they decided to collect humanitarian Aid and take it to Kosovo themselves.¹³ Christians also responded to the same need. Are we to make a distinction between the two?

Being Christ to someone means that my involvement cannot be conditional on results.

If Mission is only understood in terms of conversions, then Inter Faith relationships will be limited and we can expect other faiths to be defensive. But Jesus' approach was open - his love was unconditional and sacrificial. When the 10 lepers came to him to be healed, they were, but only one came back to say thank you. [Luke 17:11-19] That had not stopped Jesus giving physical healing to the other nine. Jesus was clear that we don't love people in order to get something from them, we love them because that is what we do – love God and love our neighbour. The words of the hymn 'Brother, sister, let me serve you, Let me be as Christ to you; Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too' speak naturally of Christians caring for one another. But they could be applied to Inter Faith relationships in the ways we serve others in the community. Being Christ to someone means that my involvement cannot be conditional on results. If they become closer to God through the relationship, that has nothing to do with me, directly, as a channel of God's love.

How far can we work together for the common good?

In the past being a missionary may have been seen as 'converting the heathen' but few missionaries did that exclusively. There were always practical things to do which displayed the love of Christ in action. For many years missionaries now have worked alongside people of other faiths in countries where Christians are in a minority. They share a common concern for the well-being of those round them: thus hospitals, schools, agricultural projects and much more find Christians working within the culture of the host peoples and respecting their belief systems.

Jesus called on his disciples to be salt and light. Now that many Christians live in areas where there are several faiths, their situation is similar to that of the missionaries. So being salt and light will mean working within those communities. There may be times when the person with whom we have the most in common is someone from another faith, rather than the agnostic or the atheist, or simply someone with a secular world view. So many Christian values are shared by other faiths. The Golden Rule exists in every major world religion, but the similarities go further: the importance of marriage and the upbringing of children, care for the environment, many principles of peace and justice all find common ground in people of faith. Basic morality is often shared. Are there occasions when it is right to work together for these common concerns, or even to join people of another faith in promoting something of value?

¹³ www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/sewa-in-action/3779.html gives a summary of the story.

Some Christians have questioned whether working with other faiths more closely is going to cause Christendom in England to decrease? Given that Christians working with those of other faiths find that they are encouraged to be more open about their faith and stop apologising for it, this fear seems to be unfounded. Because relationships of mutual respect are developed there is confidence to be who we are. Many people of other faiths will send their children to Primary Schools with a Christian foundation because they share the values which are being promoted. Isn't cooperation between faiths a more effective witness to those with none, than division, especially where the results are visible in the life of the community?

Paul, writing to the Romans encourages them to '*Let love be genuine*'. This is within the Christian community, but how might it apply within Inter Faith contexts? There needs to be sincerity in relationships, with no hidden agenda. Giving the other person the opportunity to start the conversation means that our own priorities are not pushed to the front. Jesus often asked people what they wanted him to do, allowing them control. We do not have to be the most exciting person in the room! Nor should we attempt to demonstrate, or 'prove' the superiority of Christianity at every turn, in an effort to convert.

We are called to be faithful witnesses to all people, and that means listening to another person speak about faith so that we hear correctly. If we are living by the Golden Rule we will feel able to support them in their faith. We are likely to be able to empathise more with someone trying to live faithfully by their beliefs, than with someone with no clear beliefs, and at times it may be easier to relate to them.

But there will be differences in outlook as well as belief, and there has to be the space and the trust to express this. Learning about another faith should give a balanced understanding, where before there may have been none. On the other hand it may be more difficult to identify what is distinctive when there is much which seems to be held in common. Scriptural reasoning groups have become one feature of Inter Faith engagement where people of several faiths, most often Christians, Muslims and Jews, come together to share scriptures from their sacred texts, on a common theme, listening and discussing together what they mean. This takes things to a deeper level where it is possible to gain insights from others while helping them to understand from the Bible.

Is there anything distinctive from our Baptist heritage that could contribute to the Inter Faith discussion?

As we consider what God is asking us to do today, this final question reaches to the heart of our life and witness. Renewed, or new, commitment to Inter Faith relationships has come to some Baptists because of Thomas Helwys. 400th anniversary celebrations have reminded Baptists of the legacy which is passed down. Firstly, in 2009, 400 years since the first Baptist community was set up by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys in Amsterdam and then in 2012, 400 years since the first Baptist congregation in England was established at Spitalfields.

Baptists were dissenters and, as such, in danger because they were considered heretics. Thomas Helwys wrote *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* including a section 'On Religious Liberty' and sent a copy to King James I. Shortly afterwards in 1612 he was arrested, and died in Newgate prison in 1616. Helwys sets out his argument for religious freedom in clear terms. The king has no right over his subjects when it comes to religion. People must be free to practise religion as their conscience tells them:

"For our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he has no authority as a king but in earthly causes. And if the king's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more. For men's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure".

Thomas Helwys is not just asserting the right of Baptists to have religious freedom, nor even of other Christians, but of anyone. Here he cites Turks [Muslims] and Jews specifically, but the 'whatsoever' covers any other possibility. Not only is it a bold statement to make, which cost him his life, but it is extraordinary for its time, when so many people had been martyred for their beliefs, either Catholic or Protestant in previous decades. This is a declaration of the human right to freedom of conscience in religion. Its contribution to Inter Faith engagement needs little explanation. As Baptists we not only have the right to be Christian but we must defend the rights of others to follow their faith.

The 250th anniversary of the birth of William Carey, in 2011, was another opportunity for Baptists to remind themselves of their heritage. Obviously Carey's intentions were to convert 'the heathen', but the manner in which this happened is a model, in terms of patience and involvement. He literally learned the language – or rather languages – of the Indian peoples alongside whom he lived and worked. As he immersed himself in learning the languages, he also came to understand the culture and literature of the people, translating some of the Hindu scriptures into English. His understanding of the culture and command of the language allowed him to be more effective in researching and opposing practices which he considered evil, such as sati, the custom whereby a Hindu widow was burned, even throwing herself, on her dead husband's funeral pyre. Nick Wood comments, while recognising that William Carey was very much a man of his age, within a colonial setting, that Carey's approach was different from other missionaries in the way he worked.

'Throughout these labours Carey worked closely with learned Hindu pandits, none of whom apparently professed conversion to the Christian faith. It would be too much to claim Carey as a pioneer of Inter Faith dialogue, but it does not seem unreasonable to see Carey as a champion of popular culture.'¹⁴

If Carey could have this approach in the setting of Empire and colony, what is the challenge to us in an age where by upholding rights and expressing equality we can become agents for transformation within our society?

14 Nicholas Wood, 'Pity, Humanity and Christianity? The Work of William Carey in Postcolonial Perspective', *Baptist Quarterly*, October 2012

Following the Denominational Consultation in 1996, the Baptist Union published *Five Core Values for a Gospel People*. In presenting a vision for changing lives and transforming communities, the values stand at the centre of our lives as we reach out to others. As we are called to be a prophetic community, an inclusive community, a sacrificial community, a missionary community and a worshipping community we shall achieve nothing if the focus is inward. Living, as we do, in a multi-faith society the way we live out our Gospel values within our Inter Faith relationships will declare our understanding of our Baptist heritage. But more than that, it will show how we follow the call of Jesus to be missionary disciples.

For discussion:

If you are called to be salt and light, what does this mean in a multi faith world?

If we do not engage with people of other faiths, how can we possibly expect them to hear about Jesus?

Are we confident enough in what we believe to speak, eat and socialise with people from other faiths?

In what way can we be peacemakers in a world where religion seems to be driving war?

What are the boundaries for the Baptist principle of the freedom of belief?

Resources:

Websites:

BBC Religion

Facts and figures on all the major religions

www.bbc.co.uk/religion

The Interfaith Network

UK Main National Interfaith Organisation

www.interfaith.org.uk

Christian Muslim Forum

Forum for Christian Muslim relations

www.christianmuslimforum.org.uk

The Council of Christians and Jews

Forum for Christian Jewish Dialogue

www.ccj.org.uk

St Philip's Centre, Leicester

Resources and training

www.stphilipscentre.dioceseofleicester.com

Derby Multifaith Centre

Resource Centre at the University of Derby

www.multifaithcentre.org

St Ethelburga's Centre, London

Centre for Reconciliation and Peace

www.stethelburgas.org

Books:

- 1 Good reasonably priced introductions to all the major traditions are to be found in the **Very Short Introduction** series published by Oxford University Press:
<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/nav/p/category/academic/series/general/vsi/R/browse+within+this+series/religion+%26+bibles/n/4294921803.do?sortBy=bookTitleAscend&nType=2>
- 2 Two SCM Core Texts are useful for ministers or those with some background in theological or religious study:

World Religions

Authors: T Robinson and H Rodrigues

Publisher: SCM Press London (2006)

ISBN: 978 0 33404 014 9

RRP: £23.99

Christian Approaches to Other Faiths

Authors: A Race and P Hedges
Publisher: SCM Press London (2008)
ISBN: 978 0 33404 114 6
RRP: £25.00

See www.scmpress.co.uk

- 3 Oneworld Publications has a number of helpful studies on religions including:

Inter-Religious Dialogue: A Short Introduction

Author: M Forward
Publisher: Oneworld Publications Oxford (2001)
ISBN: 978 1 85168 275 1
RRP: £9.99

See www.oneworld-publications.com/pbooks/inter-religious-dialogue-9781851682751

- 4 Some of the hardest questions around the issue of interfaith relations, and a hopeful vision of the reconciliation that Jesus offers to our multi-faith world are tackled in:

Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-faith World

Author: Brian McLaren
Publisher: Hodder & Stoughton (2012)
ISBN: 978 1 44470 367 2
RRP: £12.99

- 5 Churches Together in England publish a regularly updated resource list available online at:

www.churches-together.net/Articles/131868/Churches_Together_in/Working_Together/Inter_faith/Publications/from_Churches_Together/Inter_Faith_Resources.aspx

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