

# Towards a Christian Theology of Religions

## Christianity in dialogue with other faiths

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### Challenge

A responsible *Christian* theology of religions must be faithful to its *sources*, it must acknowledge its place in the *community of faith*, and it must accept responsibility for the *world and its future*. For these reasons it must seek to bring the following challenges into a coherent vision:

- The Christian understanding of God entails that God has not only created the world, but that God loves the *world* (John 3:16), that God has reconciled the *world* with himself (2 Corinthians 5:17-21), and that God “desires *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4; compare 2 Peter 3:9).
- Deeply rooted in the New Testament and in Christian tradition is the confession, that Jesus Christ is the “*one* mediator between God and humankind”, that he *alone* is “the way and the truth and the life”, that “no one comes to the Father except through” him, that in Jesus Christ “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily”, and that therefore “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” (1 Timothy 2:5; John 14:6; Col 2:9; Acts 4:12). Christian theologians are bound to the reality that is reflected in these sources, and their very identity is at stake in their attitude to them.
- For Christians it is fundamental that the experience of faith in Christ entails *freedom, openness, confidence, courage, and shalom* – what the New Testament refers to with words like *παρρησια*, *ελευθερια*, *ειρηνη* and *σωτηρια*. Freedom from the quenching threat and oppressive reality of sin, fatedness and death. Openness towards God, neighbour and nature. It is therefore inadequate and it would lead to a fundamental distortion of faith, if Christ is seen merely as a good person, a pious man, a moral example, a courageous hero or a committed revolutionary. To confess the liberating reality and energising power of the gospel, Jesus Christ must be understood as *saviour, redeemer, reconciler and mediator* – lest faith changes into morality and liberty into legalism.
- The Christian identity symbol is the *trinitarian* understanding of God. God is the father of Jesus Christ and the creator of heaven and earth; the Spirit of God is the Spirit of life apart from whom nothing can exist or survive (Psalm 104:29f.); Christ, who as the incarnate word is the mediator of creation “enlightens everyone” (John 1:3f. 9), is necessarily related to the story of Jesus.
- The fact is that religions, including the Christian religion, although they claim to have answers to the human quest for meaning and salvation, not only have a history that is replete with war, torture, racism, nationalism and other injustices, but they are still involved in most major conflicts in our world today. It is therefore a major challenge to all religions today, whether they are willing to serve *peace and justice* in our world, and whether they are able to deal with their differences in a civilised, non violent and constructive manner:<sup>1</sup>
- Religious faith, rituals, doctrines and practices as such do not necessarily help to make human life human; they may in fact hinder the *celebration of life*. Religious faith can and does heal and liberate; but at the same time religious faith can also enslave, oppress and make sick. Religion can be divine or demonic, it can help or hinder in the quest for human fulfilment. It is therefore a challenge to all religions to spell out the *criteria* by which they measure the authenticity of religious faith.

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<sup>1</sup>[1] Hans Küng commences his book *Global Responsibility. In Search for a World Ethic* (London: SCM, 1991) with the following words: “No survival without a world ethic. No world peace without peace between the religions. No peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions. That is what this book is about.” (p. xv).

- Christians can no longer overlook the dignity and resources of other religions. Who would want to question the religious authenticity of a Mahatma Gandhi or of the Dalai Lama? Many Christians witness to the fact that they have been helped in understanding and practicing their *Christian* faith from encounters with members of other faiths. Respect and openness for the “other” is a basic ingredient of human life together.
- As Christians we can not and we must not forget that our history is replete with terrible *aberrations of faith in Christ*. In the name of the prince of peace we have blessed weapons and fought wars. In the name of the one who came to heal people, we have broken the bodies and souls of opponents with sophisticated instruments of torture; in the name of the one whom we confess as the incarnation of love, we killed and damned those who departed from theological orthodoxy; and in the name of the one who came to liberate the oppressed and proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, we have failed to feed the poor and promise hope to the hungry. In many and various ways Christians have been disobedient to the call of Christ. In light of the militarism, colonialism and imperialism that has originated in countries where the Christian faith was dominant, we must also face the uncomfortable question, whether our faith itself, its ground, and not only our failure to understand and implement it, was involved in shaping inhumane activities. One only has to think of what Christian societies did to Jews in Germany, to first Nations people in Canada, to Native American and to African Americans in the USA, and to Aboriginal people in Australia, to realise that even with noble intentions we have erected barriers which make it very difficult for such oppressed and disadvantaged and bruised people to come to a unprejudiced encounter with the Gospel of Christ. Should they be punished for our insensitivities, callousness and sins?
- The *Post modern paradigm* which influences or even dominates much of our thinking today, suggests that most or even all things are situational and relative. The spiritual and moral authority of a grand narrative is being questioned. Our awareness of living in a global village seems to go hand in hand with the denial of a global ethic. How then are we to understand truth? Is there a common *humanum* that transcends religious differences? Can there good and adequate reason for making universal moral claims?

### **Importance**

The importance of shaping a Christian theology of religions has advanced to the top of the theological agenda. Yet it is somewhat daunting to realise, that a convincing answer that brings the above challenges into a coherent vision has not yet evolved.

The “exclusivists”, whether in the Evangelical or Roman Catholic camp, want to limit God’s saving activity to those who have expressed an explicit faith in Christ and/or are members of the Christian church. Thereby they do not only fail to respect other religions, but at the same time they also do not fully appreciate that in Christ, God made manifest his love for the *world* and that in Christ, God has reconciled the *world* with himself (John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

The “inclusivists” rightly recognise God’s universal intention and that in Christ God has provided salvation for all people. This salvation, so the claim, is real and effective for all people of good will who live according to the dictates of their conscience. Yet, this in fact assumes the “anonymous” presence of Christ in other religions and thereby fails to show respect for the dignity of other faiths; they leave themselves open to the charge of religious imperialism.

The “pluralists” are painfully aware of the horrific consequences of Christian imperialism. They recognise the authenticity and saving efficacy of other religions and thereby give due recognition to the post-modern emphasis on the relative and situational nature of truth claims. For them all religions are equally true or false. At the same time they seem to underestimate the demonic aspects of religions and they avoid the question whether a universal truth is not necessary to answer the fundamental longings of all human beings, and whether such universal truth is not required for developing a global ethic.

## Identity and standpoint

Dialogue is only possible if religious people are encouraged to affirm their identity, and then in openness and anticipation can enter a conversation with the “others”. Christians enter such conversations with a trinitarian understanding of God. Given the experience of God as the ultimate concern, we then ask what place other religions have in our Christian vision of life and what can be the advantage of entering into a dialogue with them?

The fear, often voiced by “pluralists”, that the Christian claim of God being inherently related to the story of Jesus implies superiority and therefore leads to imperialism, is misplaced and it is not helpful for dialogue. Is it not unrealistic to ask of Christians to relativise the normativity of Christ, to expect Jews to suspend the normativity of the Torah, to expect Muslims to relativise the normativity of the Koran, and to require of Buddhists to relativise the normativity of Buddha’s teachings and practices? Such relativism contradicts the very nature of religious faith as an ultimate concern. It would be an impossible position for a Christian. It would separate the Christian from the community of faith and from the content of their authoritative traditions. There is no virtue in denying or relativising one’s identity. That would lead to soteriological uncertainty and as such run counter to the very promises of a helpful religion. To engage in dialogue one must have a position from which one speaks. Every one who can distinguish truth from lie, love from rape, selflessness from selfishness, and multi-culturalism from racism, has a point of view. In religious matters such a standpoint is generally firm because we are dealing with questions of ultimacy and therefore with matters of life and death.

Our undertaking in this essay commits us to a *Christian* theology of religions. This does not exclude the expectation and even presumption that there may be truth and grace in other religions. Indeed, arguing from a certain point of view and at the same time presuming that there may be truth and grace in other faiths, makes *dialogue* possible and it can make such a dialogue an interesting, rewarding and enriching experience.

## Approach

To occupy one’s own standpoint, and not to deny, but to affirm one’s own identity, and expect others, of course, to do the same, makes dialogue possible and promising. What method can we adopt that makes it possible to affirm one’s own identity, and at the same time to keep an open mind and an open heart towards “others”, indeed to expect the encounter with others to deepen or modify one’s own ultimate concern? I suggest the approach of *similarity and difference*<sup>2</sup> “*Similarity*” because Christian faith shares with all or with most religions the longing for and the experience of “more” than human and historical immanence. “*Difference*” because a dialogue would become uninteresting if the differences were not named. And in today’s world, given the aberrations of religious faith on the one hand, and the moral challenges in our global village on the other, all religions must allow themselves to be measured whether they are helpful or whether they are a hindrance to making human life human. This raises, of course, the important question as to what is meant by “human” and what criteria, if any, could be agreed on to define and protect the *humanum*.

## Ecumenical virtues

Given “identity”, “standpoint” and “approach”, we need to discover and affirm human attitudes which assure that in our strife-torn world, religions, whilst talking to each other and not denying their identity, are intentionally and demonstratively on the side of peace, justice and reconciliation. Hans Küng has named two ecumenical virtues that are necessary for a constructive encounter

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<sup>2</sup> This is a rough analogy to Karl Barth’s thesis that phenomena in the world *can become* reflections of the kingdom of God, but at the same time they *need to be measured* by Christian revelation whether they are such. Compare: “The Christian Community and the Civil Community,” (1946) in: Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church. Three Essays. With an Introduction by Will Herberg* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968, pp. 149-189), especially § 14.

among the religions: *willingness, competence and ability to dialogue* on the one hand, and *steadfastness in the commitment to one's own tradition* on the other<sup>3</sup> The *willingness to dialogue* shows the inner openness to dialogue partners, the respect for their position, and the humility and expectation to learn. The correlating virtue is *steadfastness, stability, firmness*. It means that one can be firm and convinced about one's own truth claims without denying the integrity and the truth claims of the "other".

How then can Christians, given their identity in the life of the trinitarian God, bring their own resources into a correlation of similarity and difference with other religions?

### **God the creator – the ground of being**

Noetically, Christian faith begins with the experience of God as saviour, redeemer, reconciler, liberator. The cognitive content of that experience is the recognition that the God, whom the believer has experienced as "pro me", is the "creator of heaven and earth". God is the all-encompassing reality, the ground of being. God holds all things together, accompanies creation with saving grace, provides ever new possibilities in the ongoing process of history and gives meaning to reality. Early Christians therefore did not only confess that God is the God of Jews and Gentiles (Romans 3:29), but they recognised that all people are responsible to God because "ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Romans 1:20). The evangelist Luke in a Pauline sermon explicitly claims that the unnamed deity worshipped at the Areopagus in Athens is none other than the Christian God (Acts 17:22-28). It is not surprising therefore that Christians affirm that the God who in Israel's history makes covenant after covenant to show his passion for his creation "has sent his Son as the *Saviour of the world*" (1 John 4:14).

If God is God, then Christians must entertain the possibility that everyone who reaches beyond their human limitations and finds wholeness and meaning in this existential search is in touch, in however broken manner, with the same divine reality which Christians call "God". This is widely accepted with reference to Judaism and Islam where the controversy is not God as such but the way God has made himself known: in the Torah, in the Koran or in Jesus Christ, but this presumption needs to be extended to all authentic and humane religious claims.

Together with most religions, Christians claim that "God", however "God" is understood, is necessary to explain the world and to meaningfully live in it. With other religions, Christians agree that relationship to "God" is a necessary aspect to the *humanum* – just as relationship to other humans, to nature and to history. Differences emerge with those religions for whom the deity or the divine does not have the *personal character* of "over againstness", and with those visions of reality, like atheism, Marxism and some forms of humanism, that see religious faith as infantile regression, as compensation for personality deficiencies, or as projection of one's own needs and interests, and who therefore want to explain reality without reference to the divine.

For Christians, God is not merely a divine principle that permeates everything; nor is God a deity that lives in splendid isolation, untouched by the human struggle for meaning and survival; nor is God a deity that in the long distant past has put a process of creation into motion and then left the process to itself; nor is God merely the immanent force that gives meaning and direction to the process of nature and history. For Christians, God is ontologically different from God's creation: God is "over against" God's creation. But this over-against-ness is not one of separation. It is an over-against-ness of *relationship*. God is therefore spoken of in *personal* terms. He is active as creator, redeemer and fulfiller; he can be addressed in prayer and worship; he does not impose a heteronomous claim upon the human conscience, but he liberates the human conscience from forces and structures that estrange it from its true being. With these observations we have already

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Küng, "Dialogfähigkeit und Standfestigkeit. Über zwei komplementäre Tugenden," *Evangelische Theologie* 49 (1989), pp. 492 - 504.

entered the discussion of what is meant by the word “God” or “divine” or “deity”. The Christian answer to this is clear and distinct.

### God the reconciler – Ground and Norm

The question of *truth* and *content* cannot be avoided when we speak of an ultimate concern, which religious faith by definition is. It is simply not true to say that “all roads lead to Rome”; it is simply not true that all religious experiences have liberating, saving and humanising dignity. Religious experiences can be life-denying and demonic – also within the Christian religion, of course. Every religion must therefore address the question of truth and content. Who is the all-encompassing reality that human beings call “God”, “Allah” or the “divine”.

**Ground.** Christians claim that an authentic religious experience must be life-affirming and life-enhancing. It must address the fundamental challenges of human life: Where do I come from? Why am I here? Why do the righteous suffer? Is freedom real or is it an illusion? How do I confront sin, fate and death?

Christians believe that faith must be grounded “*extra nos*”. The Christian assertion that all human beings are sinners is not a moral condemnation; it is a religious claim resulting from the perceived need for God and the experienced reality of forgiveness. Christian faith includes the discovery and subsequent admission (repentance) that the great human attempt to ground ultimate reality in ourselves has failed, and that there is no need to ground human life in ourselves because God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. Christian faith is not a system of doctrine, nor is it an institution, the church. It is grounded in Jesus Christ who is and remains *external* but at the same time *related* to the believer. Faith, though ontologically bound to Christ, confesses that Christ is not dissolved into faith. There is yet more truth to be expected!

For dialogue with other religions it is important that faith is aware of its noetic limitations. Faith grants *soteriological certainty* which finds expressions in such texts as 1 Timothy 2:5, John 14:6, Col 2:9, and Acts 4:12, but at the same time faith is aware that the qualitative difference between God and the believer is not removed in the event of faith; “... now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). Christians therefore distinguish between *certitudo* which is an essential part of faith and *securitas* whereby God would be verified on rational or experiential terms. Although we confess by faith that Jesus Christ is God for us, the understanding and implications of that faith remains an ongoing process.

The ground for the Christian experience of salvation is God’s saving and liberating act in Jesus Christ – his life, death and resurrection. For Christians, Jesus Christ is not only a good person, a pious believer, or a courageous hero, but he is saviour, reconciler and redeemer. He is our peace with God. He is our salvation. In Jesus, God has made his very being vulnerable to the onslaught of human selfishness, betrayal and violence. God has exposed his very being to the estranging forces of death and in that struggle – how else, given the poverty of human language and human understanding, shall we describe it? – in that struggle between God and death, *God has remained God*. When this victory of the divine struggle with the estranging forces of death became *historically manifest* in the appearances of the risen Christ to believers, the church confessed: “‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ... thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:54-57).

For our dialogue with other claims of salvation, Christians must face the question whether faith “*in Christ*” is a mythological or a theological statement. Is the resurrection of Christ a metaphor for the eschatological significance of the historical Jesus or for the authenticity of Christian experience, or has Christ *really* been raised from the dead and can therefore be addressed in worship, prayer and thanksgiving? For Christians the human quest of life, facing the challenges of sin, fate, suffering and death, is intimately and necessarily linked to the affirmation that God has shared his life with the crucified Christ, and *on that basis* Christians confess “that neither death, nor life, nor angels,

nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38f.).

This does not mean, of course, that what God has done in Christ, God has not done for *all people*, indeed for *all of creation*. In Christ, God “loved” the *world* (John 3:16) and “reconciled” (2 Corinthians 5:17-21) the *world* with himself in order to fulfil the divine aim for “everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:3f.). The reality of salvation which God has provided for all in Christ, becomes actual in the event of faith and obedience. The *event* of reconciliation therefore includes the *ministry* of reconciliation, which, in the form of a servant, “entreats” (“requests”, “begs”)<sup>4</sup> all people to “be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20).

It is important to recognise, however, that in the early church, salvation was also pronounced on those who did not know or name “Christ”. Salvation was pronounced on the poor, the hungry, the despised, and those who shared their life with them (Luke 6:20-23; Matthew 25:31-40). Their life was interpreted as belonging to the kingdom of God: “Blessed are you ...!” (Luke 6:20-22); “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34). They manifested the unconditional love that became an event in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ can therefore be understood as the *ground* and the *norm* for their salvation. At least in these texts *explicit* knowledge of Christ does not seem to be a necessary *condition* of salvation. This will become clearer in our comments on the Holy Spirit. In a trinitarian understanding of God, the Spirit witnesses to Christ (John 14-16) and as such will not contradict what God has done in Christ. Nevertheless, by confessing that the Spirit has her own identity within the trinity, the church wanted to say that the Spirit’s work includes a “more” to the person and work of Christ. This “more” includes the ministry of the of the Spirit outside the realm of a *explicit* confession of the name of Jesus as the Christ.

The early Christians therefore confessed that what has come to expression in Jesus Christ was in the being of God from the beginning. The Johannine prologue is a classic expression of that view (John 1:1-18):

1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 1:2 He was in the beginning with God. 1:3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 1:4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 1:5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ...  
1:9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ...  
1:14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ...  
1:18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (John 1:1-18)

**Norm.** Since the promise of salvation is associated with a certain disposition, response and action on the side of human beings, we would have to claim that Jesus Christ is not only the *ground* of salvation, but he is also the *norm* of the experience of salvation. Experience and tradition teach us that the divine spirit can and must be distinguished from the human spirit. The unbending human self will and the subsequent human estrangement from God is of such depth that even religious faith is in danger of being functionalised to serve gods that are not God, and therefore will lead the human conscience astray. Religious faith must therefore name a norm to evaluate experience. In the early church it was one of the gifts of the Spirit “to distinguish the spirits” (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:10; 1 John 4:1). And the measure was not just the name “Christ”, but the reality and content for which that name stands, the “humanity” of Christ (1 John) which in fact stands for his liberating solidarity with “late comers”, “unbelievers” and “outsiders” (1 Corinthians 11-14). The fact that

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<sup>4</sup> Paul's use of *deo/meqa* has the intention of saying that the way of communication must cohere with the content of what is being communicated.

these texts are spoken to churches and church leaders, and that the apostle even entertains the impossible possibility that the church can cease being the church in spite of all religious experiences and rituals (1 Corinthians 11:20-22), makes it abundantly clear that people who don't know Jesus can be closer to the reality that he fleshed out than people who confess Jesus as Lord.

Given that we are saved by grace alone and not by our works; given that this grace can be found in unexpected places, it would be a denial of the very foundation and content of Christian faith if we would limit God's grace to the explicit confession of Christ and being a member of the church. Wherever a genuine need for God is felt, wherever people reach out for salvation, wherever there is a yearning or the experience of freedom, wherever there is an expression of selfless love and engagement for freedom, justice and peace, wherever the "other" becomes interesting and important for one's own quest for life, there we may presume that the God whom Jesus called "abba" and in whose name Jesus brought "good news to the poor" and proclaimed "release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free," to be at work. The gospel must be preached because knowing the name of Jesus can and does add a dimension of intimacy that clarifies and enhances the experience of salvation.

### **God the Spirit of life and salvation – Presence and experience**

All or most religions make universal claims, and therefore they are missionary religions. Christians speak of the work of the Spirit when they refer to the universal *missio dei*.

The confessions that speak of Christ as the way, the truth and the life arise from the *experience* of ultimacy. This experience is not the result of rational deduction, moral striving, or religious instruction. It results from the *coming of faith in the story of Jesus*, which has an inherent, liberating and integrating claim upon the human conscience. This claim is not a heteronomous authority imposed upon the human conscience. It is a "saving" reality that frees the human conscience from heteronomous and pen-ultimate claims. It frees the human conscience from being caught in the accusing role of morality, and thereby it restores the conscience as the integrating center of the human person and as the guide for an ethics of responsible freedom.

This "coming" of faith in Christ includes the recognition that the great human attempt to provide its own answers to the problems of sin, meaning, fate and death have been a massive failure; and it is the grateful admission that what humanity failed to do, God has done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the event of faith the human conscience becomes liberated from the need of creating its own ultimate meaning and finds in Christ a reality that integrates the various elements that determine a personality into a meaningful vision of life.

This faith experience is *ultimate*. It is not one experience among others. It is the experience that can only be described in terms of *creatio ex nihilo* (Rom 4:5 and 17), life out of death, salvation out of lostness, being found after being lost, reconciled after feeling estranged.

This experience of faith therefore calls for an *ontology* and it has *universal* implications. If God is creator and if therefore all people and indeed all of nature is creature and creation, then what is true for Christian experience must be possible for all people. The Judeo-Christian tradition therefore confesses God's Spirit as the *necessary ground of being*:

When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. (Psalm 104:29f.)

At the same time, the experience of ultimacy does not remove the qualitative difference between God and the believer. God is God, while the believer remains human. It was the crucified Christ, not the believer, who was raised from the dead, while the believer walks "in newness of life" (Rom

6:4)<sup>5</sup> This ontological distinction (not separation!) between God and humanity becomes manifest in the fact that our *knowledge* of faith limps behind our *experience* of faith: "... now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). God's "yes" is unconditional and eschatological ("as I have been fully known"); the knowledge of that "yes" grants certainty in the conscience, but for our understanding it is a process that constantly reminds us of the difference between the human and the divine.

The Spirit of God is not only the Spirit of life. It is also the effective activity of God which seeks to apply the salvation that God has accomplished in Christ to all people. By shaping its understanding of the trinity the church wants to express that while the ministry of the Spirit is related to what God has done in Christ, it is *not identical* with it<sup>6</sup>. This means that the saving and liberating activity of the Spirit draws on the ontological depth of the death of Christ and as such it includes the passion for all that is lost.

Does this mean that the Spirit's work is necessarily tied to the *cognitive* name of Jesus? The New Testament writings counsel caution at this point. With the Logos-Christology, with the affirmation of the pre-existence of Christ, with the confession that Christ was mediator of creation, and with the insistence that the saving work of Christ covers the living and the dead of all times (1 Peter 3:18-22, 4:6), the theologians of the church wanted to say that what God has done in Christ is grounded in the depth of God's being and therefore changes the reality for all people at all times. Just as the Spirit as the Spirit of God, the father of Jesus Christ, was active before Jesus came, so the Spirit is active along side the explicit acknowledgment of Jesus. Wherever the reality that has come to expression in Jesus Christ is found, wherever there is a true search for truth, wherever there is a selfless openness for "God", wherever there is a true engagement for justice, where ever peace is waged, there we may presume the Spirit of God to be at work.

This appreciation of the "wide" work and "broad" significance of the Spirit of God should in no way play down the importance of knowing the *name of Jesus*. It simply wants to recognise that God as redeemer is creator and sustainer of heaven and earth. In the trinitarian being of God, the Spirit is intimately related to the story of Jesus and it belongs to the Spirit's activity to make the possibility of explicit faith in Christ an actual event.

The claim that the Spirit is part of the trinitarian reality of God and as such necessary to explain life and salvation, may be seen as presumptuous by those who deny God (Atheism; Marxism; certain forms of humanism) and those for whom God is not "one" and "personal" and "over against" (New Age?, Buddhism?). Such different interpretations of reality can not be avoided and the Christian must not be hesitant to enter into dialogue about the nature of being and reality. Such a dialogue should certainly be dictated by respect and tolerance and, need one say it, non-violence. In such a dialogue all who listen can be enriched.

**Conclusion:  
by their fruits you shall know them!**

Christian theology is aware of the danger of moralising faith, of making faith dependent on human performance, and thereby losing its liberating power. At the same time, Christianity along with all other religions must spell out and submit itself to the norms of truth and justice.

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<sup>5</sup> The author of *Colossians* failed to recognise or appreciate this important theological distinction when he locates the resurrection of the believer in baptism: "... you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col 2:12).

<sup>6</sup> Traditional Christology, especially in the Reformed tradition, has often tended to identify the ministry of the risen Christ with the ministry of the Spirit. Trinitarian thinking attempts to recognise the Holy Spirit as having her own identity and at the same time insists that that identity is essentially inter-related with the identity of the second person, the story of Jesus the Christ.

The fact that Christian faith makes an ultimate claim upon the believer implies a truth claim. This truth claim is accompanied by a noetic humility arising from a qualitative difference between the believer and God. Since it is fundamental for the Christian that the redeemer God is the creator of heaven and earth, and since God has revealed his will to save his creation, therefore the Christian may presume that the God who has established the event of salvation in Jesus Christ, seeks and finds many ways in which the content of the story of Jesus can free the human conscience. Whether it actually is the Spirit who proceeds from the Father through the Son, can only be known by the fruits of the Spirit:

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 11:5 the *blind receive their sight*, the *lame walk*, the *lepers are cleansed*, the *deaf hear*, the *dead are raised*, and the *poor have good news brought to them*. 11:6 And *blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.*" (Matthew 11:2-6)

In a world where we daily hear of torture and genocide, where the threat of nuclear war is not diminishing, where the rich become richer and the poor become poorer, where ecological dignity is powerless against economic interests, religions must declare, explain and make manifest that they are on the side of truth, peace and justice.

Christians enter into dialogue with other religions in the awareness that God's concern is for all people, that God's salvation in Christ is offered unconditionally, that this grace is accessible in whatever broken manner to all people, that its only limitation is given by the nature of God as love which cannot coerce, but which longs to become manifest in hope, justice, liberation, and *shalom*.

***TL: Canberra, 09/06/2003.***

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