



Maintaining Christian Character Within Plurality

Jaco Beyers¹

¹ Department Religion Studies, University of Pretoria, South Africa

jaco.beyers@up.ac.za

Abstract. Plurality is a reality. It is no longer possible in a globalized society to avoid those who are different than oneself. Christians need to re-evaluate the ways of interacting and the response to encounters with other religions in order to maintain a Christian character. To identify a Christian character is complex. There are several factors that may problematize the effort of defining a Christian character. Elements such as theology of religions informing the models on which Christians base their interactions and relations with others. There are several possible theologies of religions. Henning Wrogemann suggests that a theory of interreligious relations accounting for insights from cultural studies is also necessary to construct a model of interaction. There are different ways of engaging with others. Relations with other religions vary on a spectrum from recognition to rejection. The models of Accommodation, Opposition, Isolation and Collaboration are discussed here. Theo Sundermeier suggests that the concept of Konvivenz is useful in constructing interreligious relations. Konvivenz implies reciprocal assisting and supporting one another in need, learning reciprocally from others and celebrating together. Konvivenz can be a model how Christian character amidst plurality is expressed. Religions can share knowledge and resources with one another, address social and ethical matters of shared concern and celebrate life together. In this way differences are not ignored but reconciled. With these suggestions a guideline as to how maintaining Christian character within plurality becomes possible.

Keywords: Christianity, interreligious relations, konvivenz plurality, theology of religions

1 Introduction

The word “plurality”, derived from the word plural, implies the presence of multiple entities. These entities can exist in some form of relation with one another. The nature of the relation is, however, unclear. As plurality merely indicates the quantitative nature and not the qualitative relation between the entities, it is impossible to make a value statement on the nature of the relations. The moment the identity of the entities become clear; it may be possible to determine the quality of the relations.

The main focus in this presentation on maintaining Christian character within plurality will be on how Christianity relates to other religions. This contribution will thus

deal with identity and relationships. Identity can be either that of the individual or the group. Relationships between a “us” versus “them”, where “they” denote the Other, or the outsider, can have a variety of configurations. Our main focus is not the different forms of expression of relations. The main goal here is to identify the theology underlying the expression of the relationships. I will discuss the theoretical, in this case theological grounds, which provide substance to the decision on a particular form of relation with other religions.

I will start off by indicating the difficulty when defining Christian character amidst plurality. Next the different theological positions supporting models of relations are discussed. The theological positions inform and determine the models of interreligious relations. This contribution ends off with a few suggestions as to what elements need to be considered when discussing maintaining Christian character within plurality.

2 What is Christian Character?

What do we refer to when we talk about Christian character? Does it imply adherence to Christian dogma, ethics, behavior, attitude, identity, or a combination of these or all at once and even a bit more? What seems to be a question with a simple and quick answer proves to be more difficult for the following reasons:

What Christianity are we talking about? If we talk about Christian character, do we imply that there is one universal way in which Christians understand their own identity, dogma, teaching and ethical expression? This is however not true. Since religion is a cultural expression, we need to acknowledge that different cultures will entertain different ways of understanding their Christian identity. Christians in London surely experience their Christian identity differently than Christians living in Lagos or Jakarta. Christianity is not one monolithic block of belief. There are many variations of Christianity such as Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Pentecostalism. Each of these constitute one form or the other of Christianity. Each of these may understand the relationship with other religions differently.

What about multiple religious belonging? Can we talk about a monopolar identity in a postmodern environment where a growing tendency is to have multiple religious affiliations? Research performed by Oostveen emphasizes the implications of multiple religious belonging to a theology of religions. People identifying with Christianity among other religions will have a different way of understanding their relation with other religions [1, p. 44].

Does secularization influence Christian identity? Steve Bruce indicates that the possibility of interpreting multiple religious belonging as a new form of secularization does exist. It appears as if the individual commitment to one religion has become flexible [1, p. 611]. Can we under such conditions still talk about Christian character? If secularization refers to the social process of marginalizing religion [3, p. 7], how do we view the relation of Christianity to other religions? If religion has become something existing outside of the perimeters of society, do the inter-religious relations really matter, and if they do, to whom do they matter?

Are we referring to Cultural Christianity? When talking about Christian character are, we perhaps referring to Christian civilization, implying that geographically the territory where Christian communities are, are claimed to be Christian. Stefan Paas refers to the rise of the concept of Christendom since emperor Constantine declared Christianity as state religion [3, p. 11]. When suggesting a definition for religion, Linda Woodhead differentiates between religion as belief and religion as identity marker [4, p. 112, p. 119]. Religion as belief refers to a religious interest in dogmas, doctrines and propositions. Religion as identity marker refers to religion as a source of identity, either socially or as personal choice. It is therefore difficult to understand what we are referring to when talking about Christian character. It was unfortunate, according to Paas, that the understanding of Christendom led to the division of the world into Christian and “pagan” territory. This sentiment can still be detected in current interreligious relations [3, p. 12].

Is Christianity part of the “buffet”? The phenomenon of “buffet mentality” as mentioned by Henning Wrogemann indicates a postmodern tendency where individuals make a subjective selection of religious elements to construct a religious portfolio [2, p. 216]. If this is the case, what kind of Christianity are we talking about? If people partially subscribe to Christian values and dogmas, does it make them qualify as Christians? What does it say about interreligious relations when people are open and willing to accommodate multiple religious elements in their religious makeup?

To indicate what Christian character refers to proves to be a complex matter. That which constitutes the essence of Christianity is difficult to identify, but in order to decide on Christian character, that which makes Christianity unique, or sets it apart from other religions is clearly the belief in Jesus Christ as encountered in the Bible. If that constitutes Christianity, we at least know that everyone who subscribes to this conviction will be considered affiliated to Christianity. Ethics and rituals flowing from this conviction will be considered part of Christian character. When Christian character differentiates it as a religion from other religions, what is the relation between Christianity and other religions? Confirmed group identity results in setting oneself apart from others. It becomes us versus them – an insider versus an outsider. It is important that we investigate the theological arguments used in constructing a relationship with other religions. A theology of religions is necessary.

3 Theology of Religions

The discipline reflecting theologically on interreligious relations is referred to as theology of religions (Latin *theologia religionum*) [6, p. 20]. A theology of religions focuses on other religions Christianity is encountering as challenging or opposing the message and mission of the church. The aim is to evaluate other religions from a Christian perspective and determine the challenge they pose to maintaining a Christian character and also to reach a deeper level of understanding of interreligious relations.

Since the early ages of Christianity there were reflections on interreligious relations. Much has been written over the centuries on the relation between Christianity

and other religions [6]. Gradually these reflections crystalized in traditional models describing interreligious relations. Paul Knitter [7] updated the traditional established models (i.e. Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism) by adding a fourth possible suggestion called the Acceptance Model. Exclusivism suggests that there is only one religion with knowledge of God that can bring salvation, namely Christianity. Inclusivism refers to a position claiming that all religions have knowledge of God but only one religion brings salvation, namely Christianity. Pluralism maintains that all religions are equal and have access to knowledge of God. Each religion suggests its own valid way of attaining salvation [8]. According to the Acceptance Model Christians can only accept the differences between religions and acknowledge that there is nothing in common among religions [7, p. 181]. The result would be a relationship with other religions of being a “good neighbor” [7, p. 183].

Some scholars, such as Paul Hedges, feels that the traditional models only lead to an impasse, as no solution is presented where the particularity and plurality in interreligious relations is properly addressed. Hedges therefore suggests Pluralism as the most viable model describing interreligious relations [9, p.2]. Pluralism suggests radical openness to the religious other [9, p. 111, p. 230] and is necessitated by Christian tradition [9, p. 2]. Kevin Rose supports Hedges that Pluralism will become the only option for Christians to consider for interreligious relations [10, p. 2, p. 5].

According to Pluralism, the validity and the equality of all religions must be recognized. No religion can be considered inferior to others. All religions must be viewed as having knowledge of that which is considered transcendental. Every religion presents a valid mode of existence. No longer can one religion deny or exclude the position and status of the other. Pluralism can lead to syncretism [9, p. 237] allowing religions to exchange elements to such an extent that the unique identity of a religion disappears [10, p. 73]. It can also bring about relativism where all religions are considered equal and religious affiliation no longer matters.

More recent alternative theological models for interreligious relations have been suggested by Cheetham, Dagers and Wrogemann. Cheetham suggests that the nature of interreligious encounters must change from the religious to an aesthetic and ethical space of meeting [2, p.7, p. 123]. This implies that one views other religions as one would view a work of art, thus emphasizing the way of seeing [2, p. 127]. The goal is to experience empathy on an aesthetic level between religious traditions. This can be reached by being an “imaginatively participating perceiver” [2, p. 147] and not a participant. Viewing the other becomes a subjective activity. Seeing the other for what it is and appreciating the uniqueness and beauty within the other leads to mutual appreciation. Cheetham is trying to set the scene for the encounter, preparing conditions conducive to meaningful encounters between religions [11].

Jenny Dagers attempts to establish a theology of religions which takes the current postcolonial context into consideration as acting paradigm for thinking about religions [12]. According to Dagers the traditional models of theology of religions consisted of “Eurocentric imperialist attitudes” and must be replaced by postcolonial theologies of religious difference in order to indicate the transition from a monologue by Eurocentric Christians to acknowledging religious plurality [3, p. 1]. Dagers suggests that within a postcolonial context a revised particularist theology of religions is necessary

in order to acknowledge the particularity of religious traditions and simultaneously respect the integrity of Christianity and other religions [3, p. 2]. Daggars suggests a Christian particularity grounded in trinitarian theology. This would encourage Christianity to act with hospitality towards postcolonial theologies [3, p. 2.]

The context within which other religions are viewed is no longer a Euro-centric, Christian pivotal perspective, but a disentanglement from this position in order to recognize and acknowledge diversity. Over centuries the understanding of other religions through the lens and in terms of Christian doctrine caused an entanglement [3, p. 18].

Wrogemann suggests that a theology as well as a theory of interreligious relations is necessary [4, p. 2]. With this Wrogemann suggests that a theology of religions do not address the true questions and that we need to go beyond the theology of religions and pursue a theory of interreligious relations. The theory will incorporate insights gained from cultural studies as well as the questions arising from such insights [4, p. 21]. Sundermeier supports this by stating that it is as important to analyze interreligious relations as it is to investigate intercultural relations [5, p. 195]. This will enable Christians to motivate on theological bases the relations with other religions. The point Wrogemann makes is that the true question is that of heuristics: how do we go about in understanding interreligious relations. An understanding of the other is necessary in order to formulate one's own position and relation to the other [2, p. 19]. Thus, only in being honest about one's own prejudices and biases towards other religions can one formulate a model of relations.

4 Models of Relations for Maintaining a Christian Character

The world we are living in has become plural in more than one way [6, p. 18]. Existing in isolation is something of the past. A growing number of communities are linked to a widening network and are exposed to influences far outside their traditional range. Homogeneous communities are becoming the exception and plural communities the rule. Our world is changing into one huge plural society. This plurality applies to all levels of existence which include religious affiliation, race and culture, social and economic status as well as worldview.

Plurality implies connectedness. Globalization made humanity aware of differences. The open access to society and the world communities at large not only brought people into contact, but multiplied the divergence. Any claim or statement purporting to have fundamental and/or universal implications must be prepared to be tested. The world has become a global village. Discussing co-existence within plurality has become inevitable.

Within plurality a relation with that which does not belong to oneself – the stranger – is construed as a polarized relation between oneself and the other. The relation with the “other” as object outside of oneself has been problematized by the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1950) [14]. For Simmel the “other” is a member of a system of group formation, but not strongly attached to it or accepted by the other members of the system [15]. To communicate to the other implies a willingness to acknowledge

the existence of the other. In the relation with the other a perceived hierarchical arrangement of relations might exist.

Wrogemann indicates that with interreligious relations we need to acknowledge that there is an entire spectrum of possible positions ranging between the two extremities of recognition and rejection [2, p. 215]. When religions meet, whether it is due to military conquests, colonial expansion, migration or missionary activities, there are several possible reactions [5, p. 165]. These reactions are indications how Christianity may respond to plurality.

4.1 Accommodation

It may happen when religions meet that one dominant religion forces another religion to take over the identity of another religion. It may also happen when two religions peacefully co-exist and a process of gradual integration takes place. Both these instances may be labelled as syncretism [5, p. 166]. For Sundermeier the forced integration constitutes synthetic syncretism and the peaceful, gradual integration is symbiotic syncretism [5, p. 165, p. 172]. The result is that one religion relinquishes its identity and is absorbed by another religion. This implies the relinquishing of identity and character and taking on a different identity than one's own. It is clear how a theology of religions based on inclusivism and pluralism may motivate such an interreligious relation.

4.2 Opposition

In the struggle to maintain identity and character, religions can end up as opposing forces. To maintain character religions can resort to fighting or fleeing. The fleeing would imply that religions go "underground" to hide and be invisible to opposing powers to continue to exist. When religions meet, the reaction can be violent. In extreme cases, religions can set themselves the goal of destroying the other. This can lead to localized violent encounters or on a broader scale to what Samuel Huntington refers to as the "clash of civilizations" when monolithic cultural groups formed by religious values and norms encounter the other as a threatening power [16]. Opposition does not always need to be violent. It can take on subtle forms of disrespect and undermining gossiping. To maintain character would then imply a struggle that can from time to time result in religious inspired violence. It is clear how a theology of religions based on exclusivism may motivate such an interreligious relation.

4.3 Isolation

A third possibility in the attempt to maintain a Christian character within plurality is isolation. Religions when encountering one another may decide to have as little as possible contact with one another. This is not motivated by a feeling of threat or animosity but rather by what can best be described as polite ignorance. By drawing borders, the own identity is emphasized and uniqueness is maintained. This may be typical of a fundamental mindset. Fundamentalism can be seen as a social ideology with

underlying religious elements where the future is perceived to lay in the restoration of the idealized past [17, p. 15]. The ideal and pure existed in the past and needs to be restored. Contact with the world is acknowledging the social destruction brought about by progressive powers. Retracting and isolation will ensue the character and identity is maintained. There is no progressive force within fundamentalism [17, p. 10]. Fundamentalism can lead to extremism when maintaining the unique identity can take on violent forms. An attempt to isolate oneself from others reflects a theological model of Acceptance [7]: religions have nothing in common and nothing to talk about.

4.4 Collaboration

Besides absorbing, opposing and ignoring there is a fourth possibility of maintaining Christian character within plurality. Sundermeier uses the concept *Konvivenz* to describe an alternative way in which religions can meet and peacefully co-exist [6, pp. 43-75]. The origin of the concept *Konvivenz* is unclear [6, pp. 46]. As concept defining a way of co-existence, Sundermeier applies it to interreligious relations. There are three characteristics illustrating the implications of *Konvivenz* [6, pp. 47-50]: it refers to a learning community, a celebrating community and a sharing community. The principle is that by ignoring differences communities can support and assist one another in terms of that which the other needs. In the reciprocal exchange of assistance, communities learn from one another. The final result is that communities can learn to celebrate together. Through this convivial encounter, religious communities maintain their own unique character and together attempt to improve life for all in society. This would imply that the validity and equality of other religions are acknowledged although respect for autonomy remains.

5 Conclusion

In a pluralistic environment Individuals as well as religions collectively can decide on ways of interacting. The choice of mode of interaction can be motivated by different theological models. My suspicion is that all want to exist in an environment where the autonomy of the other is respected, tolerated and collectively protected. *Konvivenz* may be a model through which a Christian character can be maintained amidst plurality. The principle of *Konvivenz* may be motivated by the Acceptance Model [7, p. 156] that admits that religions do not have much in common in terms of shared beliefs. It might be important to ignore differences and similarities and focus on social interaction that contributes to the peaceful co-existence of all.

The goal of *Konvivenz* is not to ignore differences and emphasize similarities between religions but to reconcile diversity. Reconciliation implies acknowledging and respecting the other. It also implies making space for the Other to express its unique character. Where there are overlapping spheres, religions can collaborate on achieving shared goals. By engaging with the establishing of the common good, religions can

work together towards achieving a shared goal. On matters of morality and ethics, religions can engage together on addressing concerns of matters such as ecology, corruption and social justice.

Once religions are willing to share and learn reciprocally from one another, the thread of being absorbed by the other disappears. Knowledge brings understanding and by understanding the other one is able to reflect on one's own identity and character. In the process of getting to know the Other, one discovers oneself. The concept of Ubuntu in Africa illustrates the way in which people acknowledge that by engaging with people around you, you become human yourself.

Once people discover their own humaneness, it is possible to assist and support others, even if they are from different religious background. The need for water, food and even physical protection should not be limited to those of similar belief.

In discovering one's own place amidst plurality, one realizes that everyone can and should make a contribution. When biases and prejudices disappear, people can celebrate together. Religions can celebrate together in the gift of life, sharing joy and well-wishes for those sharing the space of living. By celebrating life, a contribution towards harmony and peaceful co-existence is made. The Christian character should be to set an example in this endeavor for peace amidst plurality.

References

1. Oostveen, D. F.: Multiple Religious Belonging: Hermeneutical Challenges for Theology of Religions. *Open Theology* 3(1), 38–47 (Jan. 2017). <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0004>.
2. Bruce, S.: Multiple Religious Belonging: Conceptual Advance or Secularization Denial?, *Open Theology* 3(1), 603–612 (Oct. 2017). <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0047>.
3. Paas, S.: Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe: Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences. *Mission Studies* 28(1), 3–25 (Jan. 2011). <https://doi.org/10.1163/016897811X572168>.
4. Woodhead, L.: Five concepts of religion. *International Review of Sociology* 21(1), 121–143 (Mar. 2011) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2011.544192>.
5. Wrogemann, H.: *Intercultural Theology, Volume Three: A Theology of Interreligious Relations*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic (2019).
6. Kärkkäinen, V.-M.: *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical & Contemporary Perspectives*, First Edition. Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic (2003).
7. Knitter, P. F.: *Introducing Theologies of Religions*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books (2002).
8. D'Costa, G.: *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions*, First Edition. Oxford and New York: Blackwell Pub (1986).
9. Hedges, P.: *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*. London: SCM Press (2010).
10. Rose, K.: *Pluralism: the future of religion*. New York: Bloomsbury (2013).
11. Cheetham, D.: *Ways of meeting and the theology of religions*. in *Transcending boundaries in philosophy and theology*. Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate (2013).
12. Dagers, J.: *Postcolonial theology of religions: particularity and pluralism in world Christianity*. London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group (2013).
13. Sundermeier, T.: *Was ist Religion?: Religionswissenschaft im theologischen Kontext: ein Studienbuch*. Gütersloh: Kaiser, Gütersloher Verlagshau (1999).

14. Wolff, K. H.: *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: The Free Press., 1950.
15. Rogers, E. M. and Steinfatt, T. M.: *Intercultural Communication*. Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press (1998).
16. Huntington, S. P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, A edition. New York: Simon & Schuster (2011).
17. Kindelberger, K.: *Fundamentalismus: Politisierte Religionen*. Brandenburgische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung: Potsdam (2004).
18. Sundermeier, T. *Konvivenz und Differenz: Studien zu einer verstehenden Missionswissenschaft*. Erlangen: Verlag der Ev.-Luth. Mission (1995).

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

