

EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP FOR LESBIAN AND GAY CHRISTIANS

THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE

FR BRIAN SMITH

THE BIBLE AND ME - AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP?

SETTING OUT THE TASK

I hope this is going to be a difficult weekend, introducing some concepts that may be new to most of you, but that will be of value to explore further in our common quest for the truth about God, and our perception that God loves us and is concerned for our welfare. If you are looking for a multiplicity of quotations from the Bible with full chapter and verse references, I am sorry to disappoint you. For me, that sort of thing is reserved for learned papers and examinations, and is not an appropriate way to deal with the Bible in the daily round of Christian living.

What I am attempting to do this weekend is to give you an idea of how to approach the corpus of literature that we know as the Holy Bible. It may well produce more questions than answers, but I hope it will stimulate you to explore some of these concepts further.

Doubtless there will be many questions. However, my experiences of such conferences is that questions often turn into statements and expressions of opinion, that can waste the short amount of time that we have available. I earnestly advise you, even if you have a question arising from discussion, to write that question down. This will ensure that the question is relevant, clear and well formulated. If I cannot provide an immediate answer, I shall be happy to research the matter, and give you a more informed response at some future date.

I also think it is only fair that I begin with a few notes about my own personal pilgrimage, so that you can see how I have arrived at the way I think today and, in particular, in my approach to the Bible.

Doubtless you will already have read the two articles that have been reproduced in the recent *Fellowship* newsletter. From them, you should have some sense of the way I think and even some of my conclusions.

To begin with, then, you should know that I was not brought up in a Christian family. In fact, on the one occasion, at the age of eight, when I followed the band up the hill and into church for the Remembrance Day service, I received a 'good hiding' for my pains.

I lived very close to Wembley Stadium and managed to get into a Billy Graham Crusade in 1954 or 1955. I came away with a copy of Saint John's Gospel, and an instruction to read ten verses every day; and a signed photograph of the Man himself. I was not aware at the time, but later began to understand that the way such jamborees work is to convince people that they are ill, and then - hey presto! - to be in a position to sell them the cure.

My conversion experience was not the Damascus Road type, nor was it the result of any great preaching. It was a gradual and, I believe, a planned progress. Over many years my soil was nurtured and enriched by people and experiences; seeds were sown and eventually germinated; some of them, I suspect, are still waiting to blossom and bear fruit.

By the age of 23 I was ready to take the final step and be baptised, and soon afterwards to offer myself for training as an Anglican priest.

In all this, the Bible played very little part. The prime movers were experiences and, above all, people: people who, by their attitudes and way of life, impressed me so much that a desire was awoken in me to wish to follow them.

At about the same time I also began to discover my sexuality. But it was not about being gay. It revolved around old men who met in a club in Mayfair; younger men in a couple of bars in the West End of London; and the school caretaker who played with the boys in his workshop. It was a confusing time, for these were the images offered me, but did not match my inner emotions. It was at a Church Army evangelistic weekend that I learned more about my true sexuality and its implications (I am glad they did not have CCTV in Hyde Park in those days!). I met someone on that weekend who had been summarily dismissed from theological training, along with many others, and whose college I was to enter the following year. From that moment I understood that being gay and Christian were both such very important facets of my God-given make up that neither should ever be compromised.

I soon became aware of the ‘don’t tell’ mentality within society at large and in the Church, but integrity demanded another approach. From then on, the only reason I would hide my sexuality would be if, by its disclosure, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God would be impeded. The watchword was to be a prophetic one, ‘integrity’, and it remains my mantra to this day. And it is with this four syllable word constantly in mind that I began my adventure into the examination of doctrine, ethics and, of course, the Bible.

I believe that it is in ignoring integrity that many people’s relationship to the Bible is abusive, both to themselves, and to those who struggled to understand God’s attempt to make himself known, and to communicate that struggle in the written word.

The training at Kelham Theological College was intense for 4½ years. At first I was quite mystified by terms such as ‘The Pentateuch’, the ‘Synoptic Gospels’, and so on. I thought ‘prophecy’ was about foretelling the future, but soon discovered that was ‘clairvoyance’. The Bible was a complete mystery to me. This was all to the good, for I could approach its study with an open mind, unlike many of my fellow students, whose minds had long been made up about the Scriptures and their meaning. Apart from cramming for examinations, I never really began to study the Bible in any real depth until I had been a priest for almost three years, and for that the principles underlying the Kelham training system stood me in good stead.

The Kelham method was to tear up everything you knew, and replace it with something far more durable and soundly based; but it was done within the context of psalmody, prayer, liturgy, housework, teamwork and community living. For someone coming from an undisciplined life, it was heaven; and I was eager to learn.

When I was ordained I had to swear to abide by the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion as laid down in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Number Six of those Articles *Of the Sufficiency of the holy Scriptures for Salvation*, reads as follows:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

There were two reasons, both contained within the said holy Scriptures, which meant that I could do this with a clear conscience. You are in luck, for here you have two quotations: *John 16.12-13* and *2 Timothy 3.15-16*. Firstly, God will always be revealing something new, or showing us how to understand what he has once made known to us, but in a new way. Secondly, that *scripture* simply means *writings* and is not the same as *sacred writings*. *2 Timothy* makes us use not only history, poetry and prophecy, but suggests

a use for *Mein Kampf*, Agatha Christie's novels and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. For each tells us something about the vagaries of human nature, about social relationships, and about the wonders of God's world.

It continues to surprise me that even some of the most knowledgeable people are not aware that the Bible is a collection of literature that spans many centuries, and is derived from varied cultural milieus, so I repeat that here.: it is not a book, but a collection. Nor do we know of an original copy to refer to. All we have are shreds of text from different parts of the Near East and a few codices; references in secular writings; translations into various languages made at various times. From such a diverse collection come the versions we use today. In particular the King James Version is an amalgam of the Latin Vulgate, the tenth century CE Hebrew Old Testament, and some Greek New Testament copies. The current version used by the mainstream churches using the Common Lectionary is the New Revised Standard Version, and makes use of the fruits of the latest linguistic research.

We have become so used to the printed word that many people are completely unaware of how the Bible was originally transmitted - by the scribes who laboriously copied the texts, often without understanding them. By researching into the origins of extant texts we can draw up 'families' of copies of copies, showing how alterations have been made, and copied onwards, sometimes to suit the particular understanding of the communities within which the copying took place.

What is also not often appreciated is that the earliest text we have of the Old Testament only goes back as far as the 7th century CE. The Masoretic Text, where the consonants are accompanied by vowels, was not made until the 10th century CE, and who is to say they put in the right vowels, for occasionally the wrong meaning can be given by such means. The texts we have of the New Testament go back for the most part to the 2nd century CE. Discoveries sixty years ago known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, have turned up older copies of some of the books of the Old Testament, which show how alterations must have been made during the Christian Era (I refer particularly to parts of Deuteronomy), apparently in order not to give Christians more ammunition in their divinisation of Jesus.

What I am saying, in effect, is that you cannot take a verse from the Old Testament and say, 'God said . . .'; just as you cannot take a verse from the Gospel and say, 'Jesus said . . .'. The closest you can get is to say something like, 'The author of such a Gospel reported Jesus as saying . . .'. Joachim Jeremias wrote a book in which he attempted to analyse the Gospels to tease out the sayings that were most probably the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. I am not sure of the value of such a labour, but I do remember reading it!

One simple example may help to make my point most clearly. If a language is no longer in use, the only way you can find out what any particular word meant is to compare every use of that word you can find. We have a problem with one word in the Lord's Prayer: *ενοπιον*. So far we have not found this word in any other Koiné Greek text. We use its context and probable intention to render this word as 'daily', yet truly we do not know what that word should be. Yet this text is used throughout Christendom as a standard, and is assumed to be the very prayer Jesus gave his disciples (even though we have two slightly different versions in the Gospels). I hope that by now you are beginning to get my drift.

We are not alone with this problem, but in our case we can at least talk about it. The Muslims have the Q'ran, which is sacrosanct, yet the current text dates only from the 9th century CE, three hundred years after Gabriel dictated it. There is a group in Turkey at this moment who are attempting to open up the study of the Q'ran, for the same reasons as I am advocating here: so that God's **intended** revelation can be discovered. You can, I think, imagine the reaction this is causing. At least we can approach the Bible critically without fearing for our lives.

The object of our weekend together is to discover how we can learn about the political influences and the vicissitudes of transmission that have brought us a particular literary collection; so that we can begin to comprehend the revelation as understood by those who drew together legend and fact, and who created an epic tale, with history and commentary, in order that we may hear what they thought God was saying to them. After that we need to see if this message has any relevance to us, for whom this is, thus far, such an important part of our spiritual, and in some cases, emotional heritage. This is not an easy task, but for those who stand out as being different from the mainstream, it is an essential one, especially as this very collection is used as the basis of opprobrium.

EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP FOR LESBIAN AND GAY CHRISTIANS

THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE

FR BRIAN SMITH

THE BIBLE AND ME - AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP?

SETTING THE SCENE

For some of what follows I am indebted to the work of Margaret Barker, a Methodist Theologian and Preacher, currently editor of the Monograph Series of the *Society for Old Testament Study*. See <http://www.margaretbarker.com>

The time the Jews looked back to as formative in their identity as a nation, was the Exodus from Egypt. For the Jews, they had been specially chosen and called by God as a light to the nations. They had been brought out of slavery by the might of God's hand.

The Gospels all point to the Last Supper as a Passover meal, with Jesus' death as a Passover lamb, to liberate us from our slavery to sin. So Easter becomes the Christian Passover, and the Christian life a wandering in the wilderness with Jesus, the new Moses, as our guide, heading for a new Promised Land, the Kingdom or Rule of God.

I suggest that, useful though this imagery might be, it is a subversion of the reality of the person of Jesus, and diverts us from the true thrust of the New Testament message. Much work has been done by German Biblical scholars in an effort to discover the real Jesus; but their Protestantism, and their consequent wariness of images that involve sacrifice and priestliness has led to a theology devoid of much of its original richness.

We are used to thinking of the Exodus as a single series of events: the salvation of Moses and his call; the demand to 'let my people go'; the plagues; the crossing of the Sea of Reeds; the destruction of Pharaoh's army. In reality we should be considering a migration of people as the result of a great catastrophe. At the time of the Exodus an island exploded in the Mediterranean, casting volcanic ash high into the atmosphere. Rivers of blood, plagues of frogs and gnats and the like, are a natural consequence as the ash begins to descend. The Habiru, who were not only in Egypt, took advantage of the chaos and began the eastward movement of people that finally came to an end with settlement in Canaan, though not without some violence, as you can imagine - here displacing, there being absorbed by, the local population. They brought with them their god, Yahu, still worshipped in southern Egypt in Greek and Roman times, and from whom we may well have inherited the T symbol, which developed into the Egyptian *ankh* and the Christian cross.

What is intriguing from the archaeological evidence is that there is little sign of blood sacrifice among the incoming Hebrews. What has been discovered are amphora (to hold

wine?) and remains of bread cakes stamped with the figure of a woman.

One suggestion arising from these discoveries is that there was a religion of the Hebrews which involved a communal meal of bread and wine, and that also embraced male and female in its understanding of God.

The Hebrew temple, with its Holy of Holies representing the harmony of creation, used a blood sacrifice on an annual Day of Atonement, to restore creation to its primeval state, through the action of the High Priest passing through the veil.

The veil of the Temple was woven from four colours: blue, purple, scarlet and white, representing the four elements of earth, air, fire (blood?) and water. The High Priest's vestment was of the same material, so that as he slid behind the veil he seemed to merge with it.

One of the problems of real religion is that it gets out of hand; congregational worship begins to develop, and it becomes very difficult to control. You can find this out by reading the four books of the Kings (or Kings and Chronicles in some bibles). This or that king reigned, but he sinned by worshipping the Baals; another king reigned, but he was a delight to God because he followed the ways of David. Good for him! Josiah's quest for power led him to centralise worship in the Jerusalem Temple, and nowhere else; so all other shrines became anathema, in spite of their popularity amongst the ordinary folk, who needed assurance that their crops would grow well and their cattle be fruitful. Much of the Old Testament from this point on is about the constant battle between the centralising nature of Jerusalem and the desire of people for more local centres of worship. This was a patriarchal phase of Jewish history which particularly proscribed any female representation of God-ness, the *Asherah*. It was also very Canaanite, with its messy multiplicity of animal sacrifices.

There are two points I want to make at this juncture. The first is that, just as Communist Russia failed to suppress the Orthodox religion, so the Josiah Reform was unsuccessful in eradicating the original Hebrew religion. While sitting lightly to Jerusalem and its rites, the Hebrews continued their worship in the background. That this was so can be seen from a study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where we have texts, particularly of Deuteronomy and Isaiah, that predate those used as the basis of any version we may have in our hands. From the Scrolls and other near-Eastern writings, such as the Books of Enoch, that did not make it into the canon, we get a picture of a very soft and gentle religion, concerned more with holiness than with judgement; and a sense of how God's creation was constantly being distorted by the creatures in it. They looked for a true High Priest to come and enter the Holy of Holies for the last time. The Hebrew religion attributed male and female characteristics to the godhead. And the Hebrew religion is still very much alive today (I will explain later).

Secondly, we need always to bear in mind, when dealing with any text that is not an authenticated original, that history is written by the victors. This includes the Bible, of

course.

I want to turn now to the Gospels, and first of all to that of Saint Luke. His knowledge of Palestinian geography was pretty dreadful, but one fascinating list of names in chapter 3 gives us some insight into his thinking. He takes Jesus' line of descent as coming from Adam, Son of God. It is a completely male family tree, as you would expect. But throughout the Gospel he is violently anti-Jewish, and continues this with tales of interference by those of Jewish origin into his second volume, the *Acts of the Apostles*.

It is Luke who brings us the account of the Annunciation, when Gabriel came to break the happy news to Mary. According to tradition, as soon as Mary was betrothed she was whisked off to spin some wool for a new Temple veil. At the time of Gabriel's visit she was spinning the red wool. There was a background idea in early Christianity that saw Mary as the veil through which the High Priest came to sprinkle the blood and purify creation. Jesus and Mary merge, like the High Priest in his vestments merging with the veil. The Godhead becomes both male and female.

There is no doubt that both male and female qualities of God were part of early Christian understanding. Mary knew something that nobody else did. She was at prayer with the apostles. A female figure adorned the entrances of many early churches as the *orante*, symbol of the Church as the praying woman.

Matthew's Gospel has usually been understood as a very Jewish gospel, with a format resembling the Books of Moses. His genealogy goes back only to Abraham, the significance of which I will mention later. Like Moses, Jesus comes out of Egypt, through the Sea of Reeds (the Jordan) and into the wilderness. He gathers some elders around him and brings the Law (the Beatitudes), and continues to teach the people, not about the Promised Land, but about the Rule of God.

The genealogy in Matthew is interesting for the choice of women's names: Tamar, who acted as a prostitute to have Judah's sons; Rahab, who needs no introduction; Ruth, who was not even Jewish and, of course, Mary. It suggests an openness to difference, exemplified also in the cleansing of the leper, the call of Matthew himself, the exchange with the Canaanite woman, and so on.

What comes to my mind is that, perhaps Matthew was not writing for true Jews at all, but that his Gospel was aimed at Hebrew Christians, and intended as a counterbalance to the Josiah reform, and a harking back to the Hebrew Temple of Solomon.

Perhaps the early Christians were the real successors of the Abrahamic religion, with their celebration using bread and wine? You may remember that Melchizedek offered Abraham bread and wine, and he was Priest of God Most High. It was the return of Melchizedek that the Hebrews awaited.

Let us return to the Last Supper for a few moments. If Jesus is the Passover Lamb, how

can he possibly be the sacrifice that takes sin away? The lamb was there to protect the descendants of Jacob from the angel of death. Well, that certainly works as an idea, for Jesus is surely our insurance against death's power over us. But if Jesus is the new Melchizedek, then he is the High Priest *par excellence*; not only does he enter the veil, but he tears it down. Far from being a Passover meal, the Last Supper, and its re-enactment become celebrations of the once and for all Atonement. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, we are not celebrating a Christian Exodus and Passover, liberation from slavery; instead, we are celebrating the Atonement, the unity of heaven and earth through our High Priest's sacrifice

As we come to the Eucharist with our distortions, we come with our Melchizedek, who has offered himself as the sacrifice. As we receive communion, we are infused with the blood of that sacrifice, and our shabby corner of the world becomes as God originally made it, in unity with him.

And where is the Hebrew religion alive today? Just attend the liturgy at any Orthodox church, with its altar screened by curtains and an iconostasis. Watch those who receive communion, as they go behind the iconostasis, passing beyond the veil, to where the creation is at one with God.

And isn't it interesting that in spite of all the mention of Jews in the New Testament, mostly pejorative, there is no Letter to the Jews, but one Letter to the Hebrews, and that in that letter Melchizedek is mentioned no less than eight times. And it is from here that we begin to understand the meaning of Atonement. But this Atonement is very Hebrew in tone. It is not the appeasement of an angry God, so familiar to Protestant theology, but the act of divine self-giving that renews and restores the creation, human society, and each individual.

And Jesus? Well, of course he was a Hebrew!

EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP FOR LESBIAN AND GAY CHRISTIANS

THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE

FR BRIAN SMITH

THE BIBLE AND ME - AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP?

HOW CAN WE USE THE BIBLE?

In view of the way the text of the Bible has been doctored over the centuries, is it worth taking the time and effort to bother about it, or should be treat is merely as an interesting collection of ancient literature?

I do not think we can do that, for two reasons. For a start, it is very much part of our culture. Even though we are in a post-Christian age, our society and its *modus operandi* is steeped in its ideas.

When I discovered faith and my sexuality I knew instinctively where to find the texts that told me I was wrong to be gay - not because I knew the Bible. It was simply because it was part of the culture in which I had been brought up.

The Netherlands may be a liberal society, and has been so for many years, at least on paper. But people do not change their opinions just because the law has changed. If you go to a gay bar in a small town in the Netherlands, most of the clientele will have come from fifty miles or more away.

The other reason for taking the Bible seriously is, of course, that it is part of our heritage as Christians. Without the New Testament we can have no knowledge of Jesus; without the Old Testament we can have but an impoverished idea of the message of Jesus that has been transmitted to us, for the Old Testament was very much Jesus' world.

We also need to take account of Jesus' background in Galilee, that great crossroads where trade routes converged. There he would have been subject to influences from east and west and, in the process, would have been considered as less than kosher as a Jew. Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Another thing we need to consider is the geographical context of the origins of our faith. Just take a wander around outside here and see the trees, the lush green grass and the rocks. Here are fast-flowing streams and waterfalls. This is the place for holy wells and tree gods. In Scandinavia we have ice gods, and trolls that bury themselves beneath the earth to escape the depredations of winter.

The Bible, and the faith to which it witnesses, is a child of the desert, and is therefore quite alien to us. Unless you have stood in the desert at dead of night and seen the stars,

you cannot begin to conceive the immensity of the heavens. In such a place you can see the shooting stars as the angels go about their business. On those rare occasions when there is no wind, the lack of insect noise produces a silence so intense that it is like a screaming in your ears. And when the wind blows, bringing the fine sand to shelter in every orifice, including those you did not know you had, then you must seek shelter. But beware the *oued*, for it is here that death lurks. Two or three days walk away is a sudden torrential shower; where you may have sheltered you hear a roar and are immediately engulfed. More people die in the desert from drowning than from thirst or starvation. Then you can appreciate the fear of the authors of the Bible, that creation is much about keeping under control the waters under the earth, lest they break out and cause mayhem.

So here we are, in a temperate climate, trying to make sense of desert hospitality, the fear of flooding, circumcision, dietary regulations, the sheer impossibility of distinguishing between sheep and goats, the imagery of the aqueduct. In a land where we see very few of the 4000 stars that are visible to the naked eye at any one time, we expect to understand the deep meaning of the dome of heaven and its various levels. And all that is apart from the difference in time, cosmological knowledge, and the many developments in our concept of what it means to be human.

Can we open the Bible, as if for the first time, and let it speak to us? I do not believe this is possible. The very fact that we want to read it and understand it suggests that we already have some idea of its content, and that we shall approve of what we find in it.

We start from a tremendous act of faith: that at the heart of existence there is a presence that wishes to communicate. That this entity is benign, while fortuitous, is certain, for otherwise it would be self-destructive and we would not be here to discuss it. Does this presence communicate in any particular way? In dreams, in sudden flashes of inspiration, through mysterious or even known visitors? That we may never know for sure. But if it happens to us then we may attempt to describe it, and our ramblings may be as garbled as the accounts of the Resurrection. Here are folk legends from pre-history that were passed on and embellished by the itinerant story teller. Noah's flood is a fine example, and may well be based on the flooding of some major cities that occurred when the Mediterranean spilled over into what is now the Black Sea. See what the writers have done to the legend. They have used it to express their understanding that God is displeased with our distortion of Creation; and to hold up Noah as an example of righteousness.

We are very selective in our use of the Bible. This is particularly so in the free churches where there is no lectionary (a cycle of readings designed either to reflect the passage of the Christian year, or to ensure that every part of the Bible is read on a regular and ordered basis), only a regular outing of the pastor's favourite texts.

James Barr, in *Fundamentalism* makes the point that we often demythologise some of the miracles (there were often sudden squalls on the Sea of Galilee, but which just as quickly abated), but not others, according to our taste.

You have to be a particularly virulent fundamentalist to want to stone people for wearing cloth of mixed materials, or eating beef stroganoff! Bishop Swing of California was once approached by a pastor who suggested that AIDS was God's punishment for being homosexual. The Bishop said that must mean that God obviously loved lesbians!

Like it or not, we come to the Bible with our own cultural baggage. If the culture from which we come makes us uneasy about being gay, then no amount of exposition of the relevant texts to the contrary will soothe our unease.

If we believe that slavery or patriarchy are wrong, then we will either ignore scriptural passages that suggest otherwise or find some other way to interpret them. Our reading of the Bible is informed by our culture, our nurture and our experience. To deny this is to live in a fool's paradise.

What we then end up with, rather than a string of texts that support our views and our prejudices, is a thematic concept that is aligned with our philosophy of life. We may even separate the God of the Old Testament from that of the New. We may show how Jesus overturned Old Testament concepts, if it suits us. However, if we are people of integrity, seekers after Truth, we must not rest there.

It is my understanding that life is a gift truly to be treasured. Every day brings so many possibilities. If we dread the morning, then we must find ways of overcoming that weight on the chest that keep us under the covers, hiding from the dawning adventure. Every moment must be lived to the full; and we must be prepared to take risks, and accept that we sometimes make the wrong decisions.

Living is about learning and developing, as individuals and in interdependence with others. Whatever opportunities are presented to us for new experiences we must take in faith. Each one is connected to that Presence I spoke of earlier. We need to examine these experiences and revisit our holy texts in the light of those experiences, and see if the visionaries of the past can help illuminate them for us.

At the same time we must never forget that our ability to have new experiences and to reflect on them is also a gift that is denied to the majority of our fellow human beings, whose main concern is to find food, water and shelter.

The Bible is a wonderful resource. It is not the answer to all our questions (as Elmer J Towns would have us believe!), nor is it the unsullied word of God that we would wish for. But it does give us insight into how others struggled to understand their experiences in relation to the meaning of existence in general, and may help us in our quest for meaning, identity and purpose.

EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP FOR LESBIAN AND GAY CHRISTIANS

THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE

FR BRIAN SMITH

THE BIBLE AND ME - AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP?

THE FUTURE

Here are a two suggestions which might form the basis of future conferences.

- 1 Does it matter if the story is not true, as long as it has the desired effect?
- 2 This year is the eight-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Order of Saint Francis. Francis and Illuminato crossed the battle lines between the Crusaders and the Muslim forces to meet Sultan Malek al-Kamil, because he knew that the Sultan wanted to try and make peace between Muslims and Christians. The sultan saw in Francis a fellow servant of God dedicated to peace.

A twelfth-century mystic, Muhammed Ibn 'Ali Ibn 'Arabi had a revelation in which Moses, Jesus and Muhammad all appeared to him. His views were so unorthodox that he had to flee his home, Spain. He argued for a religion of love. He understood that God was not a being, but the underlying ground of all being, and can be found in everything. He believed that Jews, Christians and Muslims all held the same desire for love and submission to God.

It is common for us to denigrate those who do not hold our faith. But what do we make of the common idea among Christians that there is no salvation outside faith in Jesus Christ? Is the religious feeling of those who have never heard of Jesus of no avail? Should we be converting Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Buddhists? Or should we be finding a common ground with them?