

US AND OTHERS

Stephen Skuce

STEPHEN SKUCE CONSIDERS WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM SCRIPTURE ABOUT HOW PEOPLE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH ENGAGE WITH THOSE WHO FOLLOW OTHER FAITHS.

We live in a world where people believe almost everything, do almost anything in the name of faith, follow a bewildering range of religions and where huge numbers have no faith understanding of any significance to them. Some want to argue that God loves all therefore all are acceptable to God, irrespective of faith or understanding. Others want to narrow the scope of true faith to those who are explicitly Christian, and then often narrower than that, to include those who believe basically the same as them. There isn't really a neat middle space, and even if there was that wouldn't make it the obvious way forward. Belief can often seem extreme to those who don't share the same view.

How do we as Christians understand our place in this mosaic? And can we learn about this from the story of the Magi?

GOD ISN'T AS SINGLE-MINDED AS WE SOMETIMES THINK.

For the last couple of generations, we have recognised, better than our predecessors, that God is in charge, not us. We express this in part by 'missio Dei' – the understanding that God has a mission, and we join in with this, rather than a previous view which at times gave the understanding that the church had a mission and this was how God worked in the world. We were his hands, feet and mouthpiece. Of course, that isn't quite the case. Attempting to limit God has never been a smart move.

In many ways God acts indiscriminately. John 1:9 reminds us that Jesus, the Light of the World, brings light to all people, not just those who respond to his grace; and this is where the wise men or magi come in. We actually know very little about these people (Matthew 2:1-12), but we are fairly sure they were from outside the Jewish tradition. Despite that, they were able to discern God, know that God wanted something from them, know that this was worth travelling hundreds of miles, hear God speak through dreams and in the stars, and have the wit to do what God was saying.

JESUS IS THE ONLY SAVIOUR.

We are a scriptural people and that means we try to understand and live our lives by the full Bible, not just our few favourite texts. Nor do we let our assumptions dominate how we read the Bible, it's the other way around. So, we go back to the magi, who clearly had some sort of relationship with God that enabled them to hear, understand and follow him. What does scripture say when these people encountered Jesus? They recognised him, worshipped, bowed down and gave the gifts they had with them (Matthew 1:11).

One understanding of this story is that this moment was the coming to saving faith of the magi. This is basically my view, but I do note that the magi weren't rejecting their existing beliefs or practices. There must have been further faith development when they returned home, as they sought to make sense of what it meant to be a worshipper

and follower of Jesus. But they didn't reject their pre-existing faith perspective, as that had been the means in which they had been able to find Jesus and respond to him.

WE NEED TO SHARE GOOD NEWS WITH EVERYONE.

We don't know anything more about the magi. There are various traditions, and these include the magi eventually being martyred for their witness to Jesus. But we don't know. What we do know is that most who meet with Jesus want to tell others about what they have experienced. The Book of Acts is testimony to this, as the Christian faith was primarily spread around the Roman empire by traders, servants, soldiers and slaves, rather than by professional missionaries. And, of course, it was the same in the era of the British empire. Should we, today, include sincere followers of other faiths among those we tell about Jesus?

The majority of those recorded on a national census as Muslim will be expressing a cultural heritage and sense of belonging that is shared with most who describe themselves as Christian in the same census. This is not to denigrate the faith being expressed, but a recognition that, as John Wesley fully understood, there are degrees of faith which include fairly tenuous cultural associations. But, what about the Muslim who is sincere, moral, faithful, prayerful and generous. Do they need to be introduced to Christ?

The Methodist answer is yes. One of the great words that the Wesley brothers emphasised was 'all'. All need Christ. Those who don't follow Jesus as Lord and Saviour need to know him. We don't need to challenge the beliefs of any others and we can accept many who follow other faiths to be in a relationship with God. We need to share the good news with all so that all can discover a saving relationship, and the generosity of this is that we don't exclude anyone. The good news is for all.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION / GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Can we recognise God at work today in the lives of those who are not followers of Jesus?
2. How does the Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace relate to God at work in the lives of those who are not his followers?
3. Is there a difference between a relationship with God and a saving relationship with God?
4. What was John Wesley's relationship with God prior to 24 May 1738 and does this say anything about how we relate to people who follow other faiths?
5. How do we understand the encounter between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10-11?
6. Are there ways in which we can work with people of other faiths?