

Who Do We Say That We Are?

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Christian Identity
in a Multi-Religious World

Interreligious Dialogue
and Cooperation
World Council of Churches



**World Council
of Churches**
Publications

WHO DO WE SAY THAT WE ARE?
Christian Identity in a Multi-Religious World

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Foreword

The title of this report deliberately echoes Jesus' words to his disciples in the synoptic gospels: "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus' question leads the disciples to a new step in their faith and their realization of Jesus' identity.

Just as it was then with Jesus and his first friends, so it is today with us: Christian identity and self-understanding are realized not through assertions but through questions. It is our neighbours of other religions who can help us discover who we really are.

The report itself, *Who Do We Say That We Are? Christian Identity in a Multi-Religious World*, is the result of considerable work and widespread collaboration over a period of more than twelve years, which has finally come to this fruition, having been received by the World Council of Churches central committee in July 2014.

The study process which eventually resulted in this document first started in 2002, with a recommendation by the WCC central committee to the three staff teams of Faith and Order, Inter-religious Relations, and Mission and Evangelism, and their respective commissions or advisory bodies. Around this time the substantial document *Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions* was published. *Ecumenical Considerations* was seeking to ask questions about the rationale and parameters for dialogue with people of other religions; the present document is seeking to offer something rather different (though obviously related), namely, how the living reality of being a Christian in a multi-religious world may, and perhaps should, affect our understanding and perception of our own Christian faith. The premise

that underlies the report is that through dialogue with people of other religions we can deepen our understanding of key tenets of our Christian faith, and discover new and fresh insights.

Back in 2003, while working for the Anglican Communion with responsibility for interreligious dialogue, I was invited to participate in the meetings that marked the beginnings of this process. It was the first occasion on which I myself worked with the World Council of Churches. Over the years since, I was also invited to contribute to a number of the “religion specific” consultations that also fed into the development of the present document. So it felt both an honour and a challenge that, when I started working at the WCC myself in 2011 as Programme Executive for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation, I was asked by colleagues to draw the process to a conclusion. I am delighted to make it more widely available now in this trade edition.

Clare Amos

Programme Executive, Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation
World Council of Churches

Who Do We Say That We Are?

Introduction

1. Human beings live in a world of many different faiths, many different religions. In truth, this has always been so, but developments throughout the 20th century and now into the 21st century facilitating speed of communication and travel, together with changes in the political order and large-scale migration, have brought home to many this reality in a way that they would not previously have imagined, or perhaps even desired. Such realization of the religious plurality of our world can provoke a variety of reactions among Christians. These can include wonder, challenge, hostility, embarrassment, puzzlement, self-questioning, and fear.
2. Jesus once asked his disciples the question: “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29 and parallels). Today, mindful of the religiously plural contexts in which Christian life and witness are set within our world, we ask of ourselves: “Who do we say that we are?” Christians in every age have implicitly asked this question, for it is the point of deep self-reflection where, taking seriously the contemporary needs of witness and mission, we discover whose we are and whom we serve. Our answer to this question both reflects and guides the way we live out our unique religious identity and calling.
3. Christianity itself came to birth in a lived experience of a world of religious plurality. The very earliest expressions of

Christian self-understanding emerged as Christians began consciously to define themselves first as a sect within Judaism and then, partly due to interaction with the pagan world, as distinct from the Jewish faith. “It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:26). This primary and fundamental stage in the development of Christian self-identity undoubtedly took place partly because Antioch was a city both famous and infamous for the religious diversity it accommodated. Throughout the first four or five centuries of its life, the church continued to be shaped by its interaction with the Jewish and Hellenistic (Greek) religious traditions, as well as by religio-political concerns of the Roman Empire. The doctrinal developments during this period, culminating in the classic Christian understandings about the nature of God and the person of Christ as articulated in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, were influenced by a positive implied conversation with the Greek worlds of religion and philosophy. But during the lengthy following period of “Christendom,” particularly in parts of the world where Christianity was the dominant faith, politically and religiously, the focus was rather on intra-Christian discussion and argument, which, with occasional exceptions, did not overtly seek to take seriously the faiths and beliefs of others outside the Christian fold. Certainly these others were not normally perceived as influencing how Christians thought about themselves, even though in parts of the world, such as the Middle East, substantial Christian communities lived alongside adherents of another faith for many centuries. During the 19th and the earlier part of the 20th century, the Western missionary movement found itself in situations of engagement, and sometimes conflict, with other religions. Though there was a gradual shift in mission

thinking, with many mission practitioners and thinkers becoming committed to constructive dialogue with followers of other religions, the awareness only gradually dawned that such engagement could even impinge upon Christian identity itself. It was only slowly that the insight expressed in the preface to the “Christian Presence” series of books began to filter consciously into the thinking of mainstream Christianity: “When we approach the man [*sic*] of another faith than our own it will be in a spirit of expectancy to find how God has been speaking to him and what new understandings of the grace and love of God we may ourselves discover in this encounter.”¹

4. Over the last 25 years, and particularly since the beginning of the 21st century, political, ideological, and religious shifts have given a new edge to the need for Christians to engage appropriately with religious plurality. There are at least two complementary aspects to this engagement. One is the importance of enabling constructive dialogue with adherents of other religions. *Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions*, a document produced by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 2004, expresses the parameters and principles for such dialogue. There is however another further aspect, perhaps even more urgent, foreshadowed in the “Christian Presence” series, and which the Christian churches and people cannot avoid exploring more deeply today: namely, how a real awareness of this context of religious plurality may affect questions of Christian identity and self-understanding. It is this concern that the present document seeks to address.

1. The *Christian Presence* books were a series published by SCM in the 1950s and 1960s. Each book in the series reflected on Christian engagement with a specific religion. The preface (from which the quotation above comes) was written by Max Warren.

5. These early years of the 21st century seem to be marked by a profound dialectic that is affecting the life of our globe. The increasing interaction brought about by travel, communications, and migration has led on the one hand to a deeper sense of shared humanity, and therefore of universal and world-wide concerns, but on the other has also provoked a greater insistence upon particularity and otherness. Religion is not vanishing, as had been suggested by modern predictions of secularization, but rather it remains a vibrant element shaping and influencing culture and civil society. However, religions seem to exemplify fundamental tension. There is both the recognition of the universality of religious experience and commitment, but also the establishment of more rigid boundaries between religions, in part influenced by long histories in which economic, political, and social factors; ethnicity; and demography have all played key roles. As a result, mutual perceptions and relations between religions are frequently dictated by preconceived ideas and a lack of mutual listening.
6. The identities of Christians across the world and their relationships with others are enormously varied as well. They have been shaped by long and diverse processes of interaction in which missionary work has played what sometimes seemed to be an ambiguous role. Many Christians acted out of their faithfulness to the gospel; struggled in humility to share the love, grace, and mercy of God in Christ with other people; and showed genuine solidarity with the marginalized. Yet Christians have often dismissed people belonging to other faiths as merely “heathen” and were far from taking seriously their religious and spiritual traditions. Though stemming from a sincerely held belief in the absolute and exclusive truth of the Christian faith, a pernicious attitude of

cultural superiority had detrimental effects on those others and betrayed the core message of the gospel. Consequently, a critical reassessment of our self-understanding is badly needed. And, indeed, conscious efforts in interreligious dialogue, both locally as well as internationally, have given us a new awareness that relating interreligiously may belong integrally to our Christian identity: it is a vital aspect of the boundary-crossing nature that is written in to the fabric of Christianity. In turn, this must entail an attentive and open listening to people of other faiths.

7. Our primary identity as Christians lies in the fact that we are “people of the resurrection.” Alongside the diversity that marks out Christians throughout the world, we must affirm that this is a common character that binds us together as Christians. From earliest times of Christian history, the followers of Jesus have seen their central role as being “witnesses of the resurrection” (Acts 1:22). It is only in the light of the resurrection that the whole of the Christian story can be fully understood: “He [Jesus] ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead” (Mark 9:9). The ecumenical movement is founded on the conviction that such a common identity exists within the undoubted diversity of our confessions and cultures. Yet the resurrection is not simply ours, as Christians, to possess. The resurrection of Christ is intimately connected to the resurrection of the whole of humanity. It is no accident that the resurrection accounts of the gospels have an elusive, mysterious quality to them, illustrative of God’s refusal to be trapped into particular religious systems or expectations. The resurrection both ratifies the pre-Easter ministry of Jesus described in the gospels, and also throws it excitingly open to the whole world. The WCC general

assembly in Porto Alegre (2006) devoted a plenary session to the question of Christian identity and religious plurality. With respect to the former, it was suggested that our identity of Christians requires us to “carry the name of Christ,”

to belong in a place that Jesus defines for us in his very person. By living in that place, we come in some degree to share his identity, to bear his name and to be in the same relationships he has with God and with the world ... Christian identity is a faithful identity, an identity marked by consistently being with both God and God's world.

Paul introduces his hymn on the self-emptying of Christ (Phil. 2:5–12) with the exhortation, “Have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Sharing his “mind” enables us to share in the same relationship he has with God and also with the world, a relationship characterized by Christ's work and ministry of reconciliation.

To be a Christian is not to lay claim to absolute knowledge, but to lay claim to the perspective that will transform our most deeply rooted hurts and fears and so change the world at the most important level. It is a perspective that depends on being where Jesus is, under his authority, sharing the “breath” of his life, seeing what he sees – God as Abba, Father, a God completely committed to the people in whose life he seeks to reproduce his own life.²

2. Rowan Williams, “Plenary on Christian Identity and Religious Plurality,” WCC Assembly, Porto Alegre, 2006, at: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2006-porto-alegre/2-plenary-presentations/christian-identity-religious-plurality/>

8. If we assume our identity as Christians by seeking to stand where Jesus Christ himself stands, this has profound implications for our relationship with God, the world, and with the whole of humanity. It becomes intrinsic to our understanding of who we are to stand in solidarity “in Christ” with the marginalized and the stranger. The self-reflective question “Who do we say that we are?” cannot be separated from the existential question “What must we do?” In the parable of the great judgment in Matt. 25:31-46, Jesus reveals that he has identified himself with the hungry, the sick, the naked, the prisoner, and the stranger, and his resurrection has ratified that this is where we must stand with him now. As this parable makes clear, if we – and others – desire to share his company eternally, we must accept to be identified not only by doctrines or terminology but by the place where we choose to stand.³ Such a location is risky, and has porous borders that cannot be sealed.
9. How does this stance of Jesus affect the relationship of Christians to people of other religions? In 1989, a statement made at the San Antonio conference of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CMWE) said, “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.”⁴ It is with such a “mind” as this, which draws together both faithful confidence and openness of vision, that the deepening of our Christian self-understanding in this multi-religious world needs to be explored. Depending upon our specific contexts, such self-understanding may require of us

rowan-williams-presentation?set_language=en

3. It is perhaps significant that in semitic languages the word for “stand” and the word for “resurrection” are closely linked.

4. Wilson, F.R. (ed), *The San Antonio Report. Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ's Way* (Geneva: WCC, 1990), 32.

repentance, or it may mean that we need to be prepared to offer a risky or prophetic challenge. But it is a “mind” in which humility is vital and that offers no resting place for arrogance. The word “deepening” is used deliberately because when we open ourselves to people of other religions, we may sometimes hear echoes of what we have come to believe on the basis of our experience of the life, the cross and the resurrection of Christ, and be given fresh insights into our own faith. The challenge for Christians in this world of religious plurality is perhaps to be “re-evangelised through a gracious encounter with other people ... [so that] Christians have been evangelised by people of other faiths – not with another *evangelium*, but with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁵

10. So in responding to the challenges offered to us by other faiths and their peoples, Christians are not only answering queries and critiques posed by our religious interlocutors, we are also rethinking, re-interpreting, and reformulating the understanding of our own faith in a way that is congruent with the tradition of Christian self-reflection and theological development that has existed since the very beginnings of Christianity. This is, of course, a mutual process, and just as Christians may be transformed by their encounter with the religious other, so authentic interreligious engagement may also pose to such others challenges which can lead to transformation.

11. The following sections of this document explore some key aspects of how Christian identity has been challenged by religious diversity, and how Christian commitment may be nourished by encounters in dialogue with those who do not

5. Michael Ipgrave, “Loving Wisdom,” unpublished lecture, 2009.

share our perspective and place as they have been defined for us by Jesus in his person. The reflections in these sections take account of the work done at a number of meetings and consultations organized by the WCC over the past decade that have explored Christian self-understanding in the context of a religiously plural world. A note of these meetings is given in the Appendix. The reflections offered are not seeking to collate the reports and findings of those meetings, but rather to use them, as far as appropriate, as a background resource for the current document. We have also drawn, where applicable, on two recent published major documents: *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, produced by the CWME⁶ and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*,⁷ produced by the Commission on Faith and Order, believing that it is important that the interreligious insights offered by the WCC are congruent with recent work offered by these two commissions. As with the document *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World*, the current document is intended for a wide audience rather than aimed at specialists in interreligious concerns.

12. Running through this document, and mindful of the 10th Assembly of the WCC – with its prayer “God of life, lead us to justice and peace” – is the motif of “life.” Whatever else our Christian self-understanding in this world of many faiths requires of us, it surely demands that we see ourselves as people who are committed to fullness of life for all. We have become all too aware of the ability of religions, including our own, to become death-dealing rather than life-giving.

6. *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes, with a Practical Guide*, ed. Jooseop Keum (Geneva: WCC, 2013).

7. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013).

The touchstone as to whether or not our self-understanding leads toward life is a vital one, and reiterated by Jesus himself on one of the few occasions in the synoptic gospels when he himself sought to define God: “He is God not of the dead, but the living” (Mark 12:27 and parallels).

13. A considerable number of Christians, both scholars and practitioners, have been involved in the process that led to this document, and it reflects their vision. All of them, whatever their specific backgrounds and contexts, would acknowledge the critical importance of serious engagement by Christians with people of other faiths. They would avow that it is through such long-term and patient exchange over a considerable period of time, giving to and receiving from people of other faiths, that their own self-understanding and sense of identity as Christians have been enriched and that they have felt able to proffer some questions, even “hard” ones, to their companions of different faiths. At a memorial service held in May 2013 for Bishop Kenneth Cragg, whose important role in the establishment in the 1970s of the WCC Programme for Dialogue with Other Living Faiths and Ideologies is widely acknowledged, it was suggested that Bishop Cragg’s life and work exemplified the story of the Emmaus road. It was through the willingness of the disciples to travel a considerable distance with a “stranger,” through their willingness to ask questions of him and to respond to those he asked, and finally through their willingness to offer hospitality, that “their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (Luke 24:31) in a new light. Can the courtesy and challenge of the story of the Emmaus road and its crucial witness to the resurrection victory of life offer us a pattern in our quest for our own Christian self-understanding in this world of many faiths? As the WCC shapes its work during

the coming years as a “pilgrimage of justice and peace,” this journey to Emmaus may offer us a hint of how our vision can be enlarged by a willingness to travel alongside people of other faiths in our mutual human quest for peace and justice.

14. In the following sections we explore the theological understandings and affirmations that we share as an ecumenical community as we seek to elaborate an answer to that vital question, “Who do we say that we are?” We begin by affirming that our self-identity as Christians in the contemporary world is grounded in our understanding of God as Trinity. This leads us to explore first what it means to speak of God as the creator of all. Next we focus on our understanding of Jesus Christ, who for Christians represents the redemptive life of the world, and in turn then reflect on the life-giving Spirit of God. In each case we sketch our affirmation and note the deepening and discovery through dialogue that is evoked. Following the explication of these trinitarian affirmations, we touch on scripture, the church, and eschatology as leading elements in the quest to express our self-understanding as Christians set within a religiously plural world. The document is not simply linear, but revisits a number of key motifs during the course of our exploration, thus embedding the pattern of deepening through discovery into its own structure.