

Can a Christian Be a Pluralist?

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I have often teased Michael von Brück about coming out of the closet and declaring himself a pluralist – someone who unabashedly affirms that no religion has the ability or the right to hold itself up as superior over all other religions. For understandable reasons, he has resisted my urgings. I believe those reasons are both personal (Michael, like all card-carrying Zen Buddhists, doesn't like categories) and political (for many Christians, I think especially in Germany, "pluralist" is a bad word).

Well, whether Michael von Brück is really a pluralist or not, in the following reflections I would like to make a case – for him, but more so for my fellow Christians, especially in Germany – that there is no inherent contradiction between being an authentic pluralist and at the same time an authentic Christian.

Defining terms

In my theological studies at the Gregorian University in Rome, way back in the early 60s, we walked the path of theology – that is, of "faith seeking understanding" – by way of *theses*. Each step was a carefully crafted thesis – a truth claim that consisted, first, of a definition of terms and then a line-up of proofs from three sources: scripture, tradition, and reason. Old Roman that I am, I would like in this essay to follow pretty much the same path.

My thesis is straightforward: *One can be both a Christian and a pluralist at the same time*. The first step in laying out this thesis will be a "*definitio terminorum*" – a definition of terms. The intent of this step is not to achieve agreement on these terms (though I hope that might be possible) but to enable my readers to understand what I am saying and what I am trying to argue.

The terms in my thesis are basically two: Christian and pluralist.

What does "to be a Christian" require?

I would like to suggest that there are at least four qualities that have to mark the life of anyone who would call herself a Christian: