

Baar Statement:

Theological Perspectives on Plurality¹

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Contents

Baar Statement:	1
Theological Perspectives on Plurality	1
I. Introduction	2
II. A Theological Understanding of Religious Plurality	3
III. Christology And Religious Plurality	4
IV. The Holy Spirit And Religious Plurality.....	5
V. Interreligious Dialogue: A Theological Perspective	5

The Dialogue sub-unit of the WCC undertook a four-year study programme on 'My Neighbour's Faith and Mine - Theological Discoveries through Interfaith Dialogue'. As the apex of this study, delegates from the Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions were brought together to reflect on some of these issues. A week of intense discussions centred on questions such as the significance of religious plurality, christology, and the issues in understanding the activity of the Spirit in the world. The document which follows is a statement made by the members of this consultation, which was held in Baar, near Zurich, Switzerland in January 1990. It informed the discussion of these issues at the 7th WCC assembly in Canberra in February 1991.

¹ Downloaded from <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/baar-statement-theological-perspectives-on-plurality> on 18 July 2016.

I. Introduction

Dialogue with people of living faiths has been part of the Work of the WCC since 1971 when the Central Committee meeting in Addis Ababa affirmed that dialogue "is to be understood as the common adventure of the churches".

Since the Nairobi WCC Assembly in 1975 this common adventure has been seen primarily as "dialogue in community". This has meant entering into dialogue with our neighbours of other faiths in the communities we as Christians share with them, exploring such issues as peace, justice, and humanity's relation to nature. We have found repeatedly that Christians may not behave as if we were the only people of faith as we face common problems of an interdependent world. It is evident the various religious traditions of the world have much to contribute in wisdom and inspiration towards solving these problems.

In this ecumenical consultation we have reaffirmed the importance of Dialogue in Community as articulated in the [Guidelines on Dialogues](#) (1979). We also recall the affirmation of the Central Committee in adopting these guidelines: "To enter into dialogue requires an opening of the mind and heart to others. It is an undertaking which requires risk as well as a deep sense of vocation" (Central Committee, Kingston, Jamaica, 1979).

We turned our attention with particular urgency to the theological questions that have emerged from the practice of dialogue. As the **Guidelines** suggested: "Christians engaged in faithful 'dialogue in community' with people of other faiths...cannot avoid asking themselves penetrating questions about the place of these people in the activity of God in history. They ask these questions not in theory, but in terms of what God may be doing in the lives of hundreds of millions of men and women who live in and seek community together with Christians, but along different ways" (Guidelines, p.11).

Dialogue with people of other living faiths leads us to ask what is the relation of the diversity of religious traditions to the mystery of the one Triune God? It is clear to us that interfaith dialogue has implications not only for our human relations in community with people of other faiths, but for our Christian theology as well.

From the beginning Christians have encountered people of other faiths, and from time to time theologians have grappled with the significance of religious plurality. The modern ecumenical movement from its earliest beginnings (Edinburgh 1910) has made many attempts to understand the relation of the Christian message to the world of many faiths.

Today our greater awareness and appreciation of religious plurality leads us to move in this "common adventure" toward a more adequate theology of religions. There is a widely felt need for such a theology, for without it Christians remain ill-equipped to understand the profound religious experiences which they witness in the lives of people of other faiths or to articulate their own experience in a way that will be understood by people of other faiths.

II. A Theological Understanding of Religious Plurality

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. We see His wisdom and justice extending to the ends of the earth as He guides the nations through their traditions of wisdom and understanding. God's glory penetrates the whole of creation.

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 salvation, or wholeness, or enlightenment, or divine guidance, or rest, or liberation.

We therefore take this witness with the utmost seriousness and acknowledge that among all the nations and peoples there has always been the saving presence of God. Though as Christians our testimony is always to the salvation we have experienced through Christ, we at the same time "cannot set limits to the saving power of God" (CWME, San Antonio 1989).

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 humankind. We affirm that God has been present in their seeking and finding, that where there is truth and wisdom in their teachings, and love and holiness in their living, this like any wisdom, insight, knowledge, understanding, love and holiness that is found among us is the gift of the Holy Spirit. We also affirm that God is with them as they struggle, along with us, for justice and liberation.

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 groups of peoples. 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. "The Spirit of God is at work in ways that pass human understanding and in places that to us are least expected. In entering into dialogue with others, therefore, Christians seek to discern the unsearchable riches of Christ and the way God deals with humanity" (CWME Statement, Mission and Evangelism).

It is our Christian faith in God which challenges us to take seriously the whole realm of religious plurality. We see this not so much as an obstacle to be overcome, but rather as an opportunity for deepening our encounter with God and with our neighbours as we await the fulfilment when "God will be all in all" (1 Cor. 15-18). 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 neighbours of other faiths" (CWME Report, San Antonio 1989, para. 29). The one God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ has not left Himself without witness, anywhere (Acts 14.17).

Ambiguity in the Religious Traditions

Any affirmation of the positive qualities of wisdom, love, compassion, and spiritual insight in the world's religious traditions must also speak with honesty and with sadness of the human wickedness and folly that is also present in all religious communities. We must recognize the ways in which religion has functioned too often to support systems of oppression and exclusion. Any adequate theology of religions must deal with human wickedness and sin, with disobedience to spiritual insight and failure to live in accordance with the highest ideals. Therefore we are continually challenged by the Spirit to discern the wisdom and purposes of God.

III. Christology And Religious Plurality

Because we have seen and experienced goodness, truth and holiness among followers of other paths and ways than that of Jesus Christ, we are forced to confront with total seriousness the question raised in the [Guidelines on Dialogue](#) (1979) concerning the universal creative and redemptive activity of God towards all humankind and the particular redemptive activity of God in the history of Israel and in the person and work of Jesus Christ (para. 23). We find ourselves recognizing a need to move beyond a theology which confines salvation to the explicit personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

We affirm that in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, the entire human family has been united to God in an irrevocable bond and covenant. The saving presence of God's activity in all creation and human history comes to its focal point in the event of Christ.

In Jesus's words and action, in His proclamation, in His ministry of healing and service, God was establishing His reign on earth, a sovereign rule whose presence and power cannot be limited to any one community or culture. The attitudes of Jesus as He reached out to those beyond the house of Israel testify to this universal reign. He spoke with the woman of Samaria, affirming all who would worship God in Spirit and truth (Jn. 4.7-24). He marvelled at the faith of a centurion, acknowledging that He had not found such faith in all Israel (Matt. 8.5-11). For the sake of a Syro-Phoenician woman, and in response to her faith, He performed a miracle of healing (Matt. 15.21-28).

But while it appears that the saving power of the reign of God made present in Jesus during His earthly ministry was in some sense limited (cf. Matt. 10.23), through the event of His death and resurrection, the paschal mystery itself, these limits were transcended. The cross and the resurrection disclose for us the universal dimension of the saving mystery of God.

This saving mystery is mediated and expressed in many and various ways as God's plan unfolds toward its fulfillment. It may be available to those outside the fold of Christ (Jn. 10.16) in ways we cannot understand, as they live faithful and truthful lives in their concrete circumstances and in the framework of the religious traditions which guide and inspire them. The Christ event is for us the clearest expression of the salvific will of God in all human history. (I Tim. 2.4)

IV. The Holy Spirit And Religious Plurality

We have been especially concerned in this Consultation with the person and work of the Holy Spirit, who moved and still moves over the face of the earth to create, nurture, challenge, renew and sustain. We have learned again to see the activity of the Spirit as beyond our definitions, descriptions and limitations, as "the wind blows where it wills" (Jn. 3.8). We have marvelled at the "economy" of the Spirit in all the world, and are full of hope and expectancy. We see the freedom of the Spirit moving in ways which we cannot predict, we see the nurturing power of the Spirit bringing order out of chaos and renewing the face of the earth, and the 'energies' of the Spirit working within and inspiring human beings in their universal longing for and seeking after truth, peace and justice. Everything which belongs to 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' is properly to be recognized and acknowledged as the fruit of the activity of the Holy Spirit. (Gal. 5.22-23, cf. Rom. 14.17).

We are clear, therefore, that a positive answer must be given to the question raised in the Guidelines on Dialogue (1979) "is it right and helpful to understand the work of God outside the Church in terms of the Holy Spirit" (para. 23). We affirm unequivocally that God the Holy Spirit has been at work in the life and traditions of peoples of living faiths.

Further we affirm that it is within the realm of the Spirit that we may be able to interpret the truth and goodness of other religions and distinguish the "things that differ", so that our "love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment" (Phil. 1.9-10).

We also affirm that the Holy Spirit, the Interpreter of Christ and of our own Scriptures (Jn. 14.26) will lead us to understand afresh the deposit of the faith already given to us, and into fresh and unexpected discovery of new wisdom and insight, as we learn more from our neighbours of other faiths.

V. Interreligious Dialogue: A Theological Perspective

Our recognition of the mystery of salvation in men and women of other religious traditions shapes the concrete attitudes with which we Christians must approach them in interreligious dialogue.

We need to respect their religious convictions, different as these may be from our own, and to admire the things which God has accomplished and continues to accomplish in them through the Spirit. Interreligious dialogue is therefore a "two-way street". Christians must enter into it in a spirit of openness, prepared to receive from others, while on their part, they give witness of their own faith. Authentic dialogue opens both partners to a deeper conversion to the God who speaks to each through the other. Through the witness of others, we Christians can truly discover facets of the divine mystery which we have not yet seen or responded to. The practice of dialogue will then result in the deepening of our own life of faith. We believe that walking together with people of other living faiths will bring us to a fuller understanding and experience of truth.

We feel called to allow the practice of interreligious dialogue to transform the way in which we do theology. We need to move toward a dialogical theology in which the praxis of dialogue together with that of human liberation, will constitute a true *locus theologicus*, i.e. both a source of and basis for theological work. The challenge of religious plurality and the praxis of dialogue are part of the context in which we must search for fresh understandings, new questions, and better expressions of our Christian faith and commitment.