



Interfaith Relations and the Church

THE IDENTITY CHALLENGE

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7. How did Jesus model interfaith relations? Can you think of biblical stories which suggest how Jesus would want us to interact with those who practice faiths different from our own?

Prayer

God, we give you thanks that our identity is grounded in your identity—that you placed your own image in us when you created us, and that through Christ you have claimed us as your own. Give us a strong confidence in who we are, strong enough to be open to others whom you have created. Help us to become better disciples through relationships rooted in love and without fear. Let our identity be based on what we *are* and not over and against what we are not. Stir our hearts and guide our steps, so that we might be people who help usher in your reign of peace, reconciliation, health and wholeness. We pray these things in the name of Jesus the Christ, through whom you have saved and redeemed us. Amen.

Questions

1. How would you answer if someone asks why are you a Christian?
2. What are the defining characteristics of Christian identity?
3. How does interfaith engagement affect the way we understand ourselves—our identity—as followers of Christ?
4. How does one's Christian identity inform or shape relationships with people of other faiths?
5. Do you think that encounter with people of other faiths can help us on our journey of Christian self-discovery? Why or why not?
6. How would you describe your most profound spiritual experience? How might such personal experience affect your relations with people of other faiths?

Interfaith Relations and the Church: The Identity Challenge

Our engagement in interfaith relations, like our engagement with other Christian traditions, calls us to re-examine ourselves, our formulations of our faith, and our practices. We are called to ask: how does interfaith engagement affect the way we understand ourselves—or affect our identity—as followers of Christ? Some people may respond to this challenge to Christian identity with worry that engaging with neighbors of other religions will cause us to doubt and perhaps even lose our faith. For others, encounters with those who are different from us offer the opportunity to contemplate our own faith more deeply and embody it more clearly. Those who are different or distinct from us may ask us questions that stretch our imaginations and open up new ways for us to encounter the Living God whom Jesus called “Father.”

As we strive to identify ourselves, it may be all too easy to say who we are not: for instance, “We are not *them*.” In a world filled with global tension, fragmentation, extreme poverty, militant religious fundamentalism, and violence, it is understandable that we may be tempted to turn inward, build metaphorical fortresses around our hearts, and develop simple answers to complicated problems. “We” are good and “they” are bad. “We” are right and “they” are wrong. However, history teaches us it is dangerous to stigmatize others who are unlike ourselves.

Christ calls us to a much higher standard—to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mt 19:19), to extend hospitality to strangers and foreigners (Lk 10:33), to bring a message of reconciliation to the

world (2 Cor 5:19), and to be peacemakers (Mt 5:9). Interfaith engagement offers us an opportunity to become stronger and clearer in our faith, as well as more open-hearted in our expression of that faith. In all these ways our Christian identity can be strengthened, as we strive to become the body of Christ in the world, taking seriously the old popular adage that “you may be the only Bible that someone else will ever read.”

Identity Formation—I Am Because We Are

Identity—“I am who I am,” or “we are who we are”—develops always in relation to our surroundings, particularly in relationship with people and social events. Identity is a relational concept; that is, our relationships define who we are. Philosopher Rene Descartes defined a human being with the phrase “I think, therefore I am.” In Christian theology, however, we have a different model of existence in the Trinity of God. God is inherently relational, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even in terms of being the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer (or Sanctifier). Although God is unified, God is not singular and isolated. Christ draws us into that eternal, divine relationship, as he describes in John 17:21, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Our identity as Christians is a relational identity. We are who we are because God is who God is and we love because God first loved us. The story of God in Christ shapes us. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has shared with the world the “*ubuntu*” theology found in many African cultures. In essence, *ubuntu* means, “I am because we are,” and “a person is a person through other persons.” Our human communities shape us and make us who we are. We were created as communal beings—in community with God and in community with each other. Our identity is wrapped up in the identity of our neighbors. As

is not afraid. The heart of the Christian narrative is not God’s exclusivity but God’s enduring love and hospitality. As individuals who “are being transformed into the [image of Christ] from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18), Christians try to reflect his goodness in our interfaith work. We can build a bridge of understanding and cooperation among the religious traditions represented in our communities.

In a sense, the identity challenge in interfaith relations is at the core of other challenges—theological, ecumenical, moral, and missional—in interfaith relations. Our response to each of these is grounded in our understanding of who we are. In the question of *identity*, these four additional challenges find integration. What is the *theological* response to the question, “How are we to relate to people of other faiths?” The answer is, at heart, an explanation of our theological identity. We relate to people of other faiths in certain ways as an expression of who we are as Christians. In relation to the *ecumenical* challenge, we relate to people of other faiths (interreligiously) as an expression of who we are with each other in the Christian household (intra-religiously.) We exercise *moral* choices and actions because of the Christian ethics which shape us. And finally, we engage in *mission* as an expression of who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do. We work to bring about the kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven” because of who we are as followers of Christ.

Finally, not only does our Christian identity call us to interfaith relations, but our Christian identity is also enhanced by our mutual encounter with people of other faiths, their questions, their insights, their gifts to us. Jesus said that the world would know us by our love. In our contemporary world, as Jesus taught in biblical times, our love of those who are different from us has the power to transform us and to usher in a foretaste of God’s reign of justice and peace.

lived and living traditions along with ancient written wisdom. Traditions are *lived*, in that real people practice them. In other words, they're not just ideas recorded in books. To learn about other religions, it's most helpful to learn about how actual people practice them. Similarly, religions are *living* traditions in that they change over time, as people interpret written traditions and respond to one another and the world around them. Our own Christian traditions are living in this sense, and that gives us a great opportunity to grow. When two (or more) people speak with one another about their *living* faith and share how it is *lived* in their experience, we begin to break down stereotypes and encounter "real" people and authentic faith. When we speak honestly and respectfully, we are free to proclaim our deep convictions as well as learn from, or be challenged by, the deep convictions of others. This sharing is a kind of mutuality which can strengthen our very identity.

In learning about the lived faith of others, we may find that we learn more about our own faith too! Islam, for example, which highly values the ideal of submission to God, challenges Christians to re-examine our own Christian practice of submission to God's sovereignty. Engagement with Buddhists might lead Christians to think and share about what it means to be deeply compassionate and non-violent. These kinds of conversations and mutual questioning can help us refine our own sense of what we believe — because we are often asked questions that we don't even think of asking ourselves, and we have to find words to share our experiences and beliefs. This is one of the gifts of interfaith relations. It is not a challenge to our Christian identity if we allow ourselves to explore that identity in order to deepen into it and share it more authentically with others.

Christian faithfulness is not a hindrance to openness. While Jesus was and is unique, his is a uniqueness that relates to others and

Ephesians 4:25 puts it, "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another."

Communities shape and form us corporately. We are who we are because of *where* we are, shaped by families, communities, and cultures. Our existence as part of a culture and community means that none of us is completely unique, yet, each individual brings something unique to that interrelatedness. Even as community plays an important role in shaping our identities, individuals also exercise what we call moral agency in developing their own self-identities. We are relatively free as individuals to make choices and develop "who we are" in this or that way, accordingly.

Similarly, Christian identity is grounded in our relationships with other human beings (corporate/communal), and also in our relationship with the divine persons of the Trinity (personal/spiritual). In relationship to God, a Christian's spiritual experiences may play a significant role in one's understanding of who she or he is. A person's sense of identity and destiny in relation to God and the world, time and eternity, can be radically changed by such awe-filled encounters with the Holy. Mystical experience can lead one to feel that he or she is a participant (personal and individual) in God's new creation and a member of a new humanity (corporate and communal) initiated and consummated in Jesus Christ. Rooted in this kind of experience, the life of faith now involves a foretaste of God's future and all of life becomes divine service. Thoughts, words, and deeds are dedicated to God in holy living and joyful worship. Accordingly, in a certain sense, Christians are those who know God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, not only with our minds but also experientially, in our hearts, in our spiritual practices, and in our relationships.

Core Aspects of Christian Identity

One part of the identity challenge that engagement in interfaith relations brings is the challenge to explain one's own version of Christian faithfulness to those who understand faithfulness quite differently. This is the challenge from within our community, an ecumenical challenge, an intra-religious challenge. We need to be able to explain, to other Christians and to the world, how our identity as passionate followers of Jesus leads us to be dedicated to interfaith relations.

Christian identity is best understood not as a form of reaction *against* the surrounding world (we are not *them*), but rather in relation to what Christians are committed to: the acceptance and sharing of God's exceeding love as it is revealed in Jesus. The sign of accepting this love is expressed through the commitment to live as followers of Christ and to participate in establishing the reign of God—a reign of *shalom* (peace), reconciliation, health, and wholeness. Christians are those whose identity has been shaped and formed by the story of God's saving love in Jesus. We share this good news of God's love in many ways, giving God's love a concrete expression in response to specific contexts. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, proclaim release to the captives, and preach the good news in light of the coming reign of God.

Christians have also been known throughout the years by their embodiment of love and hospitality. In its dawning years, when the Church spoke and acted, it did so for the sake of hospitality toward the neighbor. The early Christian communities had a remarkable vitality and growth because of the extraordinary quality of their hospitality. "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke

bread from house to house and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:44-47). They practiced hospitality not as a tactic to increase membership, but because it was truly at the heart of their identity, and it was an act of faithfulness to the gospel of Christ. It was in their acts of hospitality that the gospel shone brightly. The Christian practice of hospitality is grounded in the love that we have experienced from Christ. While we yearn to be faithful, we are disciples of the more radical claim that the "greatest" virtue is love (1 Cor 13:13). We want to be persons who are compassionate as well as trusting, believing Paul's teaching that "the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal 5:6).

Christian identity is rooted in the promise of Jesus that "peacemakers . . . will be called children of God" (Mt 5:9). We strive to be peacemakers and to be known as open and gracious, following the command of the Lord who said, "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house'" (Lk 10:5)! Furthermore, recognizing that many people feel like no one hears their voice, Christians feel called to be the "ears" of Jesus, listening to the dreams, fears, joys, and sorrows of our neighbors and friends of other faiths.

Christian Identity in Relation to People of Other Faiths

Part of the identity challenge is discerning how *who we are* affects *how we act* in interfaith relations. And yet, another part of the identity challenge has to do with how interaction with people of other religions affects our understanding of our own Christian faith.

When we engage with people of other faiths, we are engaging