

# Vibrant Christianity in Multifaith Britain



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# Vibrant Christianity in Multifaith Britain

Equipping the church for a faithful  
engagement with people of different faiths

Andrew Smith



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## Introduction

Back in 1978, when I was 11 years old, I used to love watching *Top of the Pops* on a Thursday evening. It was a highlight of the week's TV schedule, which, let's face it, was meagre fare back then. Although I enjoyed the programme, and am now able to watch endless repeats, many of the acts were pretty forgettable. But occasionally one would stand out from the crowd. One such band was Boney M, who suddenly appeared wearing shiny silver jumpsuits and singing a song that I didn't understand but which my parents assured me was from the Bible, with its lyrics about rivers of Babylon and singing the Lord's song. I never really liked the song and thought Boney M looked a bit embarrassing, but it had one of those tunes that gets stuck in your head, irritatingly catchy and unforgettable. One of the lines that I always remembered was 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' Many years later I discovered that the lyrics were indeed from the Bible and came from Psalm 137, referring to the people of Israel's exile in Babylon. They were taken to a 'strange land' where people spoke a different language, ate different food and worshipped foreign gods, and when it was demanded that they sing their worship songs, the Israelites found that they couldn't do it. Being in such a strange place meant that the old songs didn't make sense; indeed, how could they sing the Lord's songs in such a strange country?

Over the past couple of decades I've met with many Christians who have asked how they can make sense of their faith in a country that is home to an increasing number of people from different faith traditions. For many people who grew up in the UK before 2000, the world has changed dramatically, religion is rarely out of the news, usually for all the wrong reasons, and Britain is increasingly

described as a multifaith society. Other faiths, particularly Islam, are much more visible in politics, education, popular culture and the news. Consequently, when people are discussing how to share their faith or what place Christianity has in society many of the old certainties have gone; we are no longer the one dominant religious voice in a sea of unbelief, but one of many – and not always the loudest. For many Christians this raises numerous questions about how they express their faith, through either words or actions. In other words, how do we now sing the Lord's song in this strange land?

This is a journey that I went on back in the mid 1990s in Birmingham. I'd grown up in a Christian family, attending a big evangelical church in the south of England, but until I was about 28 I'd never actually met someone who was a member of a different faith. At school in the 1980s, pretty much everyone rejected the idea of God or religion and there was a general view that all religion was slowly dying out. If Christians had ever taught me anything about other religions, it was that they were inferior to Christianity and that there was no spirituality in them; rather, they were purely ritualistic. Our job as Christians was to tell people of other faiths about Jesus, because then they would be spiritually fulfilled when they became Christians. This made sense to me, until I actually met some Muslims. I met some people who loved being Muslim, talked about faith in spiritual rather than ritualistic terms and articulated very clearly how they found spiritual fulfilment within Islam. Obviously a young Christian turning up and preaching simplistic sermons at them was not what they were looking for. Consequently, like so many others, I started to ask the question in one form or other: 'How do I sing the Lord's song in this strange land?'

Having only ever mixed with secular people, I'd never had to work out how I related to or understood the faith of others. In many ways it challenged the simplistic notions of faith and Christianity that I had. Here were people who thought religion was a good thing and weren't expecting it to die out; they believed in God, prayed, read

scriptures, went to a place of worship, wanted to tell others about their faith and thought that their faith should inform the way they lived. It all seemed really close, yet vastly different, to the Christian faith that I experienced. One consequence was that I asked big questions of the Christian faith. Was Jesus ‘the way and the truth and the life?’ What was it that made Christianity unique? How did the message of the gospel relate to people who seemed to be quite godly people yet denied that Jesus was the Son of God?

These are some of the questions that this book will seek to answer. Since that time, I have got to know and become friends with people of many different faiths, including Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists and Jews. I have spoken to large numbers of Christians trying to make sense of the changing world and wanting to ‘sing the Lord’s song’ in ways that make sense to people of different faiths, yet not sure what words to use or how to get started. I’ve also come to realise that there are many different ways in which Christians answer these questions, often disagreeing quite strongly about what we should be doing and how we should go about doing it.

Although there are now many people engaging with those of other faiths in creative and interesting ways, I firmly believe that this is a task for the whole church and not just a few interfaith experts or specialised cross-cultural missionaries. Having spent over 20 years trying to share my faith and be a witness to the good news of Jesus with people of different faiths, I can honestly say that it’s been rewarding, fun, frustrating, disappointing and enriching in equal measure (and this is true of my work with churches over that time as well). My faith in Christ has been deepened; I’ve made some really good friends and I’ve also changed the way I read the Bible. I find myself asking, ‘What would my Sikh friend think if she read this passage?’ or ‘How would this sound to a Buddhist?’

I’ve also gone back to scripture time and again to interrogate it for myself, to try to discern what God might be saying to me in the context of multifaith issues or in relation to specific questions

or challenges. Sometimes I've discovered passages that I haven't noticed before, but more often I've rediscovered more well-known texts or found God speaking to me in new ways through them. One such text is Luke 6:31, 'Do to others as you would have them do to you.' This saying has been so commonly referred to, often as 'The Golden Rule', that I think we've neglected to consider what it would mean to obey it. When considering what it means to live a vibrant Christian life among people of different faiths, I've discovered that this verse is deeply challenging and really helpful. Do I want people to listen to me talk about my faith? If the answer is yes, then I need to do the same to them and listen to them talk about their faith. Do I want people to visit my church? If so, then I need to be willing to visit their gurdwara or mosque. Not only did the verse challenge me to think differently when I started this ministry, it also reassured me that it's okay to visit a Buddhist vihara or listen to a Hindu explain their faith. Jesus wants me to treat them as I want to be treated.

I've also been aware of how little I know. I have a simple rule that's stood me in good stead for 20 years and that I'll pass on to you. All I do is smile and ask. That's it really. Whether I want to know why a Hindu temple has a deity that I haven't seen before or why a Muslim friend is fasting, all I do is smile and ask. So far no one's been offended or upset; usually it leads to a conversation that goes in all sorts of directions. So, if you remember one thing from this book, use this as a way of getting to know and understand different faiths: just smile and ask.

## 1

## What do we think of other faiths?

### A spiritual scale?

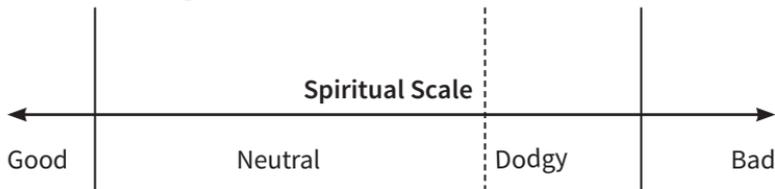
*A young man thinks he's got everything: money, power, youthful good looks, but still feels uneasy about his life. All those big questions about who he is, what will happen when he dies and what the purpose of life is keep haunting him. Then one day he hears that the rabbi that everyone's talking about, famous as a great preacher and miracle worker, is in town. So, the young man rushes off and to his surprise gets right up close to him. He blurts out the first thing that comes to mind. 'Good teacher,' he calls out, 'what must I do to receive eternal life?' He's hoping for a resolution to this most perplexing question, but when the answer comes it's not what he's looking for. Although he insists that he keeps God's laws, this new preacher takes him by surprise. 'Go,' he calmly says, 'and sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor, then come and follow me.' The young man is stunned. When he said 'eternal life,' he meant in the future, after he'd died; he wasn't expecting it to affect the way he uses his money now. So, he has only one option: he turns and walks away.*

That story from Matthew 19:16–26 highlights many people's starting point when thinking about how Christians relate to people of other faiths. The questions they have are all about what people must do to receive eternal life. But usually this is code for 'who is going to be in heaven?' Typically, these questions are about whether people of different faiths will get into heaven, and what about people of different faiths who have never heard the gospel? For some people,

it's clear that no one except Christians will be in heaven; others are less certain, especially if they've started to meet people of other faiths who are living good lives and ones centred on prayer and worship.

These questions also apply to people of no faith, but often they only get asked in reference to encountering people of different faiths. Why is that? Why are we more concerned about these questions when relating to people of faith when they actually apply in all sorts of situations? Before we go on to look at how we might respond to questions of salvation, I want to look at why people tend to get more concerned about them when it comes to thinking about engaging with other religions.

A few years ago I came up with a theory of how many Christians view the world, which I call 'the spiritual scale'. I have described it before, but wanted to expand upon the idea here.<sup>1</sup> I want to show how, I think, it permeates and affects much of the way we view the world, and therefore our engagement with it, and particularly how it affects the way we relate to people of different faiths. The spiritual scale looks something like this:



What do I mean by 'spiritual'? In this instance, I mean things that are in line with God's will and enable us to grow to be more holy. There will be many different interpretations of what God's will is in different situations, and different definitions of 'spiritual'. The idea of the scale is not a method of discerning God's will or defining spirituality, but a way in which, I think, people relate to the world. When we look at the world in this way, some things are considered spiritually good (for example, churches) and other things are considered spiritually bad (which often include other faiths), but much of life

(such as shopping or holidays) is seen as just spiritually neutral. The consequence of viewing the world like this is that we can become uncritical of things that we might consider spiritually good, wary of or hostile to things that we think are spiritually bad, and ignore the impact on us of things that we think are spiritually neutral.

Why do I think people view the world in this way? Because I often meet people who live and talk like this, even though they are usually unaware that that is what they are doing. For example, I often take groups of Christians to visit mosques, gurdwaras or mandirs and, on occasion, people ask if they can pray for spiritual protection before they go in, and many tell me that they were praying for that during the visit. If that's what people need to do in order to feel secure then I'm happy for them to do that, although in my experience no one has ever been spiritually attacked or led into sin during these visits, even if they have found them uncomfortable or challenging. In fact, some pray so hard during the visit I think it might be the best prayer time they've had for a while.

However, after the visit people go off to their usual lives of shopping, watching TV and going online. As they do this, no doubt like many of us they will worry about the clothes they wear or the food they eat despite being commanded not to by Jesus (Matthew 6:25); they will be tempted to be greedy or to look at inappropriate images or to gamble money they can ill afford and so on. But I have never heard anyone suggest that we pray for protection before we go shopping or log on to the Internet or switch on the TV. Why? Because places of worship of other faiths are considered to be spiritually bad, whereas shopping, the Internet and TV are considered neutral or at worst a bit dodgy. By viewing the world as a spiritual scale, they are being uncritical of things considered neutral and critical of things considered bad despite not necessarily having any evidence for this point of view.

Many years ago I was meeting with some Christians to talk about whether we wanted to set up a dialogue meeting with some Muslims.

The idea ground to a halt when someone asked whether we could legitimately work with Muslims on a dialogue programme when really all we wanted to do was convert them. I found this fascinating, as I was fairly sure that if we had met to talk about working with the police on tackling anti-social behaviour in our area, no one would have asked that question about the police. It was one of the first times I realised that Christians were viewing people in very different ways: some as spiritually bad and in need of conversion; others as spiritually neutral, so there was no need to consider sharing the gospel with them.

The final conversation I heard that convinced me that people view the world like this was between two people who had both just finished at a mission college. One had got a job in the local authority and was telling us his concerns about his boss, as he had just found out she was a witch. 'Does that make any difference?' his friend asked. 'Yes,' he replied, 'I'll have to start praying for her *now*.' For some reason, she wasn't worthy of prayer before but now he knew she was a witch he felt compelled to pray. In his mind, she had moved from neutral to bad and so now needed prayer.

At this point I need to say a few things about this spiritual scale. The main point I want to make is that I think it is wrong! I don't think the world can or should be viewed like this or that different religions, organisations or beliefs can be simply categorised as 'spiritually good' or 'spiritually bad'. Despite the fact that viewing the world like this is almost ubiquitous, it's a dangerous way of doing so. What I want to show is why it's so problematic and contrary to biblical teaching.

First, it means we prejudge situations, missing opportunities or challenges they may present. When I'm talking to churches about letting their young people come to a Christian-Muslim youth event I'm running, there are often questions about whether the Muslims will attempt to convert the Christians and many churches are wary about getting involved. Yet when I've run events where Christian and

secular young people are mixing, no one asks these questions. This is a classic case of living by the spiritual scale and, therefore, being blind to the reality of life. When I ask people whether they know any Christians who have joined another faith, usually one or two hands go up. If I then ask if they know any Christians who have just drifted away and become secular, virtually every hand in the room goes up. Yet we are happier for young people to mix with a secular group than a Muslim one. People are leaving the church not, on the whole, to convert to Islam but to drift off into secularism, but because many Christians have a spiritual scale that suggests that other faiths are spiritually bad and secularism is spiritually neutral, they are wary of one and not the other despite evidence that suggests a more complex picture.

I think for Christians to see the world as a spiritual scale is wrong, as I don't think God sees the world like this. While there may be a very few things that can be considered totally bad or totally good from a spiritual perspective, most things are far more complex, with elements that are spiritually good – that is, in line with God's will – and others that are far removed from what God wants. In the Old Testament we read of Nebuchadnezzar, who wreaked such havoc on the people of Judah, besieging and attacking Jerusalem and carrying them into exile in Babylon, where they faced his fiery furnace (Daniel 3). Yet far from being considered as spiritually bad and therefore totally outside God's will, he is frequently described in the book of Jeremiah as God's servant and eventually comes to 'praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven' (Daniel 4:37). Even someone as despotic as Nebuchadnezzar cannot be placed on a spiritual scale and written off as spiritually bad or neutral. Like the rest of us, his character and temperament were far more complex.

Today we can see similar examples in the world around us. A clothes shop might work to make sure its garments are made by people working in good conditions (which would make God happy) while still encouraging us to buy clothes we don't need (not what God might want). My Muslim friends will deny that Jesus is the Son of

God, but they can be exceptionally patient and generous and self-controlled with me, things that God wants. Similarly, churches might be delivering wonderful worship, programmes for young people and creative evangelism, while being uncaring about the elderly or LGBT members of the congregation.

If we're honest, this complexity of being both close to and far away from what God wants describes most of us most of the time. The task we have when engaging with the world, and particularly the world of different faiths, is to keep questioning whether we are using a spiritual scale to determine what we think about a situation, a person, a place or an entire faith. Then we need to ask not whether they are good, bad or neutral, but what we can find in them that is spiritually good. What is there that pleases God that I can celebrate and what displeases God that I need to question or challenge? This can be true for Christians of all traditions. Some Christians I know from the liberal tradition still view the world as a spiritual scale; it's just that what's considered good, neutral or bad is different. But it still results in the same problematic way of engaging with the world. Finally, what I don't think we can do is consider some things to be neutral; all systems, structures or people contain elements that are good and bad, but not neutral.

## Who is going to heaven?

I started this chapter by suggesting that for many Christians this question is their starting point. It's a question that has been written about by a huge number of scholars, and three basic approaches to this have been described. They are usually called exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. I'm going to give a very brief overview, but if you want to read more, some good authors to look at would be Harold Netland and John Hick.<sup>2</sup>

## Exclusivism

This is the belief that Christianity as revealed in the Bible is the only true faith and that accepting Jesus Christ as Lord is the only way to salvation. Other faiths might be morally good, but they contain nothing that will save people from their sins. Heaven is saved for those who believe and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord, and some maintain that only those who consciously commit their lives to Jesus, usually through a prescribed prayer, are saved. This was the orthodox teaching of the church for many centuries and is still a standpoint adopted by many Christians today. While this view, which offers no salvation for people who haven't heard the gospel, might seem harsh to some, exclusivist theologians emphasise God's love and justice – if decisions seem unfair to us, it is because of our limited view and we can trust God's infinite wisdom to get them right.

## Pluralism

Many Christians have found the exclusivist standpoint difficult when meeting devout, godly people from different faiths, or when thinking of those who have never heard the gospel. Would they really be condemned to an eternity of punishment through no fault of their own? How does this sit with a God of love? Pluralism describes different faiths as different ways in which people have sought to worship and respond to the one true God, sometimes described as the 'Ultimate Real'. The faiths are true for those who believe them but are not exclusively true, so there is the possibility of salvation in all faiths. Pluralists want to affirm the beliefs and practices of all faiths but also to suggest that not all faiths are equal (that's relativism). For example, a religion that practised human sacrifice would not be placed on the same level as those that condemn such practices.

## Inclusivism

As the popularity of pluralism grew in the latter half of the 20th century, many Christians who were unhappy with the judgmental

basis of exclusivism were also unhappy with pluralism's denial of the exclusive truth claims made by, and about, Jesus Christ in the Bible. The God who loves the whole world (John 3:16) is also the God who sent his Son Jesus as 'the way and the truth and the life' (John 14:6). There seems to be both a wideness to God's love and an exclusivity to it through Jesus. Inclusivist theologians started to look at how the scriptures describe God at work beyond the church or the people of Israel and to argue that one can see God's Holy Spirit at work in the world and that people might be responding to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, however, it is through the death and resurrection of Jesus that people are saved, whether they acknowledge that or not. Inclusivism argues that if people of different faiths are in heaven (and the presumption is that many will be), it will be because God in his wisdom has judged them to be people living according to his will from the best of their knowledge, and that Jesus' blood was shed for all, so covered them as well. It's almost as if Jesus stands before God the Father and says, 'They're with me.'

Clearly, a brief paragraph on each position does not do justice to the thinking that has gone into these three perspectives, but the aim of this book is not to re-work those arguments. I want to acknowledge that this has been the framework for Christian engagement with other faiths for many years, but also to suggest that for many Christians trying to live out their faith in normal life this isn't always a helpful model. It tends to focus solely on the question of who is saved – in other words, who is going to be in heaven – rather than on other questions, particularly in relation to how we live alongside people of other faiths now.

Each of the standpoints can reinforce the idea of a spiritual scale by placing those who agree with it as spiritually good and those in opposition as spiritually bad. Because the model doesn't deal with other questions about society (such as poverty, injustice and gender issues), those questions are left out of the discussion and so can easily be relegated to the status of spiritually neutral or irrelevant. It's almost as if religion is all about entry tickets to heaven and our task

is to discern who's got the tickets and how we can offer those tickets to others. Like the rich young ruler we thought about at the start of this chapter, we need to learn that following Jesus isn't just about entry tickets to heaven but is also about life now; for him eternal life included giving all he had to the poor. For us eternal life might include befriending someone of another faith. Asking who is going to be in heaven might be an important question, but it certainly isn't the only question we need to ask, nor is it the only question Jesus ever asked us to consider.

For some Christians, moving from a spiritual scale to a more flexible approach where we try to discern positives and negatives in all situations and people is challenging. We can feel uncomfortable moving away from the certainty of 'we're right and they're wrong'. Being willing to recognise our own frailties and failings and then also to acknowledge the good and positive in others is a big ask for many people. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges in encountering people of other faiths is the realisation that we are not living the life Jesus has called us to. Seeing the example of others should, in the words of a Muslim friend of mine, 'spur us on into acts of righteousness' – drawing us closer to Jesus, not further away.

So, who is going to heaven? I actually think that question needs quite a lot of unpacking, which is what I'm going to do over the next few chapters. Also, there are other questions the Bible poses that are just as important and that shed light on this issue and impact the way we behave towards people of different faiths.

## Questions

- Think about the way you view different aspects of your life or people you meet. Do you put them on a spiritual scale?
- Draw out the scale and write down where you often place the things you do or the situations or people you encounter. Now

try to look at each of those things and identify the good to be encouraged or the bad to be challenged in each of them. Where did you put other faiths? Has this affected the way you see them?

- What are the questions you have when you think about encountering people of different faiths? What might Jesus be challenging you to ask?



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