

Spirituality, in a Multi Faith Society

An introduction
to differing
spiritual doctrines and practice

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Warning: This document is merely an introduction to different spiritual doctrines and practice. In no way does the information herein qualify you as an expert. You should speak with members of the faith groups mentioned to gain a truer understanding of their spirituality.

Introduction

“Operation World” identifies some 5% of the population of the U.K. as belonging to non-judeo-Christian faiths. These faiths include Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism and various other faith groups. The majority of these other faiths are practised by people of non-European ethnic origins, and the majority population of these ethnic groups are in the 4-30 years age range. Clearly, there is a need for the Church and Christian youth workers to have an understanding of the spiritual beliefs and practices of this significant minority of people. Unfortunately, much that is written about other faiths by Christians tends to have a somewhat slanted perspective, with only one goal in mind -“How do we get them into church? I lose count of the number of books and articles which portray Hindus, Muslims, Rastafari and others as “tools of the devil”, leading astray the young people of this country. The words are never as blunt as this but the intent is certainly there.

Generally, the purpose of Christian books about other faiths is how “we Christians” can identify the doctrinal or intellectual weaknesses in those faiths and use that information to undermine peoples’ (beliefs in those faiths) so that they turn to Christ. Please let me make clear that although I am a Christian, I find such approaches distasteful. Besides, I have found that there are huge doctrinal and intellectual weaknesses in the faith of many Christians too. Many would be unable to explain their understanding of Christian fundamentals such as the Trinity, the nature of the Gospel or the role of the Church. The main problem in Christian exploration of other faiths, however, is the confusion between doctrine and practice. Some Christian books and articles compare the Christian doctrine of Monotheism with the Hindu practice of idol worship not considering the Christian practice of prayer to saints or the Hindu doctrine of Brahman and the Trimurti. Or we will condemn the Rastafarian practice of smoking Marijuana while accepting the legitimacy of Christian ecstatic experience. My hope is that in reading this booklet Christians will be more willing to try and understand the faith and practice of non-European, non-Christian groups; validating their experience, while not necessarily accepting the validity of their religion.

For the purposes of this booklet I have chosen to look closely at four faiths: Hinduism, Islam, Rastafari, and Nation of Islam. Each faith will be considered in terms of doctrine and practice. After this overview of other faiths I will consider the principles of working with people of other faiths. I will conclude with a selection of questions which I hope will spark fresh thinking and with a bibliography of sensible books about other faiths and faith groups.

Four understandings of spirituality

Hinduism

Doctrine: Often perceived as polytheistic. However, actually monotheistic at heart. One God, Brahman, who has a triune godhead, the Trimurti, of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu. All other 'gods' and 'goddesses' are expressions of this Trimurti. Brahman is unknowable except through the agency of his Trimurti. It/they is/are the means by which Brahman associates with our human natures. The human soul (atman) is drawn from Brahman and the purpose of existence (inasmuch as there is a purpose) is for the atman to return to Brahman.

However, two things stand in the way of this; the illusion that this universe is reality (Maya) and the cosmic balance between one's good and bad deeds (Karma). (Note: Karma also refers to the cosmic law of cause and effect.) Humans are fooled by the illusion that this physical universe is true reality, when in fact, the only true reality is Brahman. Our attachment to this illusion of reality leads us into attachment to 'worldly' desires and values, which in turn leads us into deeds which prevent our souls from finding the peace (Shanti) which they desire. Humans can 'earn' good karma by doing good deeds, leading an ascetic lifestyle, or by devotion (bhakti) to a particular 'god' or teacher (guru). Hopefully, by performing enough good or 'right' deeds one can gain enough good karma to earn release/salvation (moksha) for the soul at death. This release means freedom from a body and return to the source of life, Brahman. Failure to earn sufficient good karma in this life means that upon death the soul will transmigrate to another host body, usually that of a lesser animal or that of a human from a lesser caste. The cycle of birth, death, rebirth continues until the soul achieves moksha. A Hindu can never really know if he/she has earned sufficient good karma to achieve moksha.

Practice: Daily ritual ablutions and devotions to a chosen 'god' (e.g. Rama, Krishna, Ganesh) and/or chosen guru (e.g. Sai Baba). Offerings of sweetmeats, flowers and prayers are made to the chosen deity. Worship of a god or gods may also be performed at a Hindu temple (mandir). Religious festivals observed include feast days of particular gods and goddesses. The Hindu festival most known to westerners is the festival of Diwali. Every Hindu is bound by duty (dharma) to a particular station and role in life which he/she is compelled to fulfil to the best of his/her ability.

Islam

Doctrine: There is but one God and His name is Allah, Mohammed is His messenger. Mohammed is the final prophet of God. God does not have human form neither has He ever been born as a human and neither has He ever had a son. Human beings are born sinless. Adam and Eve did sin, in heaven after being tempted by Satan (Shayton), but were forgiven and sent down to earth by Allah. However, humans do sin. God's forgiveness is earned by doing good and right deeds. Ultimately, however, one's fate (Kismet) is decreed by Allah. The only human who lived a sinless life was the prophet Jesus.

Upon death souls are taken to Barzakh (place/state of waiting) where they will wait until the day of judgement. Allah will judge the living and the dead and some will go to paradise while others will go to hell. There are spirit beings such as angels and jinns. Jinns are spirit forces made of fire and angels are God's messengers. The Qur'an is the revealed word of God, spoken directly by Allah Mohammed. Jewish and Christian scriptures were inspired by God but have been corrupted by humans and are therefore

untrustworthy. There is a special kind of sin called Shirk. This is the likening of God to any created thing. The Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity are examples of Shirk. Mohammed was the messenger of God, the last in a long line of prophets stretching back to Adam. Jesus (Isa) will return to earth and shatter the image of the cross and declare his submission to Allah.

Practice: There are five major obligations for every muslim. These are known as the Five Pillars of Islam.

Belief in, and recitation of the Kalima (creed).

“There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is the prophet of Allah”.

Ritual prayer five times a day (additional prayer at other times during the day is encouraged too).

Fasting. Abstention from food, drink, smoking and sexual intercourse from dawn to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan.

Giving of alms. This is called Zakat (purification).

Pilgrimage to Mecca (Haji). Obligatory to all those who can afford it once in a lifetime.

In addition to the above, Muslims will refrain from eating pork; they may marry either Jews, Christians or Muslims but must raise any children as muslims. Some ‘stricter’ muslim groups have particular rules relating to the status, dress and behaviour of women.

Rastafari

Doctrine: Black people are the reincarnation of ancient Israel (through a union between king Solomon and the queen of Sheba-Ethiopian=Israelite). Having offended God they were exiled to Jamaica. Their time of punishment is over but the white man has used trickery to prevent a return to Africa. The slavery of the black race is primarily mental. Redemption includes the breaking of this mental enslavement as well as physical enslavement. All white structures, authority and culture are a part of ‘Babylon’, the enslaver of blacks. Rastafari must reject Babylon. White people are inferior to black people. They are the oppressors. While the black race in Africa (Ethiopia and Egypt) were discovering science and civilisation the whites (Europeans) were living in caves. However, white people are not all evil, some become Rastafari. The Emperor Haile Selassie I is the true and living God. He is the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Lion of the Tribe of Judah and descendant of King David. He lives and is with the Rastafari in all that they do. (Note: Ras Tafari was the birth name of Emperor Haile Selassie). Ras Tafari is even now arranging for the return of Africans exiled, in Jamaica, to Africa. In the near future black people will rule the earth. The God whom blacks worship is called Jah (from Jehovah) and is different from the god whom the whites worship, who is not god but the devil. There is no death for he who remains true to Jah. Rastas who die do so because they have wavered in their loyalty to Jah. Ganja (Marijuana) is the holy herb given by Jah to man and is used as an aid to meditation.

Practice: Regular meetings for prayer worship and fellowship. In Jamaica, the main meeting is the Nyabingi, which is akin to a convention, held on a monthly basis. Diet is mainly vegetarian. However meat is eaten, but never pork. Cutting of hair is discouraged, the long plaited/matted hair is called “dreadlocks”. Meditation (accompanied by smoking of ganja), prayer and reading of the Bible are practised. However, the Bible (Old Testament) has been distorted by whites and is only able to be correctly interpreted by the Rasta. All human beings are to be treated with care and compassion; albeit black people first and then white people.

Nation of Islam

Doctrine: There is only one God and his name is Allah. Elijah Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. The former prophet Mohammed was but a 'reflection' of Elijah Muhammad. Allah is male and black. He created humans as righteous beings, partakers of His own dignity and black. All black people are 'gods'. The evil white race was created as the result of an experiment, by the black scientist Yakub. The white race was forced into Europe and became 'apes'. Heaven= Hereafter. The time when the dominance of the evil white race will end and the true humans, blacks, will once again rule the earth. Resurrection is a mental resurrection. The recognition of the black man's true origins, status and destiny. The Muslim Qur'an will be superseded by a new 'Book'.

Practice: Very similar to orthodox Islam. Daily prayers, regular congregational worship, affirmation of a creed and dietary restrictions. There is a black focus to the religion. Projects to encourage the education and employment of blacks by blacks are encouraged. Teaching focuses on the 'mysteries' of true black nature and destiny. Segregation of races is encouraged and mixed race marriages and friendships are rejected. However, it is important to note the differences from orthodox Islam in both practice and doctrine. Large rallies in predominantly black areas are held, with well known (in black circles) Nation members speaking (e.g. Leo Chester). Much active recruitment among black young people.

Working with people of other faiths

1. Be clear about your motives

Consider this question: *“Do you love me because you want to save me, or do you want to save me because you love me?”* Your motivation for working with someone of another faith group must be love, first and last. I have seen too many examples of Christian ‘outreach’, ‘evangelism’ and ‘community care programmes’ that simply treated people as targets for proselytism rather than as objects of genuine love and affection. If you just want to see ‘souls saved’, forget working with people of other faiths, you will simply do more damage than good.

2. Know what you believe

If you don’t understand your own faith (doctrine and practice), how can you share it with someone else? If you don’t know how to answer a particular question about your faith, admit it and find out what the answer is from those who do know.

3. Do not confuse Christian doctrine with western church practice.

Please avoid cultural arguments. For example; wearing a shirt and tie when preaching is western church convention, not Christian doctrine. Equally, seating men and women separately in a Sikh Temple is Punjabi convention and different than the Sikh doctrine that men and women are equal in (God’s) sight.

4. Don’t get involved in philosophical arguments.

Simply put, you will be approaching things from different philosophical perspectives than say a Muslim or a Hindu. More likely than not you will also be outclassed.

5. Meet people’s needs

Christian witness and mission is about more than peoples’ souls. Physical, emotional, intellectual and community needs also require a response.

6. Consider the cost of conversion

For example; a Muslim girl who becomes a Christian, or who begins to read the Bible, risks having her whole life shattered. Indeed, she may be risking her life. This is a huge price to pay. Are you willing to become a new parent/sister/family for that girl? Will you be willing to take on the burden of looking after her, give her a new home, have her family knocking on your door, stand between her and people who may want to harm her? If not, don’t encourage her along the Christian path. Furthermore, what about her family? They may be ostracised by their community, their business may suffer, brothers and sisters may find it difficult to get a marriage partner. Who supports the family ?

7. Think community, not individual

Most of the non-Christian faith groups in this country emphasise the community. The Christian church tends to emphasise the individual.

Changing from one to the other can make one very lonely. Beware of this. Work with communities, not individuals, whenever possible.

Pause for thought

The following questions are in no particular order of priority. They are here to encourage you to think about the issue of spirituality in a multi-faith context. Having read the four different types of spiritual understandings, above; think how your own understanding of spiritual doctrine is formed and how this understanding affects your spiritual practice, or whether your practice affects your understanding of doctrine.

1. Who answers the prayers of a Hindu mother praying for her son's success in his exams?
2. How might Christians be able to use the festival of Diwali as an opportunity for making friends with Hindu or Sikh neighbours and talking about Jesus?
3. How would a Christian respond to the Muslim accusation that Christians worship three gods? (Careful, this is a trick question!)
4. How valid is the Nation of Islam's claim that white people are 'devils'?
5. What factors might have contributed to this idea?
6. Has the UK ever been a 'Christian country'?
7. Is 'duty' a spiritual concept and/or obligation?
8. Why do Christian artists persist in presenting Jesus as a white man?
9. Why does the western church not object to this?
10. Is image more important than truth?
11. Is work a spiritual concept and/or obligation?
12. Who comes first; your family or your church family?
13. Is Jah the same as Jehovah?
14. Are green politics influenced by Hindu spiritual concepts?
15. Is politics subject to spiritual discipline?
16. If so, what is the spirit of the age?
17. Is there such a thing as religious racism?
18. Is it possible to have a Christian state?
19. Are exclusively Christian media involved in a form of segregation?
20. What religious message does 'Gangsta Rap' have to offer?
21. What do you think of the Rastafari concept of 'Babylon'?
22. How might the church have contributed to this?
23. Malcolm X (Nation of Islam) and Bob Marley (Rastafari) were both from Christian families. What factors might have been at work in their move to the particular new faiths that they chose?
24. How are culture and faith linked?
25. Is the Muslim Allah the same God as Yahweh (Jehovah)?
26. Is the Muslim Allah the same God as the Nation of Islam Allah?
27. Is spirituality taught or intuitive?
28. What can Christians learn from Islam, Hinduism, Rastafari and Nation of Islam?
29. Do you pray to God daily?
30. What have you learned from this booklet?

Please Remember:

This booklet is merely a primer, intended to get you thinking. Some of the questions are deliberately provocative, please don't get too upset.