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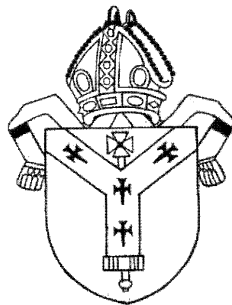
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Plenary on Christian Identity and Religious Plurality



Archbishop of Canterbury

“Christian Identity and Religious Plurality”

Address to the 9th meeting of the World Council of Churches

Porto Alegre, Brazil

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If someone says to you ‘Identify yourself?’ you will probably answer first by giving your name – then perhaps describing the work you do, the place you come from, the relations in which you stand. In many cultures, you would give the name of your parents or your extended family. To speak about ‘identity’, then, is to speak about how we establish our place in the language and the world of those around us: names are there to be used, to be spoken to us, not just by us; work is how we join in the human process of transforming our environment; and who we are becomes clear to those around when we put ourselves in a map of relationships. Before we start thinking about what is essential to Christian identity in the abstract, it may help us just for a moment to stay with this element of simply putting ourselves on the map.

So in these terms how do we as Christians answer the challenge to identify ourselves? We carry the name of Christ. We are the people who are known for their loyalty to, their affiliation with, the historical person who was given the title of 'anointed monarch' by his followers – Jesus, the Jew of Nazareth. Every time we say 'Christian', we take for granted a story and a place in history, the story and place of those people with whom God made an alliance in the distant past, the people whom he called so that in their life together he might show his glory. We are already in the realm of work and relations. We are involved with that history of God's covenant. As those who are loyal to an 'anointed monarch' in the Jewish tradition, our lives are supposed to be living testimony to the faithfulness of God to his commitments. There is no way of spelling out our identity that does not get us involved in this story and this context. Explaining the very word 'Christ' means explaining what it is to be a people who exist because God has promised to be with them and whom God has commanded to show what he is like.

And to say that we are now under the authority of an anointed monarch whose life on earth was two millennia ago is also to say at once something about that 'monarch'. His life and presence are not just a matter of record, of narrative. There are groups that identify themselves by their founders – Lutherans, Marxists – but the name Christians use of themselves is not like that because of what the title 'Christ' means. We do not look back to a founder; we look now, around, within, for a presence that has authority over our lives and is active today. And so we already imply the ways in which we shall be thinking theologically, doctrinally, about the story of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

But as we go further, the identity we are sketching becomes fuller still. What does the anointed king tell us to do and how does he give us power to do it? We are to reveal, like the Jewish people, that the God whose authority the king holds is a God of justice, impartial, universal, and a God who is free to forgive offences. But we are also to show who God is by the words our king tells us to address to God. We are to call him 'Father', to speak in intimate and bold words. Our identity is not just about relations with other human beings and our labours to shape those relationships according to justice and mercy. It is about our relation to God, and the 'work' of expressing that relation in our words and acts. In Greek, the word *leitourgeia* first meant work for the sake of the public good, before it came to mean the public service of God. Christian identity is 'liturgical' in both senses, the work of a people, a community, showing God to each other and to the world around them, in daily action and in worship. Our 'liturgy' is both the adoration of God for God's own sake and the service of a world distorted by pride and greed. It is expressed not only in passion for the human family, especially in the middle of poverty and violence, but in passion for the whole material world, which continues to suffer the violence involved in sustaining the comfort of a prosperous human minority at the cost of our common resources.

'Identify yourself' says the world to the Christian; and the Christian says (as the martyrs of the first centuries said), 'We are the servants of a monarch, the monarch of a nation set free by God's special action to show his love and strength in their life together, a monarch whose authority belongs to the present and the future as much as the past. We are witnesses to the consistency of a God who cannot be turned aside from his purpose by any created power, or by any failure or betrayal on our part. We are more than servants or witnesses, because we are enabled to speak as if we were, like our king, free to be intimate with God; God has stepped across the distance between ourselves and heaven, and has brought us close to him. When we speak directly to God, we speak in a voice God himself has given us to use.'

So, as Christians spell out, bit by bit, what is the meaning of the name they use of themselves, they put themselves on the map of human history. Before they start analysing the doctrines that are necessary for this identity to be talked about and communicated abstractly, they speak of themselves as belonging in this story and this set of possibilities. Creed and structure flow from this. And it can be put most forcefully, even shockingly, if we say that Christians identify themselves not only as servants of the anointed king but as Christ. Their place in the world is his place. By allowing themselves to be caught up into his witness and doing what his authority makes possible for them, in work and worship, they

stand where he stands. The Christian Scriptures say that believers bear the name of Christ, that this name is written on their foreheads, that their life together is a material 'body' for the anointed king on earth.

Christian identity is to belong in a place that Jesus defines for us. 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. Forget 'Christianity' for a moment – Christianity as a system of ideas competing with others in the market: concentrate on the place in the world that is the place of Jesus the anointed, and what it is that becomes possible in that place.

There is a difference between seeing the world as basically a territory where systems compete, where groups with different allegiances live at each other's expense, where rivalry is inescapable, and seeing the world as a territory where being in a particular place makes it possible for you to see, to say and to do certain things that aren't possible elsewhere. The claim of Christian belief is not first and foremost that it offers the only accurate system of thought, as against all other competitors; it is that, by standing in the place of Christ, it is possible to live in such intimacy with God that no fear or failure can ever break God's commitment to us, and to live in such a degree of mutual gift and understanding that no human conflict or division need bring us to uncontrollable violence and mutual damage. From here, you can see what you need to see to be at peace with God and with God's creation; and also what you need to be at peace with yourself, acknowledging your need of mercy and re-creation.

This perspective assumes from the beginning that we live in a world of plural perspectives, and that there is no 'view from nowhere', as philosophers sometimes express the claim to absolute knowledge. 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.

In what sense is this an exclusive claim? In one way, it can be nothing except exclusive. There is no Christian identity that does not begin from this place. Try to reconstruct the 'identity' from principles, ideals or whatever, and you end up with something that is very different from the scriptural account of being 'in Christ'. And because being in Christ is bound up with one and only one particular history – that of Jewish faith and of the man from Nazareth – it is simply not clear what it would mean to say that this perspective could in principle be gained by any person anywhere with any sort of commitments. Yet in another sense exclusivism is impossible here, certainly the exclusivism of a system of ideas and conclusions that someone claims to be final and absolute. The place of Jesus is open to all who want to see what Christians see and to become what Christians are becoming. And no Christian believer has in his or her possession some kind of map of where exactly the boundaries of that place are to be fixed, or a key to lock others out or in.

In the nature of the case, the Christian does not see what can be seen from other perspectives. He or she would be foolish to say that nothing can be seen or that every other perspective distorts everything so badly that there can be no real truth told. If I say that only in this place are hurts fully healed, sins forgiven, adoption into God's intimate presence promised, that assumes that adoption and forgiveness are to be desired above all other things. Not every perspective has that at the centre. What I want to say about those other views is not that they are in error but that they leave out what matters most in human struggle; yet I know that this will never be obvious to those others, and we can only come together, we can only introduce others into our perspective, in the light of the kind of shared labour and shared hope that brings into central focus what I believe to be most significant for humanity. And meanwhile that sharing will also tell me that there may be things – perhaps of less ultimate importance, yet enormously significant – that my perspective has not taught me to see or to value.

What does this mean for the actual, on-the-ground experience of living alongside the plurality of religious communities – and non-religious ones too – that we cannot escape or ignore in our world? I believe that our emphasis should not be on possessing a system in which all questions are answered, but precisely on witness to the place and the identity that we have been invited to live in. We are to show what we see, to reproduce the life of God as it has been delivered to us by the anointed. And it seems from what we have already been saying that at the heart of this witness must be faithful commitment. Christian identity is a faithful identity, an identity marked by consistently being with both God and God's world. We must be faithful to God, in prayer and liturgy, we must simply stand again and again where Jesus is, saying, 'Abba'. When Christians pray the Eucharistic prayer, they take the place of Jesus, both as he prays to the Father and as he offers welcome to the world at his table. The Eucharist is the celebration of the God who keeps promises and whose hospitality is always to be trusted. But this already tells us that we have to be committed to those around us, whatever their perspective. Their need, their hope, their search for healing at the depth of their humanity is something with which we must, as we say in English, 'keep faith'. That is to say, we must be there to accompany this searching, asking critical questions with those of other faiths, sometimes asking critical questions of them also. As we seek transformation together, it may be by God's gift that others may find their way to see what we see and to know what is possible for us.

But what of their own beliefs, their own 'places'? Sometimes when we look at our neighbours of other traditions, it can be as if we see in their eyes a reflection of what we see; they do not have the words we have, but something is deeply recognisable. The language of 'anonymous Christianity' is now not much in fashion – and it had all kinds of problems about it. Yet who that has been involved in dialogue with other faiths has not had the sense of an echo, a reflection, of the kind of life Christians seek to live? St Paul says that God did not leave himself without witnesses in the ages before the Messiah; in those places where that name is not named, God may yet give himself to be seen. Because we do not live there, we cannot easily analyse let alone control how this may be. And to acknowledge this is not at all to say that what happens in the history of Israel and Jesus is relative, one way among others. This, we say, is the path to forgiveness and adoption. But when others appear to have arrived at a place where forgiveness and adoption are sensed and valued, even when these things are not directly spoken of in the language of another faith's mainstream reflection, are we to say that God has not found a path for himself?

And when we face radically different notions, strange and complex accounts of a perspective not our own, our questions must be not 'How do we convict them of error? How do we win the competition of ideas?' but, 'What do they actually see? and can what they see be a part of the world that I see?' These are questions that can be answered only by faithfulness – that is, by staying with the other. Our calling to faithfulness, remember, is an aspect of our own identity and integrity. To work patiently alongside people of other faiths is not an option invented by modern liberals who seek to relativise the radical singleness of Jesus Christ and what was made possible through him. It is a necessary part of being where he is; it is a dimension of 'liturgy', staying before the presence of God and the presence of God's creation (human and non-human) in prayer and love. If we are truly learning how to be in that relation with God and the world in which Jesus of Nazareth stood, we shall not turn away from those who see from another place. And any claim or belief that we see more or more deeply is always rightly going to be tested in those encounters where we find ourselves working for a vision of human flourishing and justice in the company of those who do not start where we have started.

But the call to faithfulness has some more precise implications as well. In a situation where Christians are historically a majority, faithfulness to the other means solidarity with them, the imperative of defending them and standing with them in times of harassment or violence. In a majority Christian culture, the Christian may find himself or herself assisting the non-Christian community or communities to find a public voice. In the UK, this has been a matter largely of developing interfaith forums, working with other communities over issues around migration and asylum and common concerns about international justice, about poverty or environmental degradation, arguing that other faiths should have a share in the partnership between the state and the Church in education, and, not

least, continuing to build alliances against anti-semitism. The pattern is not dissimilar elsewhere in Europe. There is a proper element of Christian self-examination involved here as Christians recognise the extent to which their societies have not been hospitable or just to the other.

However, the question also arises of what faithfulness means in a majority non-Christian culture; and this is less straightforward. For a variety of reasons, some based on fact and some on fantasy, many non-Christian majorities regard Christian presence as a threat, or at least as the sign of a particular geopolitical agenda (linked with the USA or the West in general) – despite the long history of Christian minorities in so many such contexts. One of the most problematic effects of recent international developments has been precisely to associate Christians in the Middle East or Pakistan, for example, with an alien and aggressive policy in the eyes of an easily manipulated majority. The suffering of Christian minorities as a result of this is something which all our churches and the whole of this Assembly need constantly to keep in focus.

Yet what is remarkable is the courage with which Christians continue – in Egypt, in Pakistan, in the Balkans, even in Iraq – to seek ways of continuing to work alongside non-Christian neighbours. This is not the climate of ‘dialogue’ as it happens in the West or in the comfortable setting of international conferences; it is the painful making and remaking of trust in a deeply unsafe and complex environment. Only relatively rarely in such settings have Christians responded with counter-aggression or by absolute withdrawal. They continue to ask how they and those of other commitments can be citizens together. It is in this sort of context, I would say, that we most clearly see what it means to carry the cost of faithfulness, to occupy the place of Jesus and so to bear the stresses and sometimes the horrors of rejection and still to speak of sharing and hospitality. Here we see what it is to model a new humanity; and there is enough to suggest that such modelling can be contagious, can open up new possibilities for a whole culture. And this is not simply a question of patience in suffering. It also lays on Christians the task of speaking to those aspects of a non-Christian culture which are deeply problematic – where the environment is one in which human dignity, the status of women, the rule of law and similar priorities are not honoured as they should be. To witness in these things may lay Christians open to further attack or marginalisation, yet it remains part of that identity which we all seek to hold with integrity. Once again, where this happens, all of us need to find ways of making our solidarity real with believers in minority situations.

The question of Christian identity in a world of plural perspectives and convictions cannot be answered in clichés about the tolerant co-existence of different opinions. It is rather that the nature of our conviction as Christians puts us irrevocably in a certain place, which is both promising and deeply risky, the place where we are called to show utter commitment to the God who is revealed in Jesus and to all those to whom his invitation is addressed. Our very identity obliges us to active faithfulness of this double kind. We are not called to win competitions or arguments in favour of our ‘product’ in some religious marketplace. If we are, in the words of Olivier Clement, to take our dialogue beyond the encounter of ideologies, we have to be ready to witness, in life and word, to what is made possible by being in the place of Jesus the anointed – ‘our reasons for living, for loving less badly and dying less badly’ (Clement, *Anachroniques*, p.307). ‘Identify yourself!’ And we do so by giving prayerful thanks for our place and by living faithfully where God in Jesus has brought us to be, so that the world may see what is the depth and cost of God’s own fidelity to the world he has made.

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