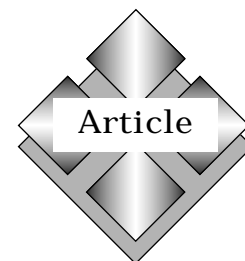


A multi-faith challenge to Bible study?



by
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This is a summary (with additional thoughts for a Western readership) of a Bible study prepared by Hope S Antone for the Christian Conference of Asia's programme on 'Christian Education in the Context of Asian Plurality', 20–27 October 1999 in Bali, Indonesia.

Jesus said, 'I am the Way; I am Truth and Life. No one can come to the Father except through me' (John 14:4, *New Jerusalem Bible*). These words, found only in John's Gospel, have been used by some Christian sects and denominations as justification for opting out of any form of multi-faith dialogue. Such a starkly rigid position is not so easy for Asian Christians to adopt, where multi-cultural influences abound. Can the same be said for our Western cities?

At a conference held in Bali, Indonesia, last year on 'Christian Education in the Context of Asian Plurality', a Bible study was prepared. The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman was chosen (found in Mark 7:24–30 and Matthew 15:21–28). The story is set outside Galilee. Jesus has headed north looking for some peace and quiet. Instead, he is confronted by a foreign woman, a follower of the ancient Canaanite (pagan) religion.

This is a Bible study that is not so popular, especially if your notion is of a kind and gentle Jesus. For Jesus' response to the woman's request to heal her daughter appears, not to mince words, racist. She is not a Jew, she is not one of us, she and her daughter are likened to dogs. Imagine the thinking of the woman...

What, he likens my people to the dogs? Oh, what can be more insulting...? But I will not take offence. I will not protest at his use of labels for my people and me. Let me use it instead to appeal some more to him. Let me kneel down and bow to show my respect for him.

'Yes, sir, I know it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.'

Oh, it feels like a very long silence. I can feel everyone's eyes looking at me. Did I irritate him further with what I just said? Will I be punished...? What is he going to do next?

What Jesus does next is heal her daughter.

The story shows how the woman does not give in, not even taking offence at Jesus' insult, but instead using it to argue against

him. As the feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza puts it: '...she rejects the theological argument of Jesus that Gentile aliens are excluded from the life-giving power of God's reign of wellbeing. The woman turns Jesus' argument against itself, and overcomes his prejudice. No one should be excluded, she insists. God's power of salvation is without boundaries. And her argument wins the day.'¹

Traditional Bible scholars have found this story difficult. They praise the woman for her humble submission, but tend to squirm when faced with Jesus' insulting behaviour. Some rather doubtful claims are made to try and explain the passage, often accompanied by words like 'what Jesus really meant...' He was testing her faith, comprehending the Gentile mission, demonstrating amazing grace, even referring to household pets!

As Sharon Ringe suggests, 'The very strangeness and the offensiveness of the story's portrayal of Jesus may suggest that the core of the story was indeed remembered as an incident in Jesus' life when even he was caught with his compassion down.'²

Who is this woman? An anonymous Gentile pagan woman who dares to violate social rules, interrupts Jesus' rest and annoys the disciples. This cultural, ethnic and religious outsider obtains what she most desires, the healing of her daughter. And in the long run, she opens the way for Jesus' and the Church's mission beyond the Jewish community. Jesus has come for the Gentiles too!

Feminist or post-colonial interpretation?

Theologians like Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Sharon Ringe have read much into this story and presented it as a feminist discourse. But what happens when the story is re-read as an Asian, post-colonial, multi-faith or multicultural discourse? The Asian scholars Kwok Pui Lan and R S Sugirtharajah offer another reading of the text.

In the Christian missionary framework, Asian peoples who for so long have embraced

God's power of salvation is without boundaries

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