

Christian Witness Amidst

Religious Pluralism



Reformed Ecumenical Council

2050 Breton Rd. SE Ste. 102
Grand Rapids, MI 49546 USA

Tel/Fax: 616 949-2910

Email: rev@recweb.org

Web site: www.recweb.org

2005



Christian Witness amidst Religious Pluralism

In 1992 and 1996 respectively, the REC issued clear statements on its understanding of Christian mission and the uniqueness of Christ. These statements were made against the background of the worldwide phenomenon of religious pluralism. Though these statements were very helpful and answered a number of questions, we, the REC member churches, have realised that our exploration of the reality of religious pluralism has been far from complete. To have a clear theological position on the uniqueness of Christ is one thing. How we witness to that in day-to-day life situations of religious pluralism is another matter. The fact is that many REC church members live with people of other faiths on a daily basis. Hence, churches are called to reflect anew on the question of how to relate to and witness to people of other faiths. The main focus of this document will be on this question: *How do Christians encounter the reality of religious pluralism, with all its challenges, and how can they credibly live out their faith in Christ in these situations?*

In this document we use the term *religious pluralism* for the sociological reality of living in a multi-religious society.

Different Facets of Religious Pluralism

We observe that the contexts of religious pluralism in which the REC member churches live differ greatly and have various facets. We acknowledge that the contexts of religious pluralism, referred to below, should not be seen as three distinct models, but as stages on a continuum. We also observe that in the course of time contexts can be subject to change. The guidelines mentioned below intend to be guidelines, and in no way want to impede the guidance of the Holy Spirit on appropriate responses to specific contexts.

- There are contexts in which people of different religious traditions live harmoniously together and where there are possibilities for cooperation in public life, for constructive encounters and open witness to the Gospel.
- There are also contexts that were harmonious in the past but in which growing tensions now occur. In some cases, this has caused a general deterioration of relationships between the communities. In other cases, we see a more diverse response. Some people engaged in encounters are strengthened in their determination to build bridges; with others

these tensions lead to a confirmation of their negative perceptions and/or a reinforcement of existing prejudices.

- There are also contexts in which the relationships between people of different faiths are openly hostile and sometimes even violent. The reality is that some of the REC member churches have to function in very difficult and oppressive circumstances. In such situations public witness to Christ is very hard. Often this coincides with situations in which the Christian community forms a small minority.

Needless to say, these different contexts call for different forms of Christian witness. Sensitivity to the possibilities in each of these situations and a prayerful discernment of God's will and way for our Christian witness is vital.

We signal that apart from the setting of the individual contexts in which the REC member churches work, relationships between the different faith communities are also influenced by global events and developments. We see a growing tendency in most religious traditions towards fundamentalism, even militant fundamentalism. We also observe a fear for the increase of violent confrontations between some adherents of the different religious communities.

As REC churches we are called upon to resist this build up of negative mutual perceptions and the escalation of suspicion, to help dismantle prejudices and to contribute positively towards maintaining good relationships and building peace.

Biblical-Theological Reflection on relating to People of other Faiths

The multi-religiousness of the societies we live in also confronts us with a series of theological questions. The REC document *The Unique Person and Work of Christ* makes two clear points: On the one hand it states that 'Scripture emphasizes that Christ has come once and for all. His incarnation is the very center of history. It is the crucial divine intervention. (Visser 't Hoof t, *No other name*: 97) Therefore, there can be no other saviors. (See also Romans 6:10, Hebrews 7:27 and 9:28).'¹ Yet the document also very clearly indicates that this unique revelation of God in Christ does not deny that there can be knowledge of God in other religious traditions. To the question: 'Does God also speak and deal with people in other ways than through an explicit knowledge of Christ?' an affirmative answer is given: 'we know that God was present in some sense among () people who had never heard the name of Jesus Christ.'

¹ *The Unique Person and Work of Christ*, (1995), 2.

Also: 'The Holy Spirit is at work in the hearts of men and women long before any of God's human agents bring the saving message of good news in Jesus Christ.'² This is often referred to as common grace. The Dutch missiologist J.H. Bavinck calls this phenomenon God's manifestation - his speechless speech - in creation and history.³ As we are reminded in Acts 14:17, 'Yet He has not left Himself without testimony...'

Having considered what the Bible says about other religions, we discovered anew that in the Bible the emphasis is on encounters and relationships, and not primarily on the comparison of systems of thought. It deals with how we think about and relate to people who believe differently than we do. Truth in the Bible is first of all about a Person we need to meet: Jesus Christ. The Bible urges us towards encounters, encounters with God through Christ and encounters with other people.

Having been met by Christ and having been changed through this experience, we are now called upon to look at other people with the eyes of Christ. The Bible tells us that *all* people are created in the image of God, *all* are His and *all* are loved by Him. We know that God's concern is not only for Israel and the church, but for the whole of His creation. His heart goes out to *all humanity*: He so loved the *world* that He gave His only Son. (John 3:16)⁴ This implies that we acknowledge the dignity of every human being, treat all people with deep respect and be willing to care for them, in the way Christ cared for us.

The Missionary Calling of the Church amidst Religious Pluralism

What then is the missionary calling of the church within the context of religious pluralism? The mission of the church (*missio ecclesiae*) is participation in God's mission (*missio Dei*). Since we believe that God in Christ has reached out to the whole world, we as faithful disciples of Christ want to follow in his footsteps by loving all of humanity as He does: fellow Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus etc., proclaiming the good news of Christ to all. It is this love of Christ that urges us on (2 Cor. 5:14).

The way in which we as REC churches seek to carry out this missionary calling depends on the context in which each church is called to witness. This will be a multi-dimensional task. Witness according to our understanding is a holistic testimony to God in Christ, in words, deeds and presence.

² *The Unique Person and Work of Christ*, 2.

³ J.H. Bavinck, *Religieus Besef en Christelijk Geloof*, Kok: Kampen 1949, 163.

⁴ *The Unique Person and Work of Christ*, 17.

- The context of harmonious relationships allows for a wide range of opportunities for witness. Direct and clear evangelism, challenging people to reorient their lives radically, should be pursued.⁵ Dialogue also should have a prominent place. In today's ever-changing religious climate harmonious relationships can never be taken for granted but should be nurtured with great care. One way in which this is realised, occurs when people of different faiths cooperate in the public domain for good government and for a just and peaceful society.
- In the context of growing estrangement the witness to Christ will have to include ways of dispelling the tension and intentional efforts towards mutual understanding, both on the community level and on an individual basis. Interreligious dialogue is one way to witness to Christ. It can help us to break through the caricatures we have made of each other and to see real faces people's hopes, pains and stories. Listening to the faith stories of others and having an opportunity to tell our own stories might also help dispel the distortions we have of one another's faiths and break away from thinking in categories of 'them' and 'us'.
- In the context of open hostility, verbal witness is often very difficult and dialogue at times virtually impossible. While we keep on looking and praying for opportunities for verbal witness and dialogue, we acknowledge that this context might require yet other forms of witness to Christ such as Christian service (diakonia) or Christian presence.⁶ By 'Christian presence' we mean being present among people with the hope and intention that our lives be understood as witness to the love of Christ.

In all these contexts we as churches seek to fulfil our calling, convinced that Christ is the only way, the unique way of salvation and convinced that in Him God is reconciling the world to Himself. We implore all on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God. (2 Cor 5:16-20, Eph. 2:7-10, Rom. 8: 12-27 and Col. 1:15-20).

⁵ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigmshifts in Theology of Mission*, Orbis Books: Maryknoll 1997, 420.

⁶ Traditionally four forms of dialogue are distinguished: dialogue of life, dialogue of joint social action, intellectual dialogue and dialogue of the spirit (See REC Agenda, The Netherlands 2005, 132/133). *The Unique Person and Work of Christ* indicates that also within the Reformed tradition there is room for interreligious cooperation for reconciliation and peace. See page 3.

Concluding Remarks

In our religiously pluralistic world, we as churches are called to witness to Christ. This is our task, our challenge, but also our joy. In the great variety of contexts in which we live, we seek to give a sincere and intelligible testimony of the hope that lives within us, but we want to do it with respect and gentleness (1 Peter 3:15): in 'bold humility' and 'humble boldness'.⁷

In all this we want to remember that we are not called to win arguments or vindicate *our* faith but as ambassadors of Christ to meet and journey with *people*. Our prayer is that what people hear from us, see in us and experience from us along the journey may be a worthy testimony to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

⁷ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 489.