

The Role of Christian Unity in a Divided World

**Speech by Rev. Dr Anders Wejryd, Archbishop emeritus of the Church of Sweden and president for Europe of the World Council of Churches (WCC)
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I would like to focus on three areas.

1. Reconciled diversity,
2. Examine yourself,
3. Go ahead!

Reconciled diversity

If Christian Unity is to play any role for peace and if Christian Unity is to be an example of any power in society, Christian unity cannot be a forced uniformity. When Christendom has become truly international and the gravity has moved from Europe to south of the Sahara, many of us see how much of church life was and is impregnated by European culture and cultures. And we gradually learn to see how church can be true and truly Christian even though it comes and should come in very different shapes.

When we are in true dialogue, we discover issues that we have over- or under-stressed and perspectives others have seen that we also ought to see. Our Christian traditions here in Europe have grown for a long time in somewhat different surroundings, and therefore we cannot just simply move out of what we have been brought up in, and move into something else. Traditions, however, are not static. They form us, yes, but every generation also forms them. A person who moves out of one Christian tradition and into another often finds herself or himself left with some of the deepest roots cut off. But through dialogue and encounters we can all learn and widen our understandings and tradition – and more clearly see the presence of Christ in the fellow person who does not share many of our traditional expressions and emphasis.

Any open-minded reading of the New Testament shows us that people have always had different needs, different understandings, different gifts. The apostles did not understand uniformly. Some people whom Jesus met needed to be lifted up – others to be criticized. And then Jesus acted differently when meeting them, according to the needs he saw. And all the rather meaningless efforts to combine the four gospels and adjust differences to get something uniform out of them have turned out to be – just meaningless. Often, such efforts have shrunk the message. What is truly great will always be perceived in different ways, because we are limited, and here we see “in a

mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face". Therefore we cannot do without all the four gospels – and we are helped also by those gospels which never became canonical, as we reflect on why they were not accepted. What is truly great has to be represented in manifold ways. It will never reach us so well, deep down, in condensed versions.

Christians who have come to understandings like this find it easier to really meet persons with different political understandings and of different or no religious faiths. They know that uniformity cannot be the true Truth, because the Truth is always greater than what can be represented here on earth.

As Christians, we have realized that the three persons in the one Godhead are both one and different: The Creator and Upholder of all, regardless of faith; The Saviour who changes the world and future for everyone and everything, but especially for those who have found him; and the Holy Spirit, God's continuous and ubiquitous presence. They are different, yet still one. What keeps the Trinity together, the inner power, is Love.

What ought to unify all Christians is that God is God, God is greater, God is love. Then everything that is thought and done by us humans is under God. Life is not only what we achieve or receive from others but what God is constantly giving us through the Spirit. To discover this underlying structure of giving and love unifies Christians and unifies a divided world. Our examples can also help people who do not want to say "God" to keep their wonderment alive and to be humble before Life itself.

If we as Christians can live out our love to our own traditions, and respect and be interested in other Christian traditions, I believe Christian reconciled diversity will become an important asset for a divided and multi-polar world.

That was my first point. Then the second:

Examine yourself

Religions are dangerous: Christianity, too. It is easy to mistake one's own desires for God's. God has been used all through history as the amplifier of human will. And God is still used in that way.

Religious institutions too have been playing that game, at least in my tradition. Other traditions have to answer for themselves. There have always been self-interests involved in religion, personal interests and institutional interests. Anyone or anything who claims power over our eternal destiny can acquire an immense power over people in this life, here and now.

If Christian Unity is to be a positive power in a divided world, it must be a unity that is constantly examined in prayer and meditation, related to Word and Sacraments, personally but not only individually. The Spirit always needs others to reach us! The Church is not outdated! If Christian Unity is not a spiritual thing, but mainly organization

and manifestation, we betray the Lord of Unity and have nothing more to offer our secular societies than what they already know.

When we have a relation to the deepest source of life itself, God, through Jesus Christ and the Spirit, we relate to someone whom we don't want to disappoint. We constantly do, I assume, but humans who love each other always expect very much from each other and can also forgive each other. How much more so, in our relationship with God! A divided society will never heal if societal life is only transactions and interface. It also has to be love and genuine interest in the other, an understanding of interdependence and belonging together. Christian Unity can be an example of that.

It is dangerous to see and admit one's shortcomings, we often think, and therefore we avoid examining ourselves. But if God is there, there is always more grace, more growth and more faith in us, than we ever believed. Faith is a factor for peace – if we dare examine ourselves and do not simply put burdens on others.

Then my third point: *Go ahead!*

Religions may be used for self-interest, as I said, but all religions basically are serving life, though some may stress the spiritual side more and others the material side. There are strong traits of sustainability, stewardship and recognition that these interests go beyond one's own group in all major religions. Not only my people. Not only now.

Christian churches are well organized. They normally have their structures built alongside the states. Churches have representatives who have to be accountable. Churches have access to science, natural science and humanities, and to politicians. Christian churches, with all these assets, have to use them in cooperation with other religions for the interests they share.

Peace is one of those, indeed not a minor issue. So is climate, being an enormous factor affecting life and death, war and peace. Another is the right of every human to life - if we think that the right to life is the same for all humankind, regardless of religion.

When borders are closed in Europe in order to preserve Christian values, the most central Christian values are denied. Let us never forget that. Churches have to be clear advocating for the right to asylum, peace, life, freedom of religion and belief - all of which means human rights. As religious people, we know that the real values of life are not what we own and not what exists just now.

With our conviction, resources and, to a greater or lesser extent, credibility, we have to act and speak clearly - not fearing to cooperate with people of other faiths or no faith if they are of good will, wanting to act and live for life!

Reconciled diversity

Examine yourself

Go ahead!