

The Bible, Jesus and other faiths

Commenting on the person of Jesus, Mark Goodacre (Senior Lecturer, University of Birmingham) writes: *"That such a person could have become so significant in world history is remarkable. But how much can we know with certainty about the Jesus of history? How reliable are the New Testament accounts about him? Opinions vary widely among scholars and students of the Bible "*.

How do you react to this quotation?

I strongly suspect that, in large measure, our attitude to people of other faiths is determined by who we think that Jesus is and what his ultimate purpose was. John Bell (a leader in the Iona Community) writes: *"It's difficult to know how much of what's written in the Gospels is an insight into how Jesus saw himself and how much is comment of other people as to how they saw Jesus"*.

I was brought up and trained in a theological tradition for which the words of John 3v16 *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life"* were paramount. It was assumed that Jesus was the unique and sole meaningful expression of God. Other passages also suggested a uniqueness that was beyond question...John 14v6 *"I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life. No-one comes to the Father except through me"*; also Acts 4v12 *"There is salvation in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved"*. And yet I must acknowledge the presence of so many believers who look to another source of inspiration under God.

How can it be true that so many are deceiving themselves?

What do we mean by salvation?

Is salvation something that has already been 'won' for us, or is it something that requires a lifelong effort on our part?

Mark Goodacre again, "*The big question about Jesus is did Jesus think of himself as Messiah, did he believe he was the distinctive person that had a really pivotal role to play in God's plan*".

How would you respond to Jesus' own question - who do people say that I am?

Three positions have been suggested that the Christian faith might adopt in its viewpoint on other faiths:

- **Exclusivist** - as its title suggests, those who belong to this camp take the view that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is able to bring us to the realisation of salvation. The texts I mentioned above would be conclusive.
- **Inclusivist** - here would be those who say that Jesus speaks for all people and includes all, irrespective of class, race or creed. They would take their inspiration from St John's notion of Jesus as the *Logos*, the Word of God. This *Logos* is identified with the Spirit that moved at the time of creation and which is beyond the close confines of the Christian Church alone.
- **Pluralist** - the view here is that Jesus is a pathway to God for Christians but that those of other faiths have their own equally valid pathways. A musical analogy would be that of singers singing together in harmony rather than unison; what sounds very different when heard in isolation, together makes for an uplifting whole.

What merit, or otherwise, would you give to each of these positions, and why?

You should also note that other faiths are not unaware of Jesus....

- Islam has 93 references to *Isa* in the Qur'an. His birth of the Virgin Mary is attested...in fact there are more verses referring to *Maryam* in the Qur'an than there are in the Bible! Jesus is acknowledged as a prophet, is accorded greater miraculous powers than given in the New Testament, and his return is expected as a sign of the end times. Muslims would say that it is not possible to be a Muslim without believing in Jesus.. however, Jesus is not believed to be more than a prophet, *Allah* has no son and is indivisible.
- Hinduism easily accepts Jesus as one of their Gods. It is a commonplace to hear Hindus speak of their respect for Jesus.

Many temples have pictures of Jesus alongside other divine representations. What is difficult for a Hindu is the notion of exclusivity that the Christian faith suggests. Some Hindus find it possible to respond to the Christian faith whilst still remaining as Hindus. I have also read of a Christian minister who also serves as a Hindu priest whilst visiting India.

- Sikhs can relate to the suffering and death of Jesus, as many of their gurus have also experienced much at the hands of others. They can also relate to Jesus as a teacher and to the Bible, as Sikhism values the place of teaching.
- A Buddhist nun who converted to Buddhism in her thirties, Ajahn Candasiri, reflects once more on the faith of her upbringing through (now) Buddhist eyes:
 - *"Well, I have to say that he (Jesus) comes across as being much more human than I remember. Although there is much said about him being the son of God, somehow that doesn't seem nearly as significant to me as the fact that he is a person - a man of great presence, enormous energy and compassion, and significant psychic abilities. He also has a great gift for conveying spiritual truth in the form of images, using the most everyday things to illustrate point he wishes to make: bread, fields, corn, salt, children, trees. People don't always understand at once, but are left with an image to ponder. Also he has a mission - to re-open the Way to eternal life; and he's quite uncompromising in his commitment to, as he puts it, 'carrying out his Father's will.'"*
- Jews will, largely, acknowledge Jesus as a great moral teacher in the tradition of their rabbis. Provided Christians do not insist that the old covenant is annulled by Jesus, there is much that can be shared in the knowledge that Jesus, indeed, lived his life as a Jew.

Wingate quotes Archbishop Rowan Williams from a 2003 lecture:

"Our doctrine is still in formation; and the question of how holy lives can exist outside our own tradition has throughout Christian history led to some of the most searching and far-reaching extensions of our language about the significance of Jesus...we do not see others either as bad or unsuccessful copies of ourselves or as people who have a few casual variants on a shared truth. We have to see how very other our universes are; and only then do we find dialogue a surprise and a joy as we discover where and how we can still talk about what matters most - holiness, being at peace, and what truly is".

How do we respond to this vision of Archbishop Williams?

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