

Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding

Preamble

“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Ps. 24:1, NRSV).

“For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 1:11).

“Then Peter began to speak to them: I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35).

1. What do the experiences of the Psalmist, the prophet, and Peter mean for us today? What does it mean to affirm our faith in Jesus Christ joyfully, and yet seek to discern God’s presence and activity in the world? How do we understand such affirmations in a religiously plural world?

I. The challenge of plurality

2. Today Christians in almost all parts of the world live in religiously plural societies. Persistent plurality and its impact on their daily lives are forcing them to seek new and adequate ways of understanding and relating to peoples of other religious traditions. The rise of religious extremism and militancy in many situations has accentuated the importance of interreligious relations. Religious identities, loyalties, and sentiments have become important components in so many international and inter-ethnic conflicts that some say that the “politics of ideology,” which played a crucial role in the twentieth-century, has been replaced in our day by the “politics of identity.”

3. All religious communities are being reshaped by new encounters and relationships. Globalization of political, economic, and even religious life brings new pressures on communities that have been in geographical or social isolation. There is greater awareness of the interdependence of human life, and of the need to collaborate across religious barriers in dealing with the pressing problems of the world. All religious traditions, therefore, are challenged to contribute to the emergence of a global community that would live in mutual respect and peace. At stake is the credibility of religious traditions as forces that can bring justice, peace, and healing to a broken world.

4. Most religious traditions, however, have their own history of compromise with political power and privilege and of complicity in violence that has marred human history. Christianity, for instance, has been, on the one hand, a force that brought the message of God's unconditional love for and acceptance of all people. On the other hand, its history, sadly, is also marked by persecutions, crusades, insensitivity to indigenous cultures, and complicity with imperial and colonial designs. In fact, such ambiguity and compromise with power and privilege is part of the history of all religious traditions, cautioning us against a romantic attitude towards them. Further, most religious traditions exhibit enormous internal diversity attended by painful divisions and disputes.

5. Today these internal disputes have to be seen in the light of the need to promote mutual understanding and peace among the religions. Given the context of increased polarization of communities, the prevalent climate of fear, and the culture of violence that has gripped our world, the mission of bringing healing and wholeness to the fractured human community is the greatest challenge that faces the religious traditions in our day.

The changing context of the Christian faith.

6. The global religious situation is also in flux. In some parts of the Western world, the institutional expressions of Christianity are in decline. New forms of religious commitment emerge as people increasingly separate personal faith from institutional belonging. The search for authentic spirituality in the context of a secular way of life presents new challenges to the churches. Further, peoples of other traditions, like Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, etc., who have increasingly moved into these areas, as minorities, often experience the need to be in dialogue with the majority community. This challenges Christians to be able to articulate their faith in ways that are meaningful both to them and their neighbours; dialogue presupposes both faith commitment and the capacity to articulate it in word and deed.

7. At the same time, Christianity, especially in its evangelical and Pentecostal manifestations, is growing rapidly in some regions of the world. In some of the other regions, Christianity is undergoing radical changes as Christians embrace new and vibrant forms of church life and enter into new relationships with indigenous cultures. While Christianity appears to be on the decline in some parts of the world, it has become a dynamic force in others.

8. These changes require of us to be more attentive than before to our relationship with other religious communities. They challenge us to acknowledge 'others' in their differences, to welcome strangers even if their 'strangeness' sometimes threatens us, and to seek reconciliation even with those who have declared themselves our enemies. In other words, we are being challenged to develop a spiritual climate and a theological approach that contributes to creative and positive relationships among the religious traditions of the world.

9. The cultural and doctrinal differences among religious traditions, however, have always made interreligious dialogue difficult. This is now aggravated by the tensions and animosities generated by global conflicts and mutual suspicions and fears. Further, the impression that Christians have turned to dialogue as a new tool for their

mission, and the controversies over ‘conversion’ and ‘religious freedom’ have not abated. Therefore dialogue, reconciliation, and peace building across the religious divides have become urgent, and yet they are never achieved through isolated events or programs. They involve a long and difficult process sustained by faith, courage, and hope.

The pastoral and faith dimensions of the question.

10. We also recognize the pastoral need to equip Christians to live in a religiously plural world. Many Christians seek ways to be committed to their own faith and yet to be open to the others. Some use spiritual disciplines from other religious traditions to deepen their Christian faith and prayer life. Still others find in other religious traditions an additional spiritual home and speak of the possibility of ‘double belonging.’ Many Christians ask for guidance to deal with interfaith marriages, the call to pray with others, and the need to deal with militancy and extremism. Others seek for guidance as they work together with neighbours of other religious traditions on issues of justice and peace. Religious plurality and its implications now affect our day-to-day lives.

11. As Christians we seek to build a new relationship with other religious traditions because we believe it to be intrinsic to the Gospel message and inherent to our mission as co-workers with God in healing the world. Therefore the mystery of God’s relationship to all God’s people, and the many ways in which peoples have responded to this mystery, invite us to explore more fully the reality of other religious traditions and our own identity as Christians in a religiously plural world.

II. Religious Traditions as Spiritual Journeys

The Christian journey

12. It is common to speak of religious traditions being “spiritual journeys.” Christianity’s spiritual journey has enriched and shaped its development into a religious tradition. It emerged initially in a predominantly Jewish-Hellenistic culture. Christians have had the experience of being ‘strangers,’ and of being persecuted minorities struggling to define themselves in the midst of dominant religious and cultural forces. And as Christianity grew into a world religion, it has become internally diversified, transformed by the many cultures with which it came into contact.

13. In the East, the Orthodox Churches have throughout their history been involved in a complex process of cultural engagement and discernment, maintaining and transmitting the Orthodox faith through integration of select cultural aspects over the centuries. On the other hand, the Orthodox churches have also struggled to resist the temptation towards uncritical syncretism. In the West, having become the religious tradition of a powerful empire, it had at times been a persecuting majority. It also became the ‘host’ culture, shaping European civilization in many positive ways. At the same time it has had a troubled history in its relationship with Judaism, Islam, and indigenous traditions.

14. The Reformation transformed the face of Western Christianity, introducing Protestantism with its proliferation of confessions and denominations, while the Enlightenment brought about a cultural revolution with the introduction of modernity, secularization, individualism, and the separation of church and state. Missionary expansions into Asia, Africa, Latin America and other parts of the world raised questions of indigenisation and inculturation of the Gospel. The encounter between the rich spiritual heritage of the Asian religions and the African Traditional Religions resulted in the emergence of theological traditions based on the cultural and religious heritages of these regions. The rise of Charismatic and Pentecostal churches in all parts of the world added yet a new dimension to Christianity.

15. In short, the ‘spiritual journey’ of Christianity has made it a very complex worldwide religious tradition. As Christianity seeks to live among cultures, religions, and philosophic traditions and attempts to respond to the present and future challenges, it will continue to be transformed. It is in this context, of a Christianity that has been and is changing, that we need a theological response to plurality.

Religions, Identities and Cultures.

16. Other religious traditions have also lived through similar challenges in their development. There is no one expression of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism, etc. As these religions journeyed out of their lands of origin they too have been shaped by the encounters with the cultures they moved into, transforming and being transformed by them. Most of the major religious traditions today have had the experience of being cultural ‘hosts’ to other religious traditions, and of being ‘hosted’ by cultures shaped by religious traditions other than their own. This means that the identities of religious communities and of individuals within them are never static, but fluid and dynamic. No religion is totally unaffected by its interaction with other religious traditions. Increasingly it has become rather misleading even to talk of ‘religions’ as such, and of ‘Judaism,’ ‘Christianity,’ ‘Islam,’ ‘Hinduism,’ ‘Buddhism’, etc., as if they were static, undifferentiated wholes.

17. These realities raise several spiritual and theological issues. What is the relationship between ‘religion’ and ‘culture?’ What is the nature of the influence they have on one another? What theological sense can we make of religious plurality? What resources within our own tradition can help us deal with these questions? We have the rich heritage of the modern ecumenical movement’s struggle with these questions to help us in our exploration.

III. Continuing an ongoing exploration

The Ecumenical Journey

18. From the very beginnings of the church, Christians have believed that the message of God’s love witnessed to in Christ needs to be shared with others. It is in the course of sharing the message, especially in Asia and Africa that the modern ecumenical movement had to face the question of God’s presence among people of other traditions. Is God’s revelation present in other religions and cultures? Is the Christian revelation in ‘continuity’ with the religious life of others, or is it ‘discontinuous,’

bringing in a whole new dimension of knowledge of God? These were difficult questions and Christians remain divided over the issue.

19. The dialogue program within the ecumenical movement has emphasized the importance of respecting the reality of other religious traditions and affirming their distinctiveness and identity. It has also brought into focus the need to collaborate with others in the search for a just and peaceful world. There is also greater awareness of how our ways of speaking about our own religious traditions and those of others can lead to confrontations and conflicts. On the one hand, religious traditions make universal truth claims. On the other hand, these claims by implication may be in conflict with the truth claims of others. These realizations, and actual experiences of relationships between peoples of different traditions in local situations, opened the way for Christians to speak of our relationship with others in terms of 'dialogue.' Yet, there are many questions awaiting further exploration. What does it mean to be in dialogue when the communities concerned are in conflict? How does one deal with the perceived conflict between conversion and religious freedom? How do we deal with the deep differences among faith communities over the relationship of religious traditions to ethnicity, cultural practices, and the state?

20. Within the discussions in the Commission on Mission and Evangelism (CWME) the exploration of the nature of the missionary mandate and its implications in a world of diverse religions, cultures, and ideologies have drawn on the concept of the 'mission of God' (missio Dei), which affirmed that we are called to participate in the mission of God in the world. Several issues of CWME's agenda interact with the present study on religious plurality: What is the relation between cooperation with people of other religious traditions (for justice and peace), involvement in interreligious dialogue, and the evangelistic mandate of the church? What are the consequences of the intrinsic relation between cultures and religions for the inculturation approach in mission? What are the implications for interfaith relations if mission is understood as building healing and reconciling communities within a pneumatological framework?

The plenary commission of Faith and Order, meeting in Kaula Lumpur, Malaysia (2004), spoke of the "journey of faith" as one inspired by the vision of "receiving one another," especially in a multi-religious context. What are the challenges that must be faced by Christians who seek a theology that is hospitable to others? The Faith and Order plenary commission has been exploring various theological issues that are relevant to this discussion. What are the limits to diversity? Are there valid signs of salvation beyond the church? To what extent are question of ethnic and national identity affected by religious identities? How do insights from other traditions contribute to our understanding of what it means to be human?

It is significant that all three programmatic streams of the council converge in dealing with questions that are relevant for a theology of religions. In fact, attempts have been made in recent conferences to deal with, and formulate, positions that take the discussions forward.

Recent Developments

21. In its search for consensus among Christians on God's saving presence in the religious life of our neighbours, the World Mission Conference in San Antonio (1989) summed up the position that the WCC has been able to affirm: "We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God." Recognizing the tension between such a statement and the affirmation of God's presence and work in the life of peoples of other faith traditions, the San Antonio report said that, "we appreciate this tension, and do not attempt to resolve it."

The question following the conference was whether in the ecumenical movement as a whole, we remain with these modest words as an expression of theological humility, or whether we should deal with that tension in finding new and creative formulations in a theology of religions.

22. In an attempt to go beyond San Antonio, a WCC consultation on Theology of Religions in Baar, Switzerland, (1990) produced an important statement, drawing out the implications of the Christian belief that God is active as creator and sustainer in the religious life of all peoples: "This conviction that God as creator of all is present and active in the plurality of religions makes it inconceivable to us that God's saving activity could be confined to any one continent, cultural type, or group of people. A refusal to take seriously the many and diverse religious testimonies to be found among the nations and peoples of the whole world amounts to disowning the biblical testimony to God as creator of all things and Father of humankind."

23. The questions raised, and the tentative attempts to deal with them, within Mission and Evangelism, Faith and Order, and the Dialogue streams within the WCC point in the direction of the need to reopen the question of the theology of religions today. Such an inquiry has become an urgent theological and pastoral necessity. The theme of the 9th WCC assembly, 'God in Your Grace, Transform the World', also calls for such an exploration.

IV. Towards a Theology of Religions

24. What would a theology of religions look like today? Many theologies of religions have been proposed. The many streams of thinking within the scriptures make our task challenging. While recognizing the diversity of the scriptural witness, we choose the theme of 'hospitality' as a hermeneutical key and an entry point for our discussion.

Celebrating the Hospitality of a Gracious God

25. Our theological understanding of religious plurality begins with our faith in the one God who created all things, the living God present and active in all creation from the beginning. The Bible testifies to God as God of all nations and peoples, whose love and compassion includes all humankind. We see in the covenant with Noah a covenant with all creation that has never been broken. We see God's wisdom and justice extending to the ends of the earth, as God guides the nations through their traditions of wisdom and understanding. God's glory penetrates the whole of creation.

The Hebrew Bible witnesses to the universal saving presence of God throughout human history through the Word or Wisdom and the Spirit.

26. In the New Testament, the incarnation of the Word of God is spoken of by St. Paul in terms of hospitality and of a life turned toward the 'other.' Paul proclaims, in doxological language, that "though he (Christ) was in the form of God he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8, NRSV). The self-emptying of Christ, and his readiness to assume our humanity, is at the heart of the confession of our faith. The mystery of the incarnation is God's deepest identification with our human condition, showing the unconditional grace of God that accepted humankind in its otherness and estrangement. Paul's hymn moves on to celebrate the risen Christ: 'Therefore God has highly exalted him, and given him the name that is above every name' (Phil.2.9). This has led Christians to confess Jesus Christ as the one in whom the entire human family has been united to God in an irrevocable bond and covenant.

27. This grace of God shown in Jesus Christ calls us to an attitude of hospitality in our relationship to others. Paul prefaces the hymn by saying, 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus' (Phil.2.5). Our hospitality involves self-emptying, and in receiving others in unconditional love we participate in the pattern of God's redeeming love. Indeed our hospitality is not limited to others in our own community; the gospel commands us to love even our enemies and to call for blessings upon them (Matt.5.43-48; Rom 12.14). As Christians, therefore, we need to search for the right balance between our identity in Christ and our openness to others in kenotic love that comes out of that very identity.

In his public ministry, Jesus not only healed people who were part of his own tradition but also responded to the great faith of the Canaanite woman and the Roman centurion (Matt. 15.21-28; 8.5-11). Jesus chooses a 'stranger,' the Samaritan, to demonstrate the fulfilling of the commandment of love of one's neighbour through love, compassion and hospitality. Gospels present Jesus' encounter with those of other faiths as incidental, and not as part of his main ministry. These stories do not present us with the necessary information to draw clear conclusions. But they do present Jesus as one whose hospitality extended to all who were in need of love and acceptance. Matthew's narrative of Jesus' parable of the Last Judgment goes further to equate openness to the victims of society, hospitality to strangers and the embracing of the other as unexpected ways of being in communion with the risen Christ (25.31-46).

It is significant that while Jesus extended hospitality to those at the margins of society he himself had to face rejection and was often in need of hospitality. Jesus' acceptance of the peoples' at the margins, as well as his own experience of rejection has provided the inspiration for those who show solidarity in our day with the poor, despised and the rejected. Thus the biblical understanding of hospitality goes well beyond the popular notion of extending help and showing generosity toward others. The Bible speaks of hospitality primarily as a radical openness to others based on the affirmation of the dignity of all. We draw our inspiration both from his example and his command that we love our neighbours.

28. The Holy Spirit helps us to live out Christ's openness to others. The person of the Holy Spirit moved and still moves over the face of the earth, to create, nurture, sustain, to challenge, renew and transform. We confess that the activity of the Spirit passes beyond our definitions, descriptions, and limitations in the manner of the wind that "blows where it wills" (Jn 3:8). Our hope and expectancy are rooted in our belief that the "economy" of the Spirit relates to the whole creation. We discern the Spirit of God moving in ways that we cannot predict. We see the nurturing power of the Holy Spirit working within, inspiring human beings in their universal longing for, and seeking after, truth, peace and justice. (Romans 8:18-27) "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control," wherever they are found, are the fruit of the Spirit. (Gal. 5:22-23, cf. Rom. 14:17)

29. We believe that this encompassing work of the Holy Spirit is also present in the life and traditions of peoples of living faith. People have at all times and in all places responded to the presence and activity of God among them, and have given their witness to their encounters with the living God. In this testimony they speak both of seeking and of having found wholeness, or enlightenment, or divine guidance, or rest, or liberation. This is the context in which we as Christians testify to the salvation we have experienced through Christ. This ministry of witness among our neighbors of other faiths must presuppose an "affirmation of what God has done and is doing among them" (CWME San Antonio 1989).

30. We see the plurality of religious traditions as both the result of the manifold ways in which God has related to peoples and nations as well as a manifestation of the richness and diversity of human response to God's gracious gifts. It is our Christian faith in God, which challenges us to take seriously the whole realm of religious plurality. Seeking to develop new and greater understandings of "the wisdom, love and power which God has given to men (and women) of other faiths" (New Delhi Report, 1961), we must affirm our "openness to the possibility that the God we know in Jesus Christ may encounter us also in the lives of our neighbors of other faiths" (CWME San Antonio 1989 par 29). We also believe that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, will lead us to understand anew the deposit of the faith already given to us, and into fresh and unforeseen insight into the divine mystery, as we learn more from our neighbors of other faiths.

Thus, it is our Trinitarian faith, in God who creates, brings wholeness, and nurtures and nourishes all life, which helps us in our hospitality of openness to all. We have been the recipients of God's generous hospitality of love. We cannot do otherwise.

V. The call to hospitality

31. How should Christian respond in light of the generosity and graciousness of God? 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it' (Heb. 13.2.) In today's context the 'stranger' includes not only the people unknown to us, the poor and the exploited, but also those who are ethnically, culturally and religiously 'others' to us. The word 'stranger' in the scriptures does not intend to objectify the 'other' but recognizes that there are people who are indeed 'strangers' to us in their culture, religion, race and other kinds of

diversities that are part of the human community. Our willingness to accept others in there 'otherness' is the hallmark of true hospitality. Through our openness to the 'other' we may encounter God in new ways. Hospitality, thus, is both the fulfillment of the commandment to 'love our neighbours as ourselves' and an opportunity to discover God anew.

32. Hospitality also pertains to how we treat each other within the Christian family; sometimes we are as much strangers to each other as we are to those outside our community. Because of the changing world context, especially increased mobility and population movements, sometimes we are the 'hosts' to others, and at other times we become the 'guests' receiving the hospitality of others; sometimes we receive 'strangers' and at other times we become the 'strangers' in the midst of others. Indeed we may need to move to an understanding of hospitality as 'mutual openness' that transcends the distinctions of 'hosts' and 'guests.'

33. Hospitality is not just an easy or simple way of relating to others. It is often not only an opportunity but also a risk. In situations of political or religious tension acts of hospitality may require great courage, especially when extended to those in deep disagreement with us or even consider us as their enemy. Further, dialogue is very difficult when there are inequalities between parties, distorted power relations, or when there are hidden agendas. One may also at times feel obliged to question the deeply held beliefs of the very people to whom one has offered hospitality and to have one's own beliefs be challenged in return.

The power of mutual transformation

34. Christians have not only learned to co-exist with people of other religious traditions, but have also been transformed by their encounters. We have discovered unknown aspects of God's presence in the world; and have uncovered the neglected elements of our own Christian traditions. We have also become more conscious of the many passages in the Bible that call upon us to live a life that is responsive to others.

35. Practical hospitality and a welcoming attitude to strangers create the space for mutual transformation and even reconciliation. Such reciprocity is exemplified in the telling of the story of the meeting between Abraham, the father of faith, and Melchizedek, the non-Israelite king of Salem (Genesis 14). Abraham received the blessing of Melchizedek, who is described as a priest of "God Most High." The story suggests that through this encounter Abraham's understanding of the nature of the deity who had led him and his family from Ur and Harran was renewed and expanded.

36. Mutual transformation is also seen in Luke's narrative of the encounter between Peter and Cornelius in the Acts of the Apostles. The Holy Spirit accomplished a transformation in Peter's self-understanding through his vision and subsequent interaction with Cornelius. This led him to confess that, "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10.34-35). In this case, Cornelius the 'stranger' becomes an instrument of Peter's transformation, even as Peter becomes an instrument of transformation of Cornelius and his household. While this story is not primarily about interfaith relations, it sheds

light on how God can lead us beyond the confines of our self-understanding in encounter with others.

37. So one can draw consequences from these examples, and from such rich experiences in daily life, for a vision of mutual hospitality among peoples of different religious traditions. From the Christian perspective, this has much to do with our ministry of reconciliation. It presupposes both our witness to the 'other' about God in Christ as also our openness to allow God to speak to us through the 'other.' Mission when understood in this light, has no room for triumphalism; it contributes to removing the causes for religious animosity and the violence that often goes with this. Hospitality requires Christians to accept others as created in the image of God, knowing that God may talk to us through others to teach and transform us, even as God may use us to transform others.

38. Biblical witness and experiences in the ecumenical ministry show that such mutual transformation is at the heart of authentic Christian witness. Openness to the 'other' can change the 'other,' even as it can change us. It may give them new perspectives on Christianity and on the gospel; it may also enable them to understand their own faith from new perspectives. Such openness, and the transformation that comes from it, can enrich our lives in surprising ways.

VI. Salvation belongs to God

42. The religious traditions of humankind, in their great diversity, are 'journeys' or 'pilgrimages' towards human fulfillment and the search for the truth about our existence. Even though we may be 'strangers' to each other, there are moments in which our paths intersect that call for 'religious hospitality.' Both our personal experiences today and historical moments in the past witness to the fact that such hospitality is possible and does take place in small ways.

43. Extending such hospitality is dependant on a theology that is hospitable to the 'other.' Our reflections on the nature of the biblical witness to God, what we believe God to have done in Christ, and the work of the Spirit shows that at the heart of the Christian faith lies an attitude of hospitality that embraces the 'other' in their otherness. It is this spirit that needs to inspire the Theology of Religions in a world that needs healing and reconciliation, and solidarity with all those, irrespective of their religious beliefs, have been pushed to the margins of society.

44. We need to acknowledge that human limitations and limitations of language makes it impossible for any community to have exhausted the mystery of the salvation God offers to humankind. All our theological reflections in the last analysis are limited by our own experience and cannot hope to deal with the scope of God's work of mending the world.

45. It is this humility that enables us to say that salvation belongs to God, God only. We do not possess salvation; we participate in it. We do not offer salvation; we witness to it. We do not decide who would be saved; we leave it to the providence of God. For our own salvation is an everlasting 'hospitality' that God has extended to us. It is God who is the 'host' of salvation. And yet, in the eschatological vision of the

new heaven and the new earth, we also have the powerful symbol of God becoming both a 'host' and a 'guest' among us: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples ..." (Rev.21.3).