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WORLD**

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NOTE TO CONTRIBUTORS:

The Ecumenical Association of Nigerian Theologians was founded in 1986 by pastors, university and seminary professors from mainline Christian churches. The objective is to critically reflect on and search for ways of establishing dialogue in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation like Nigeria. The pressure in 1986 came from the upgrading of Nigeria to full membership in the Organization of Islamic Conference. The focus of the association expanded from Muslim-Christian relations to interdisciplinary research—bringing together scholars from disciplines such as political science, history, law, economics, sociology, philosophy, psychology and anthropology, religious studies and theology—to engage in creative conversation for the good of Nigeria, Africa, the diaspora and the world. This is the focus of the *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology*, a peer-reviewed journal, published since 1987.

Contributors, invited or voluntary, should have an eye on the multi-disciplinary interest of the *Bulletin*. Submissions are in English, but the editorial board and consultants have facility for translating from French to English.

STYLE

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BULLETIN OF ECUMENICAL THEOLOGY
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EDITORIAL

It is indeed a special honour for me, for the second time in three years, to be invited by the editor-in-chief of *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* (BETH) to serve as a guest editor. Over the years, this journal has significantly embraced a global audience and focus, particularly in relation to my research and theological interest—religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue. My first stab on the responsibility of a guest editor for the journal had two articles. One focused primarily on Christian-Muslim relationship in Nigeria. The second looked beyond Nigeria to a broader topic of Muslims’ understanding and respect for Jesus Christ as a major prophet in Islam. In this edition, both the regional and religious perspectives have expanded to include issues of intra-Islamic dialogue, intra-Christian dialogue, and even more broadly religion in general in the society. Also its geographical coverage extends beyond Nigeria or Africa to embrace the wider world outlook. Therefore, more appropriately, this edition is titled: “Religions as social bridge-builders in society”. The subject of religion as a bridge-builder in today’s world is so integrally imperative and globally necessary. It is equally critically imperative that all people of good will who subscribe to the social values and necessity for religion actively collaborate to eliminate or at least minimize the negative image religion appears to embody, especially in the mind of the younger generation.

In my short period of robustly engaging some of the Generation X and Millennial, it is stunning how less they trust and appreciate religion in the society. Even more worrisome is the growing phenomenon where youths of these same generations have become the cannon fodder for perpetuating crime, hate, and evil under the guise of religion. This is the case not only for thousands that are flocking to the death cult of ISIS, Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, and Al Shabab, but also similar use of religion among some extremist ultra-right wing groups in the USA, the growing violence in India by the Hindutva group against Muslims and Christians, the violence visited on communities in East and Central Africa by the Christian cult rebel group led by Joseph Kony known as the Lord’s Resistant Army, and the violent persecution of Rohingya Myanmar Muslims by Buddhist monks, the youth, and the Myanmar army. Historically, the world has witnessed centuries of religion-inspired wars and violence or even violence justified on the basis of religion. There are innumerable examples of crimes against humanity that have been

legitimated on religious grounds: back when the greater population of humanity lived in silos, when there was minimal cultural and religious integration; back when cultural or religious pluralism was a social and theological taboo; back when it was normative to consider some human lives as dispensable; back when minority cultures and religions were driven into extinction by the dominant cultures or religions; and back when fundamental universal human rights were mere illusion. We live today in a supposedly more “civilized” world—the 21st century. There are key features of this age and century that we should be celebrating among which are the gains of growing integration of peoples of different cultures, ideologies, and religions; the expected prevalence of the rule of law and expected application of universal human rights; and the active struggle for truly egalitarian societies. Religions should be actively involved in all parts of the world to promote the commendable features of the 21st century.

In the book, *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, the editors, Douglas Johnson and Cynthia Sampson, argued that religion and religious leaders are valuable agents towards conflict resolution in society that must not be ignored by governments. In the foreword for the book, former USA President Jimmy Carter indicated instances where religion and religious leaders, during his presidency, provided the required cushion and support towards effective conflict resolution at the highest level of statehood in Africa, South America, and the Middle East.¹ This edition of BETH while affirming the arguments made in that book, goes a step further. The articles in this edition not only agree that religion is a vital positive agent for social bridge-building but also primarily argue for the imperative value of the theology of different religions towards effective inter-religious dialogue and peaceful resolution of conflicts in society.

Therefore, the articles explore different ways and advocate for why different religions must be invested in the project of bridge-building in society. The articles approach this subject from different perspectives: historical analysis, philosophical reasoning, religious instruction, and storytelling. The common thread among these articles in their different styles is that they all invoke theology as centrepiece for the advocated

¹ See Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson (eds). *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (Oxford,.: Oxford University Press, 1994).

bridge-building and dialogue. Siavash Asadi argues for better acceptance and understanding of the difference between Shia and Sunni Muslims. His article provides very concrete but instructive need for Muslims to heed the religious pluralistic approaches of Sufi Muslims as a template for relating with people of other religious persuasions in the society. Nelly van Doorn-Harder explores the prophetic qualities of Mohammed with the intent of urging Christians to be more appreciative of the spiritual and religious values of Islam.

Clement Kanu calls for an honest *trialogue* between Christians, Muslims, and practitioners of African Traditional Religion that is not drowned by marginal suspicions and theological squabbles. He advocates for what he describes as “mature differentiation,” which does not undermine the rich spiritual values inherent in all three religions.

Ignace Ndongala Maduku provides a survey of the historical-political developments in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has the Catholic Church in its crossfire. He strongly advocates for a less elitist Church that accords respect and value to the voice of the people, especially when such voices are against the political order, which alienates the people and perpetuates the exploitation of the masses.

Ikenna Paschal Okpalaeke highlights a fundamental malaise with Christian evangelization in south-eastern Nigeria, where the recrudescence of divided Christianity (a phenomenon that post-Reformation Western missionaries brought from their homes in Europe) is still significantly in play. To establish a lasting bridge among kit and kin in Nigeria who subscribe to different forms of Christianity, this author calls for the values of communality, an integral feature of any typical African society. To my mind, this author is asking Christians to recognize and apply a valuable mind-set that is embodied in the cultural ethos of south-eastern Nigeria and other African cultures towards a more lasting relationship among Christians in south-eastern Nigeria and entire Africa. While this may come across as a tacit admission of the failure of Christians to find healing through different Christian doctrines, it is more importantly a recognition and appreciation of the values that exist in the African society *ab initio* and a pragmatic approach of optimizing their application towards building a more sustainable peaceful relationship among neighbours of different faith traditions.

Amir Hussain, tapping on his personal experience, uses the metaphor of “neighbours” to better understand Muslim-Christian

dialogue; pleading for healthy understanding of religion, he calls for a better integration of Muslims in North America into the dominantly Judeo-Christian society of Canada and the United States.

Finally, James Frederick looks into the contributions of *Nostra Aetate* as well as *Ecclesiam Suam* to the new initiative of interreligious dialogue but stresses the need for more spiritual dialogue across different religious traditions. The nexus of his argument is that spiritual dialogue is more critical, productive, and likely to receive broader appreciation across different religious traditions. He laments the absence of more of such kind of dialogue in the world today.

There is no doubt that religion is one of the corner stones of the human society and a key institution for growth and development. Therefore, it is imperative that religion continues to demonstrate itself as a major force for building and sustaining human society. To effectively maintain this responsibility, every religion today must seek to actively contribute to this project of bridge-building. I hope all who engage the texts of this edition will find them resourceful and beneficial in the quest for actively and robustly engaging religion today towards bridge-building and integration of peoples and cultures not only in Nigeria or Africa, but also in the different parts of the world.

Marinus Iwuchukwu PhD, Duquesne University.

**SUFISM ON RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE
BASED ON IBN ARABI AND RUMI'S VIEWPOINTS**

Siavash Asadi¹

Abstract

Religious prejudice or absolutism can appear as physical actions or reactions in offensive or defensive roles, and can result in religious violence. The present paper attempts to examine the roots of religious prejudice in today's world of Islam, and to represent Sufism's teachings for preventing propagation of religious prejudice and violence among Muslims. Based on this research, two main factors have caused religious prejudice in Islamic context. One of them is the rejection of esoteric and metaphoric interpretation of the Islamic sacred texts. Another factor is the tendency to anathematize other beliefs. However, emphasis on viewpoints of the two greatest Sufis, Ibn Arabi and Rumi, shows that from Sufi's perspective, different esoteric and metaphoric interpretations of the Quran are unavoidably acceptable. Also, the emphasis shows that Sufis consider other beliefs as different manifestations of the same truth. Therefore, propagation of the teachings of Sufism could help to decrease religious prejudice among Muslim societies.

Key Words: Religious Prejudice, Religious Violence, Islam, Ibn Arabi, Rumi.

Introduction

The concept of "violence" can be divided into two main categories: religious and nonreligious violence. In this paper, "religious violence" is

¹ Siavash Asadi has a Ph.D. in Islamic Philosophy and Theology from Tarbiat Modares University (TMU) in Tehran, Iran; and is currently a research scholar at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

considered as violence caused by religious prejudice. In the history of Islam, religious prejudice is underscored by “course of Orthodoxy.”²

Since the emergence of Islam, two main strands of Islamic belief developed: Orthodoxy and Sufism. Orthodoxy insists on the form of Islam, literal interpretation of the sacred texts, and rigid enforcement of Islamic laws (*fiqh*). Sufism, however, insists on a mystical way for obtaining a spiritual life and unity with God. So, Sufism believes in esoteric exegesis of the sacred texts and the inner layers of Islam, in addition to faithfulness to the form of Islam and religious laws. Both strands developed among Muslim communities according to their cultural conditions, and during the years, each strand divided further into many more branches. In some periods of history, these two main Islamic strands have had good interactions with each other. But in recent history and in many Muslim communities, they have been known as two opposing strands.

The leaders of each strand have usually attempted to eliminate the other instead of trying to foster interaction. This has caused a negative imbalance of Islamic practice in many Muslim societies. Historical studies show that because of the close relationship between Orthodoxy and political power centres, Formalism (Orthodoxy) has mostly overcome Sufism. Many great Sufis, such as Mansur Hallaj (858 – 6 March 922)³ and Ayn al-Quzat (1098-1131)⁴, were anathematized by extremist orthodox clergies and were killed by governmental agents. Additionally, the superficial understanding of Islam among its followers contributed to the idea that Sufism was a deviant sect. Sufism’s emphasis on a non-personal God, special practices and other features, were not acceptable for most people who were not educated enough about Islam.

For this reason Sufism has mostly been a marginal and outcast course in Muslim societies, and its teachings have been practiced

² The term “course of Orthodoxy” is used for the course which accepts the exoteric interpretations of sacred texts only, and rejects any metaphorical or esoteric one.

³ He was a Persian mystic, writer and teacher of Sufism. He is most famous for his saying: "I am the Truth," which many saw as a claim to divinity, while others interpreted it as an instance of mystical annihilation of the ego which allows God to speak through the individual.

⁴ He was a Persian mystic, philosopher, and poet who was executed at the age of 33.

discreetly. Theoretically, the imbalanced presence of the two Islamic strands and attempts to eliminate Sufism is a result of an absolutist and literalist understanding of Islam. Reducing Islam to its surface, enforcement of Islamic laws in a rigid way, and lack of attention to moral and mystical aspects of Islam have unfavorable consequences in Muslim communities. One of these is growing religious prejudice and, consequently, religious violence in Muslim societies. More importantly, when absolutism becomes a norm, Sufism is not the only belief that suffers. Everyone who has different beliefs on whatever issue is seriously threatened by extremists.

It is imperative to understand that we cannot find the solutions for violence among Muslims outside of Islamic contexts. We can prevent—or at least we can reduce—influence of absolutism and religious prejudice by introducing moral and mystical aspects of Islam among Muslim communities. Indeed, according to the Quran and the Prophet's hadiths (the Prophet's sayings), Islam is a comprehensive religion. Islamic mystical, philosophical, moral, and jurisprudential teachings are related to one other, forming a conceptual network. Elimination or weakening any part of this network causes the whole network to be ineffective.

This essay tries to examine the roots of religious prejudice and violence in Islam, and to proffer solutions for preventing them among Muslims. It will introduce the historical roots and major factors of religious prejudice in Islam, and then analyze the ideas of the two greatest Sufis, Ibn Arabi and Rumi, to show how religious prejudice can be prevented in Muslim communities.

Religious Prejudice and Violence

The term “religious prejudice” mostly means “having a belief in the absolute and special understanding of one's religious beliefs.” So, fanatics consider their reading of Islam to be the only truth. But, as long as religious prejudice is limited to the private sphere, it cannot be named “religious violence.” Religious violence is caused by religious prejudice in two main ways that are dependent on the different roles of religious prejudice. These roles are defensive and offensive roles.

The Defensive Role of Religious Prejudice

Religious prejudice in its defensive role results in religious violence when the fanatic sees his/her beliefs theoretically criticized by others. But, he/she reacts harshly in order to defend his/her reading of religious doctrines. Suppose some published work criticizes a particular religion. It is common to see religious fanatics burn the text, exile the writer, and even kill the author, rather than respond in an intellectual manner by publishing a counter text.

In the defensive role, the fanatic is not the initiator of the conflict; he/she has a harsh reaction caused by religious prejudice. Of course, it is possible that the criticisms are not true and the critic's book is not valid. In that case, an intellectual defense of religious doctrines would be an appropriate course of action.

One example of this is the Muslim thinker, Nasr Hamed Abu Zaid (July 10, 1943 – July 5, 2010).⁵ He criticized some Islamic interpretations of the Quran through his writings. The main criticism was that the Quran is not God's words, but it is the Prophet's sayings which he received from God. For this reason, some Egyptian scholars, such as Ahmad Subhy Mansour, opposed Abu Zaid's thoughts, and some other legal scholars, such as Abdu Saboor Shahin, declared Abu Zaid to be an apostate, and the court decreed that his wife must divorce him.⁶

While, according to all Islamic scholars, those who say "I testify that there is no God beside Allah and Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah" are Muslims and cannot be anathematized, Abu Zaid said of himself:

⁵ He was an Egyptian Quranic thinker, author, academic and one of the leading liberal theologians in Islam. He is famous for his project of a humanistic Quranic hermeneutics, which "challenged mainstream views" on the Quran sparking "controversy and debate." While not denying that the Quran was of divine origin, Zaid argued that it was a "cultural product" that had to be read in the context of the language and culture of seventh century Arabs, and could be interpreted in more than one way.

⁶ According to the Islamic laws, when a man goes out of Islam, his wife must be divorced because a Muslim woman cannot be the wife of a non-Muslim man.

I am a Muslim and I am proud of my Islam. I believe in God, the Prophet Muhammad (blessing and peace of God be upon him) and Doomsday.⁷

On this basis, Dr. Muhammad Amareh, one of the greatest scholars at Al-Azhar University, strongly protested the court's inquisition. He wrote of Abu Zaid:

The challenge of Dr. Abu Zaid is an intellectual problem and it would be solved by intellectual conversations. And, in this case, the specialists are thinkers and researchers. This is not a legal challenge that is related to lawyers and judges.⁸

After that the Egyptian Islamic Jihadi group, led by Aiman Zavaheri, threatened to kill Abu Zaid. Following these threats, Abu Zaid and his wife left their country and migrated to Europe.

The Offensive Role of Religious Prejudice

Religious prejudice in its offensive role results in religious violence when the fanatics, in addition to an absolutist understanding of their religious beliefs, want to impose their beliefs on other people with force. So, religious prejudice includes two main factors: absolutism in the private sphere and interference in other private spheres with force. Fanatics consider imposing their religious beliefs on others to be a religious obligation, like prayer and fasting. More troubling is that they are willing to commit violence, which they also believe to be God's command. Indeed, one of the differences between religious and nonreligious violence is that in nonreligious violence, the offender is often remorseful because of what he/she has done. In religious violence, however, the offender is normally satisfied by what he/she has done as an order from God.

Moreover, the offensive role of religious prejudice is much more dangerous than the defensive role. This is because in the defensive state, the victim of religious violence, resulting from religious prejudice, is one

⁷ Muhammad, Amareh, *A Marxism Interpretation of Islam (al-Tafsir al-Marxi Le-al-Islam)*, First Published (Cairo: Dar al-Shorugh, 1996), 32.

⁸ Ibid, 9

individual or a small group. However, offensive prejudice attacks entire groups and communities who believe or think differently. Nowadays especially, offensive prejudice is more destructive than it was in the past. Today fanatics, because of technology and new medias, can easily make a global network with those who are like-minded for organizing global religious violence. This network is a serious threat for all world people.

ISIS is an excellent example of a global network of offensive religious prejudice. Making a global network based on common religious prejudice, ISIS attracts new members from around the world and commits atrocities. Also, sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni Muslims in some regions (like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq) are mostly based on offensive religious prejudice. In the view of these extremist groups, everyone opposing them is an enemy and must be killed.

In this way, Islam turns into a phenomenon which is in conflict with its nature. According to the Quran, the Prophet Muhammad is God's mercy for the entire world,⁹ and he said himself "I have been sent for completing the good moralities."¹⁰ Therefore, prejudice and violence contradict the nature of Islam and the duties of Muslims.

The Roots of Today's Islamic Prejudice

According to historical texts, there were signs of religious prejudice among the Prophet Muhammad's followers at the beginning of Islam. However, the most important Islamic violence in the last two centuries has been caused by some readings of Ibn Taymyyah's works.¹¹ He was a

⁹ Quran 12:107

¹⁰ al-Mottaghi, Hindi, *Kanz al-Ommal (Treasure of Servants)*, Vol.3, Research by Safvat al-Safa and Bakri al-Hayani (Riyadh: al-Rissalah Institution, 2008), hadith 5217.

¹¹ Ibn Taymyyah (1263-1328 CE) was a scholar of the Hanbali School of jurisprudence founded by Ahmad ibn Hanbal. Ibn Taymyyah has become one of the most influential medieval writers in contemporary Islam where his particular interpretations of the Quran and the Sunnah and his rejection of some aspects of classical Islamic tradition are believed by some scholars to have had considerable influence on contemporary Wahhabism, Salafism, and Jihadism. Ibn Taymyyah's controversial fatwa allowing jihad against other Muslims, is referenced to by Al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups.

great Islamic theologian with a wide scope of knowledge. But his works induce in some readers' absolutism on two levels. The first level of his absolutism appears in the interpretation of the Quran. In the Quran, Ibn Taymyyah believed, there is no metaphoric verse.¹² This means that all the Quranic verses must be read literally, and metaphoric interpretations are rejected.¹³ He even believed that one can know God physically.¹⁴ This is because there are some verses in the Quran that use terms like "God's throne." The second level of his absolutism appears in rejecting and anathematizing everyone who has different beliefs. There is a long list of beliefs that cause people to be anathematized by Ibn Taymyyah's *fatwas*.¹⁵ For instance, Ibn Taymyyah has a *fatwa* about intercession. According to this *fatwa*, requiring intercession is prohibited, even the Prophet Muhammad's intercession; and everyone who requires intercession must repent or be killed.¹⁶ He refused intercession even though the doctrine of intercession is one of the main teachings in the Quran and in both Shi'a and Sunni hadiths. According to Quranic verses and hadiths, prophets,¹⁷ believers,¹⁸ angels,¹⁹ and holy things like the Quran,²⁰ which are in close proximity to the divine, could be intercessors

¹² Ahmad, Ibn Taymyyah, *The Collection of Fatwas (Majmu al Fatawa)*, Vol.7, Research by Mostafa Abdolghader Ata (Beirut: Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, 2000), 88, 102, 103.

¹³ Ahmad, Ibn Taymyyah, *An Interpretation of the Unity Surah (Tafsir Surah Ikhlas)*, Third edition (Kuwait: Maktab al-Menar al-Islamiyah, 1959), 164.

¹⁴ Ibn Taymyyah, 2000, Vol. 5, p. 192.

¹⁵ Abdul Majid, Mash'abi, *The Manner of Ibn Taymyyah in Anathematization (Menhaj Ibn Taymyyah fi Mas'alah Takfir)*, Second Publication (Riyadh: Izwa al-Salaf Publication, 1997).

¹⁶ Ahmad, Ibn Taymyyah, *Visiting of Tombs (Ziarah al-Ghoboor)*, Seventh edition (Riyadh: The General Presidency for the departments of Scientific Research and Ifta, 2012), 17.

¹⁷ Ahmad Ibn-e-Muhammad, Ibn-e-Hanbal, *al-Mosnad*, Vol 3, Research by Adel Morshed and Others, edited by Dr. Abdollah Turki (Damascus: Al-Resaalat Publications, 2001), 325.

¹⁸ Muhammad, Faghi, *Imploration and Pilgrimage in Islam (al-Tavassol va al-Ziarah Fi Shari'ah al-Islami'ah)* (Cairo: Mostafa al-Babi al-Halabi and His Son Publication, 1968), 206.

¹⁹ Ahmad, Nesai, *Traditions (Sonan)*, Vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr Publication, 1929), 181.

²⁰ Muhammad Ibn-e-Isa, Termazi, *Tradition (Sonan)*, Vol. 4 (Beirut: Dar al-Fekr Publications, 1982), 238.

for sinners on Judgment Day. For Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad is considered the major intercessor;²¹ the Prophet himself affirms this: “There is a prayer for each prophet, and my prayer on Doomsday would be the intercession for my followers.”²²

Indeed, the intercessors are intermediate between sinners and God and they can pray for sinners and ask God’s forgiveness of them. They will cause the sin of sinners to be washed away and save the sinners from punishment. But, the Quran insists that they cannot be intercessors unless God permits them: “Who is it that can intercede with Him except by His permission.”²³

I will not prove the truth or falsity of intercession in this article. The important thing is, however, that this *fatwa* shows an intolerance for others’ beliefs. This absolutism is even more apparent when Ibn Taymyyah emphasizes killing people who are requiring intercession.

Based on his absolutist principles, Ibn Taymyyah categorizes people into three categories: Muslims, unbelievers, and hypocrites.²⁴ He clearly anathematizes Jews, Christians,²⁵ Sufis,²⁶ and even Muslims who have beliefs other than Ibn Taymyyah’s.²⁷ He portrays Shias especially as the greatest idolaters and says that they are the furthest people from the unity of God.²⁸ These ideas and *fatwas*, however, were not generally accepted by Islamic scholars during his lifetime. This is maybe because the Egyptian government and the judges at that time were Maliki and were not persuaded by Hanbali scholars such as Ibn Taymyyah. So, he was not part of the political power centres. He was even arrested and spent some time in prison.

²¹ Seyyed, Sabegh, *Islamic Believes (al-Aghaed al-Islami’ah)* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr Publication, 1982), 73.

²² Abdollah Ibn-e-Rahman, Daremi, *Traditions (Sonan)*, Vol. 2 (Damascus: I’tedal Publications, 1930), 328.

²³ Quran 2:255.

²⁴ Ahmad, Ibn Taymyyah, *Requirement of Right Path (Ighteza Seraat al-Mostaghim)*, Research by Naser Ibn Abdul Karim alAghl (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Roshd, 2008), 81.

²⁵ Ibid, 58.

²⁶ Ibid, 69.

²⁷ Ibid, 68.

²⁸ Ibid, 715-716

After Ibn Taymyyah's death, his teachings were embraced by some of his followers, but they could not keep these teachings alive. His ideas were almost forgotten, until Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab²⁹ reconstructed those ideas 400 years later. On the interpretation of the Quran, he continued Ibn Taymyyah's opinion of literal understanding and opposition to metaphorical exegesis. On anathematization, however, he was more severe than Ibn Taymyyah. He had many harsh *fatwas* for the anathematization of other Muslims, and his brother, Solomon Ibn Abdul Wahhab, wrote a book condemning Muhammad and his followers. Solomon declared his brother's fatwas to be un-Islamic, although he had accepted Ibn Taymyyah's ideas and had cited them in his book. Addressing Muhammad and his followers, he wrote:

You have anathematized all people who are Muslims, because you say those who do such deeds [that do not match with Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab's understandings] are unbelievers. Even, according to your opinion, those who say they are not unbelievers, are unbelievers themselves and must be anathematized.³⁰

Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab tried to get close to political and military power centers in addition to reconstructing Ibn Taymyyah's absolutism. After a few years, he became the most influential religious scholar in Hijaz and earned both religious authority and political-military power. Using military power, he could solidify his religious absolutism by attacking other tribes. His army destroyed many cities and killed many people who did not accept his religious views. He believed and told his followers that killing people who did not accept his beliefs was fighting in God's name. So, in his view, anathematization and killing people was a holy deed. Jamil Sidghi Zahaavi, the great contemporary Sunni theologian, writes on one of Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab's military attacks:

²⁹ He (1703 –1792) was a great Hanbali scholar and an Arabian religion reformer from Najd in central Arabia who founded the movement now called Wahhabism.

³⁰ Solomon, Ibn Abdul Wahhab, *The Divine's Thunderbolts (Savaagh al-Ilahyyah)*, Research by al-Sayyed al-Saraavi (Beirut: Dar al-Zolfaghar, 1998), 46.

The worst deed done by Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab's followers, when they entered the city in 1802, was genocide of Taif's people. They killed everyone; adults and children...even they cut off suckling's heads on the mothers' breasts. They killed readers of the Quran and praying people in the mosque.... They trampled books—including Qurans, Bukhari's book, and other hadith books in the streets.³¹

In this manner, Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab founded offensive religious prejudice and violence, which has continued in some Islamic countries over the last two centuries. Today, anathematization and religious violent deeds committed by terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram, are mostly based on Muhammad Abdul Wahhab's fatwas and his practice.

Impact of Islamic Mysticism (Sufism) on Religious Prejudice

In the previous section, we saw that absolutism causes religious prejudice and violence in Islam. It refuses any metaphorical interpretation of the Islamic sacred texts and it anathematizes any opposing belief. Although these two factors overlap and are related to each other, they could be studied as two separate factors. Islamic mysticism or Sufism, however, teaches doctrines that challenge these approaches.

Sufism, generally, knows the Quran as a deep text with various aspects and numerous layers. In fact, Sufis believe the Quran lends itself to metaphorical interpretations in addition to literal ones. Sufism can access the deeper layers of the Quranic understanding and the truth of metaphorical verses with special practices, such as meditation and prayer.

Moreover, religious pluralism is an accepted doctrine in Sufism. Different religions, Sufis believe, are the unified truth manifested in various forms in different religious beliefs and expressions. Sufism's view on other religions is known as the theory of "Transcendental Unity of Religions" or "Perennial Wisdom:" i.e. all religions have the same essence and the same purpose, which is a spiritual life and union with

³¹ Jamil Sidghi, Zahaavi, *The True Dawn (al-Fajr Sadigh)* (Cairo: Dar al-Seddigh al-Akbar, 1905), 19.

God.³² To understand the essence of the various religions, “the eye of the heart”³³ must be used; understanding spiritual matters requires intellectual intuition in addition to the exoteric interpretations. On the other hand, religious traditions, which are cultural, historical, and geographical collections of laws, practices and beliefs, transmit the content of religions from old generations to new ones. The followers of Perennial Wisdom compare various religions to the numerous ways to climb a mountain, all of which have the same endpoint: the mountaintop, the spiritual life which is union with God.³⁴ The different ways are chosen by the followers of specific religions depending on their very different conditions, such as cultural, historical, geographical, and even psychological factors.³⁵ Therefore, all religions are ways to achieve eternal truth. The apparent differences between various religions are a result of the capacities, cultures and conditions of various generations. The greatest Sufis were attempting to prove the theory of Transcendental Unity of Religions. Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) about seven centuries ago expressed his interest in this theory:

My heart accepts every form of beliefs. It is the convent of monks, the house of idols, the Ka'bah of circumambulators, the tablets of the Torah and the book of the Quran. My religion is “love” and I follow the followers of this religion wherever they go.³⁶

In Sufism, perception of the truth has various layers and must become deeper and deeper continuously by growing the human soul and purifying the heart. Therefore, nobody can say “I absolutely obtain the truth” because there are infinite ways to obtain the truth. After understanding a part of truth, a Sufi must attempt to pass layers and

³² Frithjof, Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Introduction by Huston Smith, Second printing (Wheaton, Illinois, Chennai, India: Quest Books, 2005), 12-16.

³³ The term “the eye of the heart” is adapted from another of Schuon’s books with this name. See: Frithjof, Schuon, *The Eye of the Heart; Metaphysics, Cosmology, Spiritual life*, foreword by Huston Smith (Indiana: World Wisdom, 1977).

³⁴ *Ibid*, xii.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 15.

³⁶ Abu Abdu Allah Muhammad Ibn Ali, Ibn Arabi, *Expressing the Desires (Tarjoman al-Ashvagh)*, (Beirut: no publisher, 1961), 43-44.

obtain other parts of truth, because truth is infinite itself. So, the Sufi's perception of truth is not black and white; he/she believes in a wide range of perception and is continuously improving her/his perception.

Even faith is not an absolute belief in a Sufi's viewpoint; it has unlimited steps that a Sufi must take, one after another. Going forward in the path of faith is also infinite, although at each step, the degree of faith will be stronger than the previous step. Therefore, "the absolute faith" and "absolute impiety," and consequent "anathematization," do not make sense in Sufism; as Rumi says:

There is not blasphemy and faith where
He is,
This is because He is the essence and those are the
surface.³⁷

On this basis, the basic teachings of Sufism spare Sufis from absolutism and religious prejudice. In other words, believing in Sufism's teachings and acting accordingly resists prejudice and religious violence. In the following sections, I will cite the works of the two greatest Sufis, Ibn Arabi and Rumi, and will analyze their ideas of Quranic interpretation and religious pluralism.

Ibn Arabi and Rumi on the Quranic Interpretation

According to Ibn Arabi, there is a difference between understanding of humans' and God's sayings. This is because humans' sayings regularly have singular meaning, but, God's sayings have several aspects and meanings. So, when He reveals His words, humans' understanding of them are multiple, and everyone understands them depending on their conditions. God, however, knows all aspects of language, and knows these aspects to be related to various people. In other words, God's words have various meanings because people's understandings are not the same. Therefore, considering language, all understandings of God's words are

³⁷ Rumi 2:102, 25 (It means that, according to a classical numbering, book 2, section 102, hemistich 25).

reasonable.³⁸ The Quran has, Ibn Arabi believes, many layers of truth and everyone can understand some layers depending on one's understanding level.³⁹ Abu Zaid has written about this too:

According to Ibn Arabi, the Quran has two aspects: apparent and hidden. The Quran is an infinite collection of secrets that are discovered at various levels.⁴⁰

Of course, Ibn Arabi insists on two limiting factors in understanding the Quran. These two factors prevent people from going astray from the truth: considering language rules and avoiding delusion.⁴¹ He used the term "valid" to make an interpretation which is based on language rules and is not based on delusion. Indeed, a valid interpretation is one which uses the literal words and shows inward meanings, considering the literal words and language rules.⁴² Therefore, the words do not limit the meanings; they can have a wide range of meaning in various layers of the Quran.⁴³

Rumi represents similar views with Ibn Arabi on the Quranic interpretation. He, like Ibn Arabi, considers the literal meaning of words as a criterion for any valid interpretation. But, he emphasizes that the Quran has a hidden aspect in addition to its appearance. Sufi must pass appearance and reach inward meanings:

You know that the letters of the Quran are just its appearances. But, behind these letters, there is a huge hidden truth. And, behind this huge truth, there is another hidden truth bigger than the previous. At this level, the perfect wisdoms are attracted. The third inner layer also is where perfect wisdoms are confused....So, O man, do not think that the Quran is just an appearance. It is like Satan's

³⁸ Abu Abdu Allah Muhammad Ibn Ali, Ibn Arabi, *al-Fotoohat al-Makkyyah*, Vol. 4 (Beirut: Dar-o-Sader, n.a), 25.

³⁹ *Ibid*, Vol. 3, 94.

⁴⁰ Nasr Haamed, Abu Zaid, *The Philosophy of Allegoric (Falsafah al-Ta'vil)*, Forth edition (Beirut: Thaghafi al-Arabi Center, 1998), 265.

⁴¹ Ibn Arabi, n.a, Vol.2, 595.

⁴² Ghasem. Kakai, *Ibn Arabi and Eckhart on Pantheism* (Tehran: Hermes Publication, 2003), 513.

⁴³ Abu Zaid, 1998, p. 267.

approach. Satan thinks that Adam is just a material body, while he has a spiritual soul. This is because the material body is appearance and the soul is hidden.⁴⁴

Rumi says, like Ibn Arabi, that everyone can see the Quran from his perspective based on his spiritual background. Rumi compares the Quran to a food table on which there are various foods and everyone can eat his or her choice of food depending on what they have taste, appetite, or hungry for. "The Quran has several layers of meanings for various people, like a table which has food for nobles and plebeians."⁴⁵

For Sufi and perfect believers, however, the truth of the Quran is a lost valuable essence. They must try to find it although they cannot do so wholly.⁴⁶

In spite of this wide range of Quranic understanding, Rumi emphasizes that the literal meaning of the Quran must be carefully considered. This is because he wants to prevent imaginative interpretations and wrong understandings. For him, the language rules are important criteria for Quranic interpretations. The Quranic words are unequivocal; and understanding them correctly requires the highest accuracy.⁴⁷ Even, he insists that the interpretation of the Quran by reason only does not work.⁴⁸ He says that one of the necessary factors for a correct Quranic interpretation is mystical practices and trying to improve the valuable essence of humanity. When a Sufi attempts to purify himself and the eye of his heart becomes open, the divine lights help him to see and understand the inner layers of the Quran.⁴⁹

According to the above passages, for both Rumi and Ibn Arabi, the Quran has several aspects and several layers. Plural interpretations of the Quran, considering language rules, are not only possible but also necessary because of the various understanding potential of people. When Sufis emphasize the understanding of the inner layers of the Quran as infinite, they are preventing any absolutism in interpreting the Quran.

⁴⁴ Rumi 3: 208.

⁴⁵ Rumi 3: 86, 16.

⁴⁶ Rumi 2: 86, 25.

⁴⁷ Rumi 6: 19, 7.

⁴⁸ Rumi 3: 41, 58.

⁴⁹ Rumi 2: 1, 73.

This is because by discovering any hidden layer of meaning, the interpreter knows that there are many truths that he does not know and he must attempt to obtain them. Metaphorical interpretations, therefore, are accepted and are at work in both Rumi and Ibn Arabi's teachings, especially to interpret the verses discussing a God who is Hearing and Seeing.

Ibn Arabi and Rumi on Religious Pluralism

According to their books, Ibn Arabi and Rumi have been respectful to other beliefs and religions. Based on the theory of Transcendental Unity of Religions, they consider the essence of the religions—unity with God—as the main criterion to valuation. For Ibn Arabi and Rumi, the surface of the religions, the customs and other cultural aspects of religions, are less important than their essence. This idea, of course, is based on the Quranic verses. The Quran commands believers to believe in the previous books, the Gospel and the Torah, and expresses clearly that a specific religion or custom is not required to obtain eternal truth. What is important, according to the Quran, is believing in truth, resurrection, and doing good deeds:

Verily! Those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians, and Sabians, whoever believes in God and the resurrection and does righteous deeds shall have their reward with their Lord, they shall not fear, nor shall they grieve.⁵⁰

Ibn Arabi says about respecting and accepting other beliefs and customs:

People who can discover God's secrets (Sufis) know the other religions, nations and beliefs on God. Some of these beliefs are contradictions, some are different and some are similar. But, Sufi knows the origin of these beliefs and refers them to the essence of the religion. Sufi knows the reasons of these people and does not condemn them, and does not refuse their beliefs.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Quran 2: 62.

⁵¹ Ibn Arabi, n.a, Vol. 2, p. 398.

Everything in the world, Ibn Arabi believes, is God's manifestation; therefore everything is right and is a sign of God.⁵² In other words, God is the absolute existence who is not limited absolutely while accepting forms of creatures. On this basis he expresses:

Sufis must know the knowledge of each religion and notion about God. This is because in this way, they can see the manifestation of God in all forms, and they must not deny any form of God. God is currently in existence, therefore, nobody denies.⁵³

Ibn Arabi compares various beliefs to a unifying mirror and everyone can see their reflection in it:

The unity truth is like a mirror. If one looks into the mirror from his personal perspective, he can see the sign of God and acknowledges it. But, if he looks accidentally into the mirror from another perspective, he cannot recognize the truth of God and rejects it. This is like if he sees in the mirror his own face and acknowledges it, but, when he sees another face in the mirror in front of him, he rejects the unfamiliar face.⁵⁴

In Ibn Arabi's thinking, to be limited in personal beliefs causes one to miss other parts of the truth. He strictly encourages his followers to release themselves from limited beliefs, and to open their hearts and minds to other viewpoints:

Be aware! Do not be bound by your belief and do not anathematize other beliefs. This is because if you reject other beliefs, you would lose a great goodness. You lose even the knowledge of truth. So, be in your soul like primary matter; it accepts every form in itself and you accept every belief too. God is bigger than to be limited in your belief. God says himself in the Quran "wherever you turn your face, there is God's face."⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid, p. 306.

⁵³ Ibid, Vol. 3, p. 161.

⁵⁴ Abu Abdu Allah Muhammad Ibn Ali, Ibn Arabi, *Fosus al-Hekam*, Research by Abol Alaa Afifi (Tehran: al-Zahra Publications, 1987), 184.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 113.

Based on the Quran, Ibn Arabi insists that the religions brought by the various prophets are about the truth which is the unity of God and humanity's unity with God, even though religious laws, cultures and customs are different.⁵⁶ He has an example to explain this meaning using the property of the mirror again. He compares the various religions to mirrors which are in various shapes. Some of them are short, some are long, some are wide and some are narrow. When someone looks at each of these mirrors, however, he can see one thing that is his own face. Similarly, when various religions are accurately looked at, the unique truth is apparent in them.⁵⁷

Ibn Arabi clearly declares that he has accepted Christ as the Son of God, considering the Father as He who creates the Son. Moreover, he says that God is the Father of all creatures and he knows the Son of God too:

God, as I know him, is the Father of the universe and my existence is His Son.⁵⁸

He emphasizes that Christians, like other believers, share with Muslims the belief in the unity of God while they believe in the Trinity:

But, people who believe in the Trinity are salvaged because there is a unity in the Trinity....So, they believe in the unity of the truth of God while this unity is combined with three holy essences...I saw them in a mystical experiment such that I could not distinguish them from other believers in the unity of God.⁵⁹

Similar to Ibn Arabi, Rumi in several poetries expresses that all beliefs and other viewpoints about God are valid, and he avoids insulting and reproaching other beliefs. This approach to other understandings of God, for instance, appears in the story of Moses and the shepherd expressed by Rumi in the second book of Masnavi. In this story, Moses heard a shepherd praying in the following way: "O God, show me where thou art, that I may become Thy servant. I will clean Thy shoes and comb

⁵⁶ Ibn Arabi, n.a, Vol. 2, p. 214; Vol. 4, p. 444.

⁵⁷ Ibid, Vol.3, p. 251.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 416.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 172.

Thy hair, and sew Thy clothes, and fetch Thee milk, and kill Thy body's louses. I wish to kiss Thy hands and rub Thy tired feet. I would like to clean Thy bed when Ye want to sleep." When Moses heard him praying in this manner, he rebuked him, saying: "O foolish one, though your father was a believer, you have become an infidel. God is a spirit, and needs no such gross ministrations as, in your ignorance, you suppose." The shepherd was abashed at his rebuke, and tore his clothes off and fled into the desert. Then, a voice from heaven was heard, saying: O Moses!

Why hast thou sent my servant away?
 Thou hast come to draw men to union with me,
 Not to drive them far away from me....
 To each person have I allotted peculiar forms,
 To each have I given peculiar usages....
 I regard not the outside and the words,
 I regard the inside and the state of the heart.
 I look at the heart if it be humble,
 Though the words which come out of the mouth
 may be non- humble.
 Because the heart is substance and words
 accidents,
 Accidents are only a means, substance is the final cause.⁶⁰

An absolutist literal understanding of a religion, Rumi believes, is like a thirsty man who loves the pattern of a jug, while in this jug is fresh water. He does not know that in the jug is fresh water which can quench his thirst; what is important for him is just the pattern:

⁶⁰ Rumi 2:41, 1-14. The translation of this section is from: Maulana Jalal-D-Din Muhammad, Rumi, *Masnavi I Ma'navi (Teachings of Rumi)*, Translation by E.H. Whinfield (Iowa: Omphaloskepsis, 2001),

How much ye make love in the pattern of the
jug?

Pass from this pattern and find water.
Say, how much ye make love in manifests?
Wish the hidden meanings and find them.
Know that manifests are fluid, but,
The world of deep meanings is perennial.⁶¹

He emphasizes that debates on literal understandings and anathematization of other beliefs prevent human beings from obtaining the truth of the religion. This causes human beings to plunge into the marsh of prejudice. He, like Ibn Arabi, cites the Quranic verse “wherever you turn your face, there is God’s face.”

Turks, Romans and Arabs quarrelling with
each other,
Could not solve the problem of grapes and
wine (literal understanding).
Pending, the trustworthy, spiritual king (the
truth),
Has not come, these differences are not
removed.
Following this truth, ye can remove these
differences,
That, “wherever you turn your face, there is God’s face.”⁶²

He teaches his followers that the value of human relationships is love and sympathy, not consensus or the sameness of nations and races.⁶³ Moreover, for Rumi, like Ibn Arabi, unique truth manifests differently among various cultures and nations; all must be respected. He believes that all differences between various religions are dependent on the people’s perspective:

⁶¹ Rumi 2: 25, 20-22.

⁶² Rumi 2:119, 30-33.

⁶³ Rumi 1: 68, 5.

O essence of the existence!
 These are from their perspective,
 All differences between Muslim, Christian and Jews.⁶⁴

The truth, Rumi says, is like an elephant in a dark room. Everyone touches a part of the elephant. So, when one touches the trunk he thinks that it is a pipe. And, when the other person touches the elephant's leg he thinks it is a column. According to the part which each feels, he gives a different description of the animal. But, if they had a candle, they could understand the truth of the elephant. This candle in the context of Sufism is the light of divinity. Rumi analogizes literal understanding of reality to the palm understanding the elephant:

The eye of outward sense is as the palm of a
 hand,
 The whole of the object is not grasped in the palm.⁶⁵

Based on this story, Rumi warns that anyone who limits the truth and accuses others of blasphemy will misinterpret religion. This is, Rumi says, like a fetus who thinks the world is only inside the body of his mother because he does not know anything else about the world. He also thinks that the only food is the blood which is drunk by him. This kind of thinking is related to religious prejudice. But, by using intellect and purifying the heart it could be known that these various understandings of truth have a unique source:

O honorable! This world is like a tree, and
 We are like the unripe fruits on its branches
 Unripe fruits hold the branch strongly, because
 They do not deserve to be in the king's
 palace....
 Severity and prejudice are crudity,
 Until ye are a fetus, thy food is blood.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Rumi 3: 52, 15.

⁶⁵ Rumi 3: 53, 11.

⁶⁶ Rumi 3:53, 36-40.

Conclusion

The roots of most religious violence in Muslim society—which is very dangerous and threatens the whole of human society today—are to be found in Ibn Taymyyah and Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab. They emphasize that the only Quranic interpretation is the literal one and that metaphorical interpretations must be refused. They refused any understanding of the Quran other than their own, while they insisted that unfaithful and hypocritical people must be killed. On the basis of the term used in this paper, their followers' religious prejudice is offensive. It means that not only are they religious absolutists, but also that they impose their beliefs on other people. When they possess political and military power, this imposition is carried out through violence and bloodshedding. Nowadays, the groups that follow this viewpoint, such as ISIS, al Shabbab, and Boko Haram, are committing crimes against people. To resist this viewpoint and to prevent its penetration into Muslim societies, this essay invokes the teachings of Sufism.

Of course, this article does not claim that Sufism's teachings are faultless. For this purpose, the viewpoints of two greatest Sufis, Ibn Arabi and Rumi, were analyzed. Their works demonstrate that Sufism accepts various interpretations of the Quran and hadiths depending on people's levels of understanding. Sufis know the Quran as having many inner layers that could be discovered by applying intellect and purifying the heart. Sufis also respect all other beliefs and religions. This is because they believe that while the truth is unique, it has various manifestations depending on cultures and conditions. On this basis, employing Sufism's teachings against the literal understanding of the Quran and rejecting other beliefs, religious prejudice can be limited or eliminated.

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**THINKING ABOUT PROPHETS: MUHAMMAD IN A CHRISTIAN
CONTEXT.**

Nelly van Doorn-Harder¹

Abstract

The question whether Christians consider the Prophet Muhammad to be a prophet of God or not is difficult to answer. Finding an answer to who Muhammad is or can be for Christians seems to be a highly academic and very Western enterprise. Although the scholars taking on the question all have in-depth and serious engagement with Islamic texts and teachings, they speak from specific Christian position and cultural context. In this article I argue that leaving out vast amounts of materials, such as those stemming from cultural differences and personal spiritual experiences, often leads to incomplete understandings about the role of the Prophet in the lived experience of the believers.

Realms of Unknowing

For about over half a century the question whether Christians consider the Prophet Muhammad to be a prophet of God or not has been hotly debated among Christian theologians. It remains a difficult question since the answer can have deep repercussions for Christians and Muslims within their respective communities as well as for the relationships between them. The answer might challenge deeply held beliefs and make people wonder if they are straying from conventional interpretations of their Holy Scriptures. Muslim theologian Tim Winter expresses the challenge as follows:

Strait indeed is the gate through which the theologian walks, when seeking to represent the Other, particularly his or her own world's most significant Other, on its own terms, rather than on

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the terms of a theology or a map of salvation history which he or she finds comfortable. Yet courtesy to strangers, as an Abrahamic virtue, must ultimately be about allowing them to bear witness to themselves, while remaining, without compromise, in commitment to one's own absolute covenant with God.²

Winter indicates two important aspects of this dialogue exercise: that it develops from engagements within one's own religion and that it takes seriously the beliefs that move the other, those of a different faith. However, within this relationship there is a third Other: the Divine. Prophets are individuals who convey messages from the Divine Other to their fellow human beings. Christians and Muslims believe that through the ages prophets have regularly relayed such messages, and seem to agree on the role of such unique individuals whose task it was to warn, prompt and relate God's laws. While we all pray to the same God, our views on the position of the prophet within the divine economy deeply affect our views on the Divine. Christians wrestle with the difficult concept of the Trinity. At the same time the most prominent Muslim dogma rejects any reference to this mystical union. Even though, as Karl Rahner observed, "Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists,'"³ the underlying question remains how to position the Prophet Muhammad vis-à-vis Jesus whom Christians believe to be part of the Trinity.

Consequently, when probing deeper, vast differences appear, for example, in how the faithful in Islam and Christianity not just think about, but also experience their relationship with Muhammad or Jesus. Few Christians can identify with the deep love Muslims have for their prophet who believe that: "Whatever exists—such as nobility, humility, authority, and high station—all are gifts from him, shadows of him, inasmuch as they were manifested through him."⁴ Just as they have gleaned from the Scriptures 99 names to describe the attributes and

² Tim Winter, "Jesus and Muhammad: new convergences." *The Muslim World* 99.1 (2009), 20-22.

³ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*. (New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999) 10-11.

⁴ Rumi, *Signs of the Unseen. The Discourses of Jalaluddin Rumi* (Introduction and translation by W.M. Thackston, Jr), (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1999)

perfection of God, so Muslims have found 99 names to describe their prophet.⁵ Muslims, however, might have problems with Pope Francis' explanation about how Christians connect with Jesus that clearly refers to the work of the Holy Spirit:

The Spirit of truth and charity reminds us of all that Christ said and helps us enter ever more fully into the meaning of his words. It is the Spirit who leads us to take this path: the path of the living memory of the Church. And he asks us for a response: the more generous our response, the more Jesus' words become life within us, becoming attitudes, choices, actions, testimony. In essence the Spirit reminds us of the commandment of love and calls us to live it. . . . A Christian without memory is not a true Christian but only halfway there: a man or a woman, a prisoner of the moment, who doesn't know how to treasure his or her history, doesn't know how to read it and live it as salvation history.⁶

Answers given to the question about what Christians think about the Prophet Muhammad depend on when and where it is being asked. Nowadays, most studies about who the Prophet Muhammad is for Christians come from Western theologians who not only attempt to find answers to Muslims asking the question, but are also searching for new theological interpretations about Islam that can guide Christians in the West when interacting with the elusive other called the "Muslim neighbour." By herself the identity of this neighbour is not clear; is she, just to mention a few options, a Sunnite, Shi'ite, or Sufi?

This neighbour disappears in the exercise of comparing Scriptures and teachings about Jesus and Muhammad that more often than not end up being rational, cerebral events between scholars and religious leaders, most of them men. We look at texts and discuss what we see on the page or listen to explanations about each other's faiths. Constrained by time and opportunities, we scratch the surface, come to conclusions, and try to

⁵ These names can be found online. See, for example, http://ahadees.com/names_of_holy_prophet/.

⁶ Pope Francis, sermon Pentecost 2014. Available at: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/flpent14.htm>. The text can also be found: *Walking with Jesus. A Way Forward for the Church. (2015).*

find a common denominator. Interfaith engagement often ignores to include the question of how the Divine relates to human beings. By this I mean the individual forms of spirituality; prayer, meditation, contemplation, that have guided believers throughout the ages and given them intimate connections with Jesus or Muhammad. These type of realities could be called “mystical;” a term that tends to make most scholars involved in dialogues break out in a sweat. However, due to this myopia we leave out vast amounts of materials, such as those stemming from cultural differences and personal spiritual experiences.

Moses or Abraham, for example, would seem excellent examples of prophets Muslims and Christians can agree upon without too much discussion. However, when comparing the stories Muslims and Christians tell about Moses or Abraham, their ultimate beliefs about these figures differ profoundly. Influenced by time and place they also differ depending on the needs of the community retelling them. And as Devin Stewart has pointed out, there is always a deep tension when speaking about the founder of one’s faith. In order to convince the other of its validity Muslims as well as Christians have a vested interest in demonstrating the distinctiveness of Jesus or Muhammad.⁷ Accepting this reality can be as eye opening as it is disturbing.

In the end, it seems we can do no more than agree on secular concepts such as basic human rights, freedom of religion and that all humans deserve to be respected and accepted for who they are and what they believe.

Questions

This essay revisits the question of who the Prophet Muhammad is to Christians. In my view, it should be connected with who Jesus is to Christians and who Muhammad is to Muslims. In part, the question stems from the reality that Jesus is mentioned in more than ninety verses in the Qur’an while from the Jewish-Christian point of view, no mention is made of Muhammad in their Scriptures. According to the Qur’an, Jesus is not the Son of God, but His servant and messenger to Israel (Q. 3:49, 4:157, 5:75). He is supported by the Holy Spirit (Q 2:87) and foretells the

⁷ Devin Stewart, “Prophecy.” In: Jamal J. Elias (ed.) *Key Themes for the Study of Islam*. (London: Oneworld Publications, 2010) 303.

coming of Muhammad (Q 61:6).⁸ Muslims also believe that the Paraclete or Comforter, the Spirit of truth in John 14 verse 16 that will come to guide the believers, in fact predicts the coming of Muhammad.

Over the years, numerous books have come out explaining, defending, or deriding Muhammad's actions. A famous example is Karen Armstrong's book on Muhammad that tries to assign him his rightful place in history.⁹ In this essay, I am looking at the question as it has been discussed by Christian writers, mostly theologians or religious leaders whose writings not only have the goal of addressing relationships between Muslims and Christians, but also contributing to the Christian debates about Islam.

In my view, the question "Who is the Prophet Muhammad to Christians?" by itself is not very precise and as complicated as the concept of the "Muslim neighbour." Are we addressing Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant Christians? Connected in their beliefs in the Old and the New Testament, there is a vast range of opinions among them about the interpretations of holy texts. Some take them to represent the holy history of God whose actions directly intervene in and steer history. They argue that even the most obscure Old Testament texts are part of this history that leads up to the birth of Jesus. Others read them as a compilation of texts that convey the history of the People of Israel, followed by a summary of the teachings of Jesus. In order to get some sort of clear answer, one has to explain from which position Christians are speaking since it profoundly influences their answer.

Once formulated, will the answer be free from the influence of thousands of years of Western bias towards the Prophet Muhammad that still resounds in numerous examples of Islamophobia?¹⁰ Moreover, what image of the Prophet Muhammad are we talking about? Do we address the image of Muhammad as the bearer of the Qur'an, the consummate

⁸ For further elaborations on Jesus in the Qur'an see: Zeki Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2014).

⁹ *Muhammad. A Prophet for our Time*. (San Francisco: Harper One reprints, 2007).

¹⁰ For the historic period, see, for example, John Tolan's work: *Sarecenes: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) and, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims through European Eyes in the Middle Ages* (Jacksonville: University Press of Florida, 2008).

politician, the community leader, the military leader, the hero, the mystic, the father, or the husband?

Apart from who poses the question, we have to wonder why the question is being asked and who poses it. Do Muslims expect a singular answer that satisfies all members of their community? Naturally such an answer would agree with Islamic dogma and interpretations of the Prophet Muhammad. This can be difficult since most Christians do not feel allowed to diminish the status of Jesus whom they do believe to be singular and unique, not one prophet among many.¹¹

Only when we are willing to face these realities and remain aware of the great divides of categories, time, cultures and beliefs that we are trying to bridge, can our dialogue about who the Prophet Muhammad is to Christians be fruitful. As Catholic theologian Daniel Madigan has pointed out, we should avoid a “process of negotiating claims until we reach a common denominator.”¹² Rather the exercise should help us grow in knowledge and understanding about each other, all the while respecting the depth and uniqueness of our respective faiths.

We should accept then that on many levels we are walking into a cloud of unknowing where there is no clear map or destination. From the early days of Islam, Christians and Muslims have engaged in this exercise, together or against each other, most of the time with each group having a different goal in mind. In the end, few minds were really changed, but the findings by themselves became the object of debate and controversy.

The Negus in Conversation

An example of finding a common denominator happened as early as the beginning of the seventh century when Islam was still in its infancy. In what is nowadays called Ethiopia, sometime between 613 and 615 CE, a historic meeting took place between Muslims and Christians with the nature of Christ one of the central points of discussion. As the Prophet Muhammad became more vocal about his message, the ruling elite in Mecca started to target the weak and vulnerable among the newly

¹¹ Daniel Madigan. “Jesus and Muhammad: The Sufficiency of Prophecy,” in: Michael Ippgrave (ed.) *Bearing the Word. Prophecy in Biblical and Qur’anic perspective*. (London: Church House Publishing, 2005) 96.

¹² Madigan, “Jesus and Muhammad,” 96.

converted Muslims. Fearing that recurring torture would lead to Muslims abandoning the faith, the Prophet urged eighty-three men and their families to seek refuge in Abyssinia or Ethiopia. This is called the “first hijra” or emigration. The Ethiopian emperor or Negus received the refugees with warm hospitality. However, trying to prevent a cordial relationship, the official envoy from Mecca painted a negative picture of the Muslims. Wanting to learn more, the Negus invited them to explain the new faith and their Prophet.

The Muslims described how, guided by the Prophet Muhammad, they had turned from polytheism to the faith in the one and only God. After sharing verses from the 19th Chapter of the Qur’an on St. Mary (Sura Maryam) the Negus was convinced of the veracity of the Prophet’s message, took a stick and drew a line on the ground uttering the now famous phrase that I have heard quoted many times during Christian-Muslim dialogue events: *“There is nothing more than this line between your faith and ours.”*

Dissatisfied with this development, the official delegate from Mecca who represented the old elite told the Negus that the Muslims were not as close to Christians as they seemed since they rejected the divine nature of Christ. Upon the Negus’ further query about this issue, the Muslims answered:

“Our judgment of Jesus is the same as that of Allah and His Messenger, viz., Jesus is God’s servant, His Prophet, His Spirit, and His command given unto Mary, the innocent virgin.”

According to the Tradition the Negus answered: “Jesus is just what you have stated him to be, and is nothing more than that.”¹³

This story became central in various encounters between the early Muslims and Christians and set the tone for later interactions. Yet, the entire episode should give us pause. It implies that the delegate from Mecca, an indigenous believer, in non-politically correct parlance, a pagan, had such intimate knowledge of Christianity that he could discern

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migration_to_Abyssinia. This version can also be found in: Syed A.A. Razwy, *Khadija-tul-Kubra (the Wife of the Prophet Muhammed) May Allah be Pleased with Her*. (Elmhurst, NY: Thrike Tarsile Qur’an Inc., 1990) 96.

the fine points of the discussions about the divinity of Christ that eluded most Christians. At the time, the debates about the nature of Christ had led to a deep rift between the Church of Rome and the churches in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire such as the Coptic Church in Egypt and the Ethiopian Church. The quarrels concerned topics such as “the Begotten and the Unbegotten,” whether the Father was greater and the Son inferior, if Christ was fully divine and of one in nature with the Father, or if he was one person in two natures (divine and human). As the story goes, the Negus immediately agreed that Christ and Muhammad were of the same level. This answer implied that the Christian ruler of a Church that stresses Christ’s divine nature knew less about his own faith than the nature-worshipping delegate from Mecca.

Ignoring his own sacred texts, the Negus produced an answer that supported the Qur’anic view of Jesus. For all we know the reports of this meeting are historically incorrect and the Negus gave a long speech on Christian dogma. We will never know the truth but can observe that the discussion, while promising, was reduced to one answer: a common denominator that places Jesus and Muhammad on the same level and ignores the teachings of his own Church that stress Christ’s divine nature. A potential learning exercise collapsed into a single truth to be used for the ages to come. The dialogue was not real; it did not allow for deeper conversation or true attempts to understand the other. In the twenty-first century we should avoid falling into the same trap by trying to provide or by expecting one clear answer to the question “Who is the Prophet Muhammad to Christians?” And yet, this is precisely what many Western scholars have attempted to do during the past fifty years.

Western Answers

A bitter reality for Muslims is that the West has a long history of constructing distorted images of the Prophet Muhammad. To make things worse, often the images that were conjured up were used to gain points in intra-religious community squabbles. During the time of the Reformation, for example, Protestants vilified Catholics by identifying the Pope with the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁴ There were exceptions such as Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) who studied Islam

¹⁴ For several examples see: Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014) 27-40.

seriously and concluded that Muhammad had been sincere in his calling and that Islam was a truthful religion. A breakthrough came during the 1950s when Anglican priest and professor of Islamic studies Montgomery Watt published two in-depth studies about the life of the Prophet Muhammad, respectively in Mecca and in Medina. These works were based on historical Arabic sources and place the events in the Prophet's life within the context of his environment. Watt considered Muhammad to be a sincere and true prophet, similar to Old Testament prophets; his life was saintly and the fruit of his work resulted in a religious community.

By the 1970s, *The Call of the Minaret*, a book by Anglican bishop and scholar of Islam Kenneth Cragg, had changed the tone of the conversation with and about Muslims. Cragg considered prophet-hood to be a “deeply mediating theme between Islam and Christianity” since it was the core concept of the Qur'an and to a certain extent of the Bible. He called it “the seam we need to mine all we can if we are to surmount the wilful prepossessions that dog our many prejudices.”¹⁵ In 1984, Cragg published *Muhammad and the Christian. A Question of Response* which was a Christian response to the Muslim question why Christians could not acknowledge the prophet-hood of Muhammad while Muslims showed great respect for Jesus, whom they regarded as a prophet. Cragg's conclusion must have been disappointing to Muslims. After serious engagement with the Islamic teachings about the Prophet Muhammad, he wrote that in the Qur'an there is no place for “suffering in deity,” while the Christian Gospel witnesses to divine vulnerability.¹⁶

During the past three decades Christian scholars and theologians have taken up Cragg's challenge and, often following Cragg's clues, tried to formulate answers to who Muhammad is for Christians. A few years ago, two academic articles appeared that evaluate and categorize the various opinions. David Marshall who teaches at Duke Divinity School and directs the Building Bridges Seminar of the Archbishop of Canterbury, evaluated several influential points of view in 2013, followed by Mark Beaumont from the London School of Theology whose work on

¹⁵ “My tears into thy bottle” prophethood and God, *The Muslim World* 88 3/4 (1998) 238-255.

¹⁶ David Marshall, “Muhammad in Contemporary Christian Theological Reflection,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* (March 20, 2013), 168.

the same topic appeared in 2014.¹⁷ Both provide useful summaries of the various views that have developed since Cragg's ground-breaking publication.

According to Beaumont's analysis, while many Christian scholars have sought serious engagement with the Qur'an and the position of the Prophet Muhammad, the recurring obstacle is that Muslims cannot accept the self-sacrifice of Jesus who as the Messiah came not only to educate, but first and foremost to redeem. This impediment leads to conflicting paradigms that juxtapose Christian grace, Incarnation, suffering love and redemption with Islamic law, guidance, exhortation, and judgment.¹⁸

Beaumont discerns several types of responses to the question and opinions range from "Muhammad is not a prophet from God but appropriated ideas from Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism, perhaps without realizing their origin" to those who accept Islam to be a revelation that is equal to Christianity, placing the Qur'an and the Bible on equal footing.¹⁹ Most scholars have come to a conclusion that falls somewhere between denial and full acceptance of Muhammad as a prophet. If nothing else, they are keen to acknowledge his role in improving people's lives. Ida Glaser, co-founder of the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies at Oxford, for example, argues that Muhammad initially thought he was preaching the same message as Jews and Christians but ended up imposing Islam (he more or less took a wrong turn). According to Glaser, one cannot follow the way of Muhammad and the way of Jesus at the same time.²⁰

Several writers stress the fact that Muhammad guided his people, yet was not a prophet in the Biblical sense that he received direct communications from God. Through his teachings, many people learned to pray and to worship God which makes him more of a spiritual teacher and exemplar. God did use him as a mercy for humanity, someone who summoned the Arabs back to true obedience to God, and one could consider him to be a prophet of Islam. He was zealous for God but only

¹⁷ "Christian views of Muhammad since the publication of Kenneth Cragg's *Muhammad and the Christian. A Question of Response* in 1984, *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, July 24, 2014. Available at: <http://trn.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/07/16/0265378814537749>.

¹⁸ Beaumont, 146.

¹⁹ Beaumont, 146-47, 158.

²⁰ Beaumont, 147-48.

sent to the Arabs. He truly believed that God had called him to be a prophet and that the Qur'an was given to him by God.²¹

Another recurring theme is to connect Muhammad's call and work to those of Jesus. Montgomery Watt was among the first who concluded that Muhammad reintroduced to the world the type of faith in Jesus found in Jewish Christian tradition that believed Jesus to be "a man of men," who had been chosen to be the Messiah/Christ.²² This opinion implies that Muhammad had learned about Jesus from Christian groups who did not believe him to be divine but fully human. Reasoning along similar lines, famous Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng has argued that Muhammad was influenced by Jewish-Christian ideas.²³ Küng and Watt both consider Muhammad to be wrongly informed about what the majority of Christians in his time believed about the divinity of Christ. This type of observation has led several authors to conclude that Muhammad was a prophet of God who brought a message about Jesus that differed from orthodox Christian belief. However, God sent him to the Arabs to improve their lives. Few realize that the underlying conclusion in this type of reasoning is that Muhammad did not receive the inspiration of the Qur'an but created a new religion based on religious ideas he learned about during the first forty years of his life. Naturally, this conclusion is very problematic for Muslims who consider the Qur'an to be the direct word of God.

At regular intervals, consultations and individual writers have proposed to recognize Muhammad as part of the Old Testament prophetic tradition. Thinkers such as Lamin Sanneh and Martin Forward urged non-Muslims to take into account how God used Muhammad "as a mercy for humankind" who brought peace and civilization to his people. Many consider him to be sincere in his message and call, or describe him as a man with "creative imagination" whose ideas related to the deepest and most central in human experience and the needs of his day.²⁴

²¹ Beaumont, 148-152.

²² Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and misperceptions*. (London: Routledge, 1991), 23-25.

²³ Beaumont, 156.

²⁴ For these examples, see: Aydin, Mahmut & Saaleh, Ed Abdurrahmaan, "Contemporary Christian Evaluations of the Prophethood of Muhammad (Peace be upon him), *Insights* 1.3 (Spring 2009) 105-137.

Many of the scholars and theologians whose positions I have mentioned or referred to in this essay, Montgomery Watt, Kenneth Cragg, Ira Glaser, and Martin Forward, were Anglicans or Protestants. An indication of how difficult the question is to answer for Christians might be that the Catholic Church has not taken a firm position on the issue. *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions produced during the Second Vatican Council (1965), did not mention the person of Muhammad.

Finding an answer to who Muhammad is or can be for Christians seems to be a highly academic and very Western enterprise. Although the scholars taking on the question all have in-depth and serious engagement with Islamic texts and teachings, they speak from a Christian position that operates in countries where religious freedom is taken for granted and where they are still considered to represent the majority religion. It also is a predominantly male enterprise reflecting the paucity of women's voices in the interreligious dialogue. And they adhere to a certain view of Christ, among others, leaving out reference to the Trinity that represents His unique position in relation to God and humans. This reality begs several questions. Recalling that we are unclear about which image of Muhammad we are discussing, the first question that comes to mind is, "What can we learn from deep comparisons between models of prophets in Islam and Christianity?" Secondly, would the answers of Christian theologians be different had they spoken from a minority position? And, thirdly, I repeat the question whether or not trying to position Muhammad within the Christian tradition is truly a fruitful exercise. Especially when we consider the context of newly developing methods and activities within the field of inter-religious dialogue, I propose to widen the inquiry and go beyond the written texts of Qur'an and Bible by adding information based on empirical religious experiences.

Muhammad the Prophet

It is impossible in this short essay to elaborate on the many images of Muhammad that Muslims have developed over time. He has served as a model for Muslims ranging from Sufis to jihadists, and has appeared in peoples' dreams. Muslims feel connected to him and try to model his actions in daily life. The Qur'an is the prime source of knowledge about

him and the Sunna, the records of his deeds and sayings, serves as a sacred second source of information about him.

According to the Qur'an (3:18-19), the Prophet Muhammad understood his task to be the restoration of primordial monotheism. This was the religion of God revealed from the beginning of human history. In this mission he identified with Abraham (Q. 6:162) who is called the "pure in faith" (Hanif, Q. 3:67), and the "leader (Imam) of humanity. (Q 2: 124). According to the Qur'an, prophets have been sent to all communities, especially to the Children of Israel. Muhammad, Abraham, Moses, Noah, and Jesus are considered to be the five elite prophets.

The Qur'an calls the Prophet Muhammad the "Messenger of God to the whole of humanity (Q. 7: 158), he is the Seal of the Prophets (Q. 33:40) who succeeded to perfect the religion of God that had been revealed to all prophets before him. (Q 7:158) The Qur'an also criticizes the Jews and Christians for refusing to recognize Muhammad as a genuine prophet. (2:104-105)

Given that the Qur'an teaches the unity and universality of the divine message, famous scholar of Muslim-Christian relations, David A. Kerr (d. 2008), noticed the anguished appeals it issued to Jews and Christians that they would come to see the truth of Muhammad's message²⁵:

O People of the Scripture, why do you disbelieve in the verses of Allah while you witness [to their truth]?

O People of the Scripture, why do you confuse the truth with falsehood and conceal the truth while you know [it]? (Q. 3: 70-71)

This exhortation is preceded by the invitation to come to an agreement and find commonalities between the three faiths. (Q 3:64)

According to the Tradition, the Prophet Muhammad testified about himself: "I am the fulfilment of the prayer of my father Abraham, I am the good news of Jesus, and my mother saw in her dream that a light comes from her to enlighten the palaces of Damascus." Furthermore he considered himself to be the closest to Jesus in this life and the afterlife.²⁶

²⁵ "The Prophet Muhammad in Christian Theological Perspective," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (July, 1984) 113.

²⁶ Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 23.

Since the rank of prophet is the highest in human society, Muslims consider it of the utmost importance to discern between a prophet and other individuals named in the Scriptures. As a result, they have sought to identify the attributes that qualify a person to be considered a prophet. The person who claims to be directly inspired by God, should possess the virtues of trustworthiness, truthfulness, innocence, and have the ability to convey God's message, which means that the person should be of sound mind and have a high intelligence.²⁷

Elaboration of these virtues in Muhammad has led to an enormous body of Muslim writings. For example, a modern version of this line of thinking resulted in works about prophetic intelligence and prophetic psychology. According to Indonesian scholar and Sufi, Hamdani Bakran Adz-Dzakiey who has written several hefty volumes about the topic, practicing the virtues of the Prophet Muhammad and taking him as example in everything one does, thinks and feels helps a person to reach his or her individual potentials and fosters a greater love for Allah. If practiced correctly and guided by prayer and worship, human beings can aspire to be filled with the Light of Muhammad that derives from God.²⁸ In the end, imitating the Prophet leads to a healthy inner and spiritual life that will result in a healthy society.

Non-Muslims can identify with many teachings about the Prophet Muhammad. The fact that the Qur'an invited Christians and Jews to find commonalities has been an encouragement for dialogue. Nowadays, carefully reading and discussing scriptures has become one of the main activities in interfaith encounters. Especially in the West, religious leaders and scholars participate in practices such as Comparative Theology (the exercise of comparing sacred texts from a theologically informed position rather than non-theological, or "objective"), and more recently Scriptural Reasoning (Jews, Christians, and Muslims together closely studying a religious text). The practice of Scriptural Reasoning tries to correct earlier mistakes and deadlocks that can arise from comparing Bible and Qur'an only. Most importantly, its proponents advocate to widen the pool of texts one can look at.

²⁷ Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 11-12.

²⁸ *Prophetic Psychology. Psikologi Kenabian. Menghidupkan Potensi dan Kepribadian Kenabian Dalam Diri.* (To revive the individual potential and personality within oneself). (Yogyakarta: Pustaka al-Furqan, 2007) 43-60.

When I started writing this article I agreed with the observation that for inter-religious engagements to be productive, we need to widen the type of texts and expressions of faith we look at. This observation was based on my readings of the vast body of mystical writings and poetry Muslims and Christians have produced for hundreds of years. Since then the monumental work of Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* has come out.²⁹ In this posthumous work Ahmed tries to show how “Both Muslim and non-Muslim moderns tend to marginalize the complex modes in which Muslims conceptualized their faith.”³⁰ In his view, “The main difficulty in conceptualizing Islam/Islamic lies in the prolific scale of contradiction between the ideas, values and practices that claim normative affiliation with “Islam.”³¹ Searching for ways to convey the heart of this complex system, Ahmed suggested to look at how believers understood the holy message and expressed their faith for example by way of philosophy, mystical practices, art, and poetry. Taking Ahmed’s arguments seriously means we have to re-consider our ideas about religion. Such re-thinking will lead to profound changes in the way we approach inter-religious dialogues.

Culture and Faith

I am not the only one who has observed that we have to consider surrounding cultures to truly understand how certain Biblical figures we find in the Qur’an are being understood by Muslims and Christians. Over the years scholars have investigated the stories and beliefs about individual overlapping prophets. In his book about Abraham, Hebrew Bible scholar Jon Levenson, for example, found that Jews, Christians and Muslims see Abraham in profoundly different ways.³² At local levels these differences are connected with the cultural and social space. Indonesian scholar of Islam Fredrik Doeka investigated how Indonesian Muslims and Christians look at the stories about Moses. His choice of Moses is based on the fact that he is the most mentioned prophet in the

²⁹ Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016.

³⁰ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 82, 83.

³¹ Ahmed, *What is Islam*, p. 109.

³² *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

Qur'an, featuring in 500 out of the 6,600 verses. While the Angel Gabriel transmitted the text of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims believe Moses to be the only prophet in history who received a revelation directly from God.

Doeka found that in Muslim renditions of Moses' story the battle with pharaoh features prominently while the Exodus is of much less importance.³³ Moses is considered a prime example for Muhammad but did not bring the Ten Commandments that we find in the Old Testament. Indonesian Muslim commentators consider Muhammad to be the one who continues Moses' role as exemplary prophet. However, his call was to the Israelites only to whom he foretold the coming of Muhammad. This reading of the story places Moses under Muhammad who was sent to the whole world and to all generations of mankind.³⁴ Seeing Moses as a prophet to Israel only has profound repercussions for Indonesian Muslim views on the Promised Land that is to be given to the true believers. Consequently, its inhabitants are not the Jews, but the Arab-Palestinians who follow the teachings of Muhammad.³⁵ Doeka ends his investigation with the observation that the living heritage of narratives about Moses have become somewhat separated from the core story.³⁶

On the other side of the world, researching how the stories about the prophet Abraham are used in dialogue between Turkish Muslims and Christians, George Bristow made discoveries that resemble Doeka's findings.³⁷ Bristow found that for Turkish Muslims, extra-Qur'anic tales that remain fully unknown to the Christian participants figure prominently in their understanding of the figure of Abraham.

Analysing the differences in Muslim and Christian worldviews, Bristow observed three polarities: Creation and Tawhid, New Creation and Afterlife, and Fall-Redemption and Prophet-hood. Especially the last one resulted in profound differences in worldviews that appear when interpreting the figure of Abraham:

³³ Doeka, "Moses," 13.

³⁴ Doeka, "Moses," 86.

³⁵ Doeka, "Moses," 87.

³⁶ Doeka, "Moses," 246.

³⁷ George Bristow. "Abraham in Narrative Worldviews. Doing Comparative Theology through Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Turkey" (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2015). See chapter seven.

The beginning of the story, with God as the sovereign creator of all things and humanity entrusted with a particular set of responsibilities as God's special creation, and the end of the story, with resurrection, judgment, and heaven and hell, have quite a bit in common when looked at broadly. But the rest of the story, making up almost the entire sweep of the Biblical narrative, is vastly different.³⁸

Looking through the lens of Abraham narratives, Bristow finds that the two worldviews have little in common. Despite some limited overlap, Abraham's story conveys a different relationship between God and humanity.

Christians see a single divine plan going through the Bible evolving from the Old Testament into the New Testament all the stories and events play a part in a salvation history that accumulates into the coming of Christ, the Messiah in whom "all things hold together."³⁹ Muslims see all of divine history pointing at the Prophet Muhammad.

According to Bristow, who originates from the USA but has made Turkey his home for several decades,

Part of the difficulty in interfaith communication is that we neither know the stories told by our dialogue partners nor understand why they tell them. It is thus important to learn what the stories illustrate or teach as used in practice, by Muslims in this case. Having a fuller understanding of the way narrative and worldview are related will help us to ask questions that lead to deeper issues.⁴⁰

Part of these stories comes from Muslim mystics (Sufis) whose hearts filled with love and veneration for Muhammad spilled over into poetry and praise. This love for the Prophet bound Muslims across time and space. It moved the famous Sufi Farid ud-Din Attar to utter in

³⁸ Bristow, "Abraham" 353..

³⁹ (Colossians 1:17), also see, Matthew the Poor, *The Communion of Love*, 47.

⁴⁰ Bristow, "Abraham," 357.

ecstasy: “The origin of the soul is the absolute light, nothing else. That meant it was the light of Muhammad, nothing else.”⁴¹

Reversely, information about Jesus seldom includes the experiences of Christian mystics who saw him in dreams and visions. For example, when seeing Jesus in a vision, 14th century mystic Birgitta of Sweden felt so close to Him that she was at ease to ask all kinds of questions: “Why is there not such light at night as there is in the day?”⁴² And: “Why do evils come upon some who do not deserve them?”⁴³

The love that such individuals develop for Muhammad or Jesus respectively is so deep that participants in interfaith meetings have trouble accommodating their ideas.

Alternative Visions

Since the majority of scholars whose studies about Muhammad have drawn attention were from the West, answers from Christians living in Muslim majority countries equally seldom feature into the conversation. The first Muslim conquests were in Christian majority countries in the Middle East and during the early centuries, local church leaders were invited to answer Muslim rulers what they thought about Muhammad. The answer Assyrian or Nestorian Patriarch Timothy gave Caliph al-Mahdi in 781 CE is among the most famous:

Muhammad is ‘worthy of all praise’ and ‘walked in the path of the prophets’ because he taught the Unity of God; he taught the way of Good Works; ‘he opposed idolatry and polytheism; he taught about God, His Word and His Spirit; he showed his zeal by fighting against idolatry with the sword; like Abraham he left his kinfolk rather than worship idols.’⁴⁴

⁴¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975) 215. Also see her famous book on the Prophet Muhammad: *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

⁴² Marguerite Tjader Harris (ed.), Albert Ryle Kezel, (translator). *Birgitta of Sweden. Life and Selected Revelations*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1990) 116.

⁴³ Tjader Harris, *Birgitta*, 143.

⁴⁴ W. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph*. (Rawalpindi: Christian Study Centre, 1974) 202-203.

It seems a clever answer that simply states the realities of Muhammad's life and teachings. Yet the Patriarch was profoundly aware of the differences between his beliefs and those of Muslims and did not convert to Islam. He probably would have agreed with John Azumah, a Presbyterian leader from Ghana, who was raised in a Muslim family and repeatedly has stated that Christians cannot see Muhammad the way Muslims see him and not convert to Islam. According to Azumah,

For Muslims to demand that Christians acknowledge Muhammad as a prophet is like Christians demanding that Muslims accept Jesus as the Son of God and God Incarnate....This is why Christians ' can only refer to and respect Muhammad as the "Prophet of Islam."⁴⁵

In this context, I would like to call attention to David Kerr's article that specifically points at the difference in attitudes between churches of the East and those in the West. Kerr quotes at great length the ideas of Georges Khodr (1923-) who was born in Tripoli and since 1970 serves as Metropolitan of the Archdiocese of Mount Lebanon of the Orthodox Antiochian Church.⁴⁶

The first time Khodr expressed the ideas Kerr mentions was in 1971 during a speech at the World Council of Churches Central Committee meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Later on the speech was published in several journals and books under the title of "Christianity in a Pluralist World-The Economy of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁷ Khodr criticized the West for seeing salvation history as a linear process only, ignoring the idea of an eternity that transcends history. He appealed to Christians to believe in God's revelation in Christ ontologically rather than merely chronologically.⁴⁸ A chronological view positioned truth within the monopoly of the Western churches, especially after the expansion of Islam that challenged the dominating Christian worldview. In the ensuing religious competition imperial power politics defined theology.

⁴⁵ Beaumont, 152.

⁴⁶ Joanna Azar, "George Khodr, the Poet Bishop." August, 2012.
<http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/11626>

⁴⁷ In: Gerarld H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, eds. *Mission Trends No 5*. (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1981) 36-49.

⁴⁸ Kerr, "Muhammad," 115.

According to Khodr, the Nestorian or Assyrian Church was one of the few churches that remained above this dualist worldview and while respecting Muhammad's message, did not confound it with "the centrality and ontological uniqueness of Christ."⁴⁹

To escape the dichotomy between East and West, Khodr stressed that the divine revelation was universal and links all human beings with the eternity-transcending history. "The economy of Christ," to him is the "universal sign that all human beings are made participants in the creative and salvific activity of God, a sign that is eternally present in the mystery of the omnipresent Holy Spirit."⁵⁰ This mystery points to the freedom of God who "in His work of providence and redemption is not tied down to any event."⁵¹

Khodr repeated his ideas in subsequent ecumenical meetings where they caused heated debates about Christology and the work of the Spirit; especially among Protestant theologians who overlooked that as an Orthodox theologian, Khodr's ideas were deeply influenced by church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. These individuals taught in a multi-religious world where Christianity was a newcomer and lacked any form of political power.

According to Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément (1921-2009), the earliest Christian leaders believed that there was no culture or religion that had not received a 'visitation of the Word.' In his writings, Maximus the Confessor (580-662 CE) distinguished three degrees of the 'embodiment' of the Word. In the first place the cosmos was to be understood as a theophany. It had moved humans to search for deeper spiritual understanding before they received the word. Secondly, he distinguished the revelation of the personal God who embodied the Word in Law through sacred Scriptures and thirdly, the personal incarnation of the Word who gives full meaning to the previous embodiments. Reflecting on these ideas, Clément considered the religions of Judaism and Islam to represent the second degree of the Word's representation.⁵²

Still belonging to a small Christian minority, in the second century Irenaeus, Bishop of Gaul taught that "There is one but the same God who,

⁴⁹ Kerr, "Muhammad," 115.

⁵⁰ Kerr, Muhammad, 115 quoting Kodr, "Economy of the Holy Spirit," 43.

⁵¹ Kerr, Muhammad, 115, quoting Kodr, "Economy of the Holy Spirit," 43.

⁵² Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, New York, NY: New City Press, 1993) 35.

from beginning to end, through various economies, came in assistance to mankind.”⁵³ In a similar vein, Bishop Kodr asserted that “[the Church’s] function is to read through the mystery of which it is the sign, all other signs sent by God through all times and in various religions, in view of the full revelation at the end of history.”⁵⁴

In spite of power struggles and divisions, even in the 14th century, Byzantine mystic Nicolas Cabasilas (d. 1371) insisted on applying the inclusivism of the early fathers in an inspiring way. While he is famous for his Eucharist-centered theology, he stressed that God can act in surprisingly unpredictable ways: “Christ works where the Church is not,” and “God works incessantly for the salvation of his creation.”⁵⁵ Cabasilas derived his ideas from meditating on the early martyrs who accepted the truth without ever having heard the message. For example, while the non-Christian Roman actor Porphyrius (d. 361) was re-enacting and mocking the crucifixion, he became “invaded by a love for Christ” and by a mystical act of consent accepted the new message. This led Cabasilas to believe that “The new law is spiritual. Because the Spirit works everything.”⁵⁶

Final Reflections

Individuals such as Cabasilas, Khodr, and Ahmed challenge us to relinquish our need for one clear answer when pondering the question of who the Prophet Muhammad is to Christians. Keeping in mind that religions are organic entities and not compositions of various elements that operate independent of one another, we can try to overcome the dichotomy of “prophet or not.”

New modes of reading the scriptures such as Scriptural Reasoning are based on the insight that we are still lacking the tools for full comprehension but allow us to step out of the conventional frameworks. Yet, while realizing that we are in need of deeper knowledge of surrounding culture and history, we are still hesitant to include the

⁵³ *Contra Haereses* 3,12,13 PG 7, 907 A, quoted in Papathanasiou, A. N. “If I cross the boundaries you are there.” *Communio Viatorum* 53.3, (2011) 43.

⁵⁴ Papathanasiou, “If I cross,” 43.

⁵⁵ Papathanasiou, “If I cross,” 54-55.

⁵⁶ Papathanasiou, “If I cross,” 53.

spiritual aspects of faith. This is not surprising when we consider the many definitions the word spirituality has generated. Ursula King suggests not to ask what it is but what it does.⁵⁷ In this context it is the great love for the respective founders of their religion that defines the particular definition Muslims and Christians provide. Ultimately, this love is based on an inner conviction and another incomprehensible aspect of being human: on faith. Metropolitan Khodr once wrote:

You can't talk about faith, except in the way a swimmer talks about the sea. Faith cannot be acquired like mathematics are taught, nor can it be studied as one of the applied sciences, but rather, faith is assimilated like music—through a higher path—surpassing the mind, or more profound than the intellect. In itself being a vision—faith—installs you in the midst of what you're looking for.⁵⁸

Khodr, ends the quote with, “You are only able to see what you're contemplating through ecstasy.”

Most of us don't make it to the level of ecstasy and only read about what this high state of God-awareness teaches humanity. Yet, when heeding those voices, we can learn and grow in what is most genuine, deep and beautiful in our religions.

Taking these voices into account, I call for widening our search to understand the founders of each other's faiths, using the many interdisciplinary tools that have become available to us during the past forty years and realizing how different our respective categories are. In the end, we need to acknowledge that we are on a road where maps and GPS are lacking; we are all walking it as humans in search of understanding. .

⁵⁷ *The Search for Spirituality. Our Global Quest for a Spiritual Life.* (New York: Bluebridge, 2008), 3.

⁵⁸ Khodr, Love: a cradle of faith. Blog post at http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/articles/misc/george_khodr_love.htm.

**CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM, AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION:
DIVINE FLUIDITY AND A THEOLOGY OF MATURE
DIFFERENTIATION FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS *TRIALOGUE* IN THE
NIGERIAN CONTEXT**

Clement Kanu, MSP¹

Abstract

Attempts to establish a theological common ground underlie some theories of interreligious dialogue, as seen for instance in the form of pluralism proposed by John Hick. This essay first explores the inadequacy of Christological common ground as a framework for interreligious trialogue in the Nigerian context. The essay further advances a theology of mature differentiation, which values the authenticity and uniqueness of otherness, rejects extratextual categories in religious explanation, and remains contextual. It argues that religious differences must not be harmonized as a prerequisite for authentic dialogue. Religions are different, but each capable of fostering relationships. Theologically this is anchored on a fluid model of divine selfhood and revelation extant in the Hebrew Scriptures, and other traditions that lay claim to same scriptures, notably Christianity. This model of divine conceptualization exposes that there are multiple but equally valid channels of divine revelation. An unlimited and unconstituted God can manifest the Godself in several bodies without diminishing the divine unity. In this proposal, the ideas of George Lindbeck are partially utilized, and the lived experience of the Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria is explored to demonstrate the practicability of the model. The Nigerian proverb: let the eagle perch, and let the kite perch is instructive.

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Introduction

The problem of inter-religious dialogue remains a theological perennial. It is an issue that has provoked diverse theories, and sometimes, irrelevant detours, in what has been termed “a paralyzing theoretical dilemma”² This impasse endures even in the contemporary atmosphere of religious tolerance, where it is increasingly becoming unacceptable to pass judgments on the practices of other religions. Perhaps, the reason for this deadlock is aptly captured by Catherine Cornille when she asserts: “normative judgments enter inevitably into the very encounter between individuals belonging to different religions already before any question of concepts and conclusions.”³

Attempts to cross this “religious Rubicon”⁴ have produced diverse theoretical models. One of the current and influential approaches proposed to this effect is pluralism.⁵ The core of the pluralist hypothesis as advanced by one of its greatest proponents, John Hick, is that the various religious traditions “constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to a transcendent divine reality which transcends all our varied visions of it.”⁶ Under Hick’s apparatus, every religion is traced back to a common foundation. Hick’s Pluralism thus elevates commonalities as providing an appropriate framework for inter-religious dialogue.

² Marianne Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability of Religions: Ricoeurs Linguistic Hospitality as a Model for Inter-Religious Dialogue” in *Exchange*, 37 no 3, (2008), 337-364, 350

³ Catherine Cornille ed., *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009), ix

⁴ Paul Knitter and John Hick used the image to refer to the problem of inter-religious dialogue. Cf. Paul F. Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), vii

⁵ While there are different forms of pluralism as proposed by different pluralist theologians, here we focus on the pluralism of John Hick. Thus, the concept of pluralism as used in this paper refers to the version advocated by Hick.

⁶ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 235-236

In the Nigerian context, Christology is seen as one of those unitive factors among the three major religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion), hence appropriate to promote dialogue (or as it were, *trialogue*).⁷ With regards to Christianity and Islam, the model advances the positive consideration of Jesus in both the bible and the Qur'an thus, a common ground for fruitful conversation. However, there is an unconscious non-recognition of the fundamental disparity in the biblical and Qur'anic doctrines of Christ, a difference that while central to the Christian faith, renders them infidels in the Islamic perspective. No wonder this model has not been fruitful in practice. As regards the interaction between Christianity and the indigenous religions, this model quickly translates into inculturation, anchored on the incarnation. As attractive as this might sound, it misses the point, as Ben Udoh observes, that Christ is a total stranger and an illegal alien to the indigenous religion, entering into the scene as a forceful dictator.⁸ Little wonder that inculturation has been peripheral in practice, existing in its purported perfect state only in the minds and literatures of theologians and scholars. The Christological common ground therefore as applied to the former is weak, and to the latter, non-existent.

Against this background, this essay explores the inadequacy of the above framework as applied to the Nigerian context. The central thesis of this article is that the unique elements of Christianity, Islam, and the indigenous religions must be taken seriously, and not overlooked in the search for unifying factors. Religious differences must not be harmonized. Attempts to do this in Nigeria have either failed or remained superficial. The different faith traditions in Nigeria must realize that dialogue must not presuppose a common ground. Religions are different, but each capable of fostering relationships. Christ must not be appreciated under the same spectacle in order to foster true relationship since an unlimited God can equally and validly reveal godself through multiple channels. This is what I call a theology of mature differentiation.

⁷ On the theoretical level, as the essay will examine, Christology is used to advance a common ground.

⁸ Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1988), 64. Also see Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2011), 24

To achieve this, the essay first examines how Christ is appreciated in the three traditions, in order to highlight the conflicting Christologies and the inadequacy of utilizing Christ as a unifying model. The essay then considers the pluralistic hypothesis of John Hick, also highlighting its fundamental limitations as a model for authentic dialogue in the Nigerian context. Having established these inadequacies, the essay proceeds to propose a theology of mature differentiation anchored on a fluid model of divine revelation. The ideas of post liberal theologian George Lindbeck are partially utilized, and the lived experience of the Yoruba people of South West Nigeria⁹ becomes the scope in which the practicability of the model is demonstrated. To set the tone for our discussion, we now seek an answer to who Jesus is in relation to the different religions in Nigeria.

Jesus in Christianity

Theological opinions on the person of Jesus abound.¹⁰ This diversity however underlies the centrality of what is at stake. It is therefore not out of place to assert that Christ is the essential content and focal point of Christian belief. Everything else, as Gerd Theissen puts it, “is a prelude and an epilogue, footnotes or glosses”¹¹ Based on biblical sources (especially the Gospels and Pauline epistles), and doctrinal statements,¹² many Christians believe that Jesus is both human and divine, the fulfillment of the Messianic promise, and the epitome of God’s revelation. The incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, death, resurrection, and

⁹ While the indigenous religion is found throughout the country, the northern part of Nigeria is basically Muslim while the Southeast is mostly Christian. The Yorubaland is a rich admixture of the three religions.

¹⁰ The details and convolutions of doctrinal formulations and theological opinions on Christology is not the concern of this paper. Here, I give a very brief overview of what could pass as a general belief of non theologically sophisticated Christians about Christ as to lay the foundation for the paper’s arguments.

¹¹ Gerd Theissen, *On Having A Critical Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 78

¹² In Catholicism for instance, the doctrinal formulations of the early Christological councils are of great significance.

the second coming of Christ therefore occupy a foundational place in Christian belief and life. Most Christians believe that Jesus was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary (Mathew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-37; 2:1-20); that he was anointed to bring the good news to the poor, set captives free, give sight to the blind, and inaugurate the kingdom of God (Luke 4:18); that his ministry and commitment to truth and justice put him in conflict with the religious leaders of his time and he was crucified and put to death (Mathew 26 ff; Mark 14 ff; Luke 22 ff; John 18 ff); and that God raised him from the dead “and bestowed on him the name above every other name, so that at Jesus’ name every knee must bend...and every tongue proclaim... Jesus Christ is Lord”.¹³ This last Pauline passage highlights an important Christological title (Lord) popular among Christians today, and points to the centrality of the Christ-Event, which formed the core of the early Christian kerygma as seen in such passages as Acts 2:22-24. The ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus remains a central focus of Christian belief today. It models the Christian life, establishes communion between humanity and God, and founds the basis for Christian hope to share in the resurrection experience.¹⁴ The Christian Jesus is not only considered from his earthly life. He is God, thus is worshipped and adored. The beginning of John’s gospel sets the tone: “In the beginning was the Word, the Word was in God’s presence, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). This exalted position given to Christ in Christianity is in direct conflict with both the Islamic perception of the Ultimate Reality and the indigenous religion’s concept of the Supreme Being. An examination of the place of Christ in both religions, and a critique of attempts to seek for Christological common ground will further expose this conflict.

¹³ Philippians 2:9-11). All biblical citations are taken from The New American Bible

¹⁴ Cf. 1Corinthians 15:20-22

The Islamic Jesus (‘Isa)¹⁵

One of the most recent works on this subject is Zeki Saritoprak’s *Islam’s Jesus* published in 2014. Saritoprak is obviously motivated by the quest for common ground between Christians and Muslims in an effort to promote interreligious dialogue. Highlighting verses in the Qur’an and Hadith that speak about Jesus, and dialogue with other religions, Saritoprak thoughtfully argues that the shared belief in Jesus presents an excellent opportunity for authentic relationship between Christians and Muslims. He ultimately gives an affirmative answer to the basic question he posed at the beginning of the book: “Can beliefs about Jesus provide common ground for Muslims and Christians?”¹⁶ To support his positive response, Saritoprak makes an extensive exploration of the place of Jesus in the Qur’an and in Islamic theology. Central is the position of Jesus as a highly distinguished messenger of God. In Islamic parlance, a messenger could be referred to as *al-rasul* (messenger) or *al-nabi* (prophet). Theologically, *rasul* is higher in rank than *nabi* because every *rasul* is also considered a *nabi*, but not vice versa. Among the 124,000 *nabi* believed to have existed before the emergence of Islam, only 313 are considered *rasul*.¹⁷ Of these, five enjoy the highest spiritual rank, namely Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. The temporal proximity of Jesus to Muhammad and the belief that Jesus is the forerunner of the prophet of Islam places Jesus at a position of high esteem to Muslims. This great regard given to Jesus in Islam is, according to Saritoprak, a shared belief between Christians and Muslims.¹⁸

Another identified area of common belief that received a significant attention is the descent of Jesus (or the second coming as known in the Christian tradition).¹⁹ The Islamic term “*nuzul ‘Isa*” refers to the descent of Jesus from heaven to earth to fulfill his mission. Saritoprak observes

¹⁵ For a concise composite Qur’anic picture of Jesus, cf. Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). Here I focus on Saritoprak’s argument on shared beliefs.

¹⁶ Zeki Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2014), xi

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 157. This is also the major argument in chapter one, 1-21

¹⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 22-156. This argument occurs throughout the entire book

that this particular term is not found in the Quran in relation to Jesus' descent but is found in various sayings of Muhammad.²⁰ In fact, the four Qur'anic passages that focused his arguments to this effect make no explicit reference that Jesus will return.²¹ Recognizing therefore that some Muslim theologians deny that Jesus' descent is a "certain dogma" in the Qur'an,²² he however argues, with reference to various Muslim commentators, that the connection of Jesus to the final hour is a reference to his descent. He therefore concludes that the descent of Jesus is another shared belief: "Both Christians and Muslims believe in the descent of Jesus....The majority of Muslim theologians are in agreement that Jesus is the sign of the nearness of the final hour and that he will descend from heaven to bring justice and peace".²³ From the point of view of Jesus being a *rasul* and the Islamic tradition on his descent, Saritoprak lays the foundation for a common ground that could facilitate authentic dialogue between Christians and Muslims, and concludes: "The Qur'an therefore enables the building of bridge between Muslims and Christians".²⁴

A critical look at Saritoprak's identified points of convergence, and the passages not emphasized vis-à-vis popular practice and belief, exposes some weaknesses in his arguments. First, while it is true that Jesus occupies a position of high esteem for both Muslims and Christians, what Saritoprak did not tell his readers is that the bases for such respect are fundamentally opposed. While Muslims respect Jesus because he is the forerunner of Muhammad, Christians respect him because he is divine, and the saviour of humanity. This distinction is vital because it touches at the heart of doctrine for both religions. Highlighting the proximity of Jesus to Muhammad as a basis for respect, Saritoprak alludes to Surah 61:6 where Jesus said: "O children of Israel! Lo! I am a messenger of Allah unto you, confirming what was revealed before me in the Torah, and giving good tidings of the messenger who shall come after me whose name shall be Ahmad"²⁵ Since Ahmad and Muhammad are derived from the same root, this is one of the verses used to establish that

²⁰ Ibid., 22

²¹ He examines Qur'an 3:46; 4:159; 43:61; 53:4-5. See *ibid.*, 23-34

²² *Ibid.*, 31

²³ *Ibid.*, 157

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 140-141

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4

Muhammad is the seal and fulfilment of Jesus' message. While this passage helps to elevate Jesus for the Muslim faithful, it is, to say the least, derogatory for the Christian to whom Christ is not merely a prophet, but the actual seal and fulfilment of God's revelation, the saviour of the world, worthy of worship and adoration. This is very important not only because the Qur'an seriously warns against worshipping Jesus (5:116; 4:171), but also because it considers those who worship him alongside with Allah as *fitnah* (unbelievers, infidels), whom a true Muslim has the duty to fight.²⁶ Accordingly, the basis for Christian respect for Christ places them on a different Qur'anic category (not in the category of those to be dialogued with, but of those to be fought). This singular fact shakes the foundation of Saritoprak's arguments. While Saritoprak is silent on the fate of the *fitnah* (among whom are the Christians, Surah 9:30), at least 109 passages in the Qur'an and hadith explicitly and graphically state how faithful Muslims should treat unbelievers.²⁷ For instance, 2:191-193 states: "and kill them wherever you find them because *al-fitnah* is worse than killing...and fight them until there is no more *fitnah*, and worship is for Allah alone". Not only does this passage elevate fighting over disbelief, it disproves the interpretation that fighting is only meant for self-defence, since protection was not the immediate context.²⁸ What is not obvious in Saritoprak's arguments is that many Christians today are not actually included in the category of those he refers to as 'Christians' if viewed from the Qur'anic perspective. While Saritoprak thinks that Muslims are inspired by such verses as 88:21-22, which encourages Muhammad to be a reminder not a coercer, many ordinary Muslims are governed by a literal understanding of such passages as 4:76: "let those who believe fight for the cause of Allah", and 9:29 "Fight those who believe not in Allah and his messenger, even if they are the people of the book until they pay the *Jizya*

²⁶ Cf. Surah 2:191-193; 3:151; 8:12; 8:15; 8:39; 8:59-60; 9:123; 47:3-4; etc.

²⁷ Online source, <http://www.thereligionofpeace.com/quran/023-violence.htm>, Accessed January 25, 2017

²⁸ Cf. the commentary on the verse in Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *The Noble Qur'an: Interpretation of the Meaning of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language* (Dar-us-Salam Publications, 1999)

with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued”.²⁹ Interestingly Saritoprak mentions the violence that erupted as a result of pope Benedict’s misinterpreted Regensburg comments in 2006.³⁰ One wonders however why such violence should erupt if ordinary Muslims are governed by the principles highlighted in *Islam’s Jesus*. This clearly shows that the passages that inspire many popular Muslims are clearly different from those highlighted by Saritoprak.

Similarly, while not explicitly mentioned, one could detect an inclusivist undertone in Saritoprak’s argument for dialogue. Arguing that the Qur’an enables interreligious dialogue, he asserts: “two Qur’anic verses include not only Muslims but also Jews and Christians among those who will be rewarded by God as long as they believe in God and the afterlife and do good deeds (2:62, 5:60)”. Then he adds immediately, “this is possible if ...belief in the prophets, including the prophet Muhammad as the final messenger of God is a necessary result of the belief in God. In fact, the Qur’an itself makes belief in the prophets inseparable from the belief in God (4:150)”³¹. Saritoprak’s argument here could be adequately rephrased: ‘Christians will be saved by Allah, but for such salvation to be accomplished, they have to conform to the teachings of the Qur’an by recognizing Muhammad’. The fact that the bible has no place for Muhammad, and most Christian’s belief in God does not include a concomitant belief in Muhammad, automatically excludes them from God’s reward. Put differently, where salvation is possible, the Christian becomes *ipso facto* a Muslim. Thus, what seems to be a backbone for dialogue becomes elusive, and what has taken place is at best a persuasion.

²⁹ The people of the book refers to Jews and Christians. This is one of the final revelations which set the motion for military expansion through which Islam conquered two-thirds of the Christian world in the next 100 years. It still inspires Nigerian Muslims today.

³⁰ Zeki Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 152

³¹ *Ibid.*, 140

Jesus in the Indigenous Religions³²

Unlike Christianity and Islam, the indigenous religion has no identifiable founder. It is rather a result of the community's experience of and reflection on the mystery of the universe. In this sense, the indigenous religion is rightly called traditional because "it originated from the people's environment and on their soil. It has not been preached to them, it is not imported. Africans are not converted to it. Each person is born into it, lives and practices it and makes it his own".³³ Also unlike Christianity and Islam, the indigenous religion has no written sacred books or doctrinal literatures. It is oral and finds expression in myths, liturgies, songs, stories, proverbs, rituals, pithy sayings, arts and crafts. Common to variation in practices are basic features that allow them to be considered as a single religious tradition. These include: belief in a Supreme Being, belief in spirits/divinities, belief in life after death, belief in ancestors, religious personnel and sacred places, and the practice of magic, witchcraft, and medicine.³⁴ The African perception of the universe is centred on the belief in a Supreme Being who is the creator and sustainer of the universe. The Supreme Being is believed to be surrounded by a host of supernatural powers of different types and functions. These numerous divinities are believed to be messengers of God assigned to specific areas of responsibilities and could serve as intermediaries between the human person and God. The African religious worldview is therefore spirit-filled.

The above consideration renders redundant the question of the place of Christ in the indigenous religions. The indigenous religion has no place for Christ, as John Mbiti observes: "African concepts of

³² Indigenous and traditional will be used interchangeably. Also any reference to African Traditional Religions presumes that the Nigerian indigenous religions are included. Religions (plural) and Religion (singular) are used according to the context, because though diverse, they could be considered as a single religious tradition

³³ Omosade Awolalu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan, Onibonjoje Press, 1979), 28

³⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 34

Christology do not exist”.³⁵ Ben Udoh points at the heart of Mbiti’s observation while analysing the Church of Scotland’s mission to Calabar, Nigeria. He concludes: “Christ entered the African scene as a forceful, impatient and unfriendly tyrant. He was presented as invalidating the history and institutions of the people in order to impose his rule upon them”.³⁶ Udoh’s observation becomes clear when one considers the coincidence of missionary activities and colonial occupation of Nigeria, and the cooperation between the two. Christ was therefore “the most visible publicized symbol of foreign domination”.³⁷ This underscores Bolaji Idowu’s profound unease with the missionary enterprise. According to him “Africans were required to shed their Africanness as part of the process of becoming Christians...it is now clear that by a misguided purpose a completely new God who had had nothing to do

³⁵ John Mbiti, “Some African Concepts of Christology” in *Christ and the Younger Churches*, ed. Geord F. Viicedom (London: SPCK, 1972), 51

³⁶ Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology*, 64

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 74-75. While we note here some instances where Africans freely embraced Christianity, these instances do not diminish the overwhelming forceful strategy of early efforts to implant the Christian faith. We note for instance the royal influence of King Afonso I in the 15th century Kongo where ‘idol worshippers’ faced intensive punishments, even being burned with their idols, thus casting a shadow on the issue of voluntary conversion to Christianity; and the ruthless destruction of the nkisi idols by the 17th century Capuchin missionaries, cf. Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa: 1450-1950*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 79-109. Also in Nigeria and in some other sub-Saharan African countries, the close association of colonial powers and missionaries forced Africans to accept western structures as essential to Christianity, cf. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986, pp. 29-78; 79-145. Many other writers have also lamented the effects of such ‘colonial Christianity’, cf. Adrian Hastings, *Church and Mission in Modern Africa*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1967); Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry*, trans. Robert J. Barr, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf&Stock, 2005); Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: Impact of Culture Upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*, (Milton Keynes: Regnum Books International, 1999), pp. 225-252

with the past of Africa was introduced to her peoples”.³⁸ The implication was that Christ could not inhabit the spiritual universe of African consciousness except in essence as a stranger.³⁹ Notwithstanding, many African writers posit inculturation as the appropriate means of establishing a dialogue between Christianity and the indigenous religions.⁴⁰

The abundant literature on inculturation reveals two ways of appropriating the subject: from the bible to African reality, and from African reality to Christology. The second approach enjoys a wider support. Here, the African worldview becomes the point of departure. The mystery of Christ is examined from the perspective of a particular theme or themes taken from the African context. Benezet Bujo for instance, starts his Christological reflection from African ancestral beliefs and practices. According to him:

In Africa, the *gesta* of ancestors are constantly re-enacted through ritual. This enables the African to recall these *gesta* and to conform his conduct to them. Such rituals become a life-and-death rule of conduct, guarantors of salvation, and a testament for posterity. In other words these rituals become a commemorative narrative soteriology, which assures unity of the past present and future community including the dead.⁴¹

³⁸ Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 75

³⁹ Kwame Bedaiko, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions” in *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, eds. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Bangalore: Partnership in Mission-Asia, 1983), 125. For more extensive treatment, see, Bedaiko, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1999), 225-266

⁴⁰ There are two schools of contemporary African theology: Inculturation and Liberation theology. Inculturation however is by far the most common and most developed theological school on black Africa. For details, cf. Robert J. Schreiter, ed., *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991)

⁴¹ Benezet Bujo, “A Christocentric Ethic for Black Africa” in *Theology Digest*, vol. 30 no. 2 (1982), 145

From this background, Bujo reflects on the mystery of Christ and sees him as proto ancestor, the source of life and the highest model of ancestorship.⁴² Through the incarnation Christ assumed the genuine aspiration of our ancestors. He therefore becomes the unique and privileged locus of total encounter with other ancestors, and allows them to localize where we encounter the God of salvation. Charles Nyamiti extends this understanding to the Trinity and conjectures that the Father is the ancestor of the Son, the son is the descendant of the Father, and the two live their ancestral kinship through the Spirit whom they mutually communicate to as their ancestral oblation and Eucharist.⁴³ Similar efforts in this model of inculturation by prominent African Christologists have led to the identification of Christ as elder brother,⁴⁴ chief healer,⁴⁵ master of initiation⁴⁶ etc. The originality and genuine creativity in the above contributions to African Christian theology cannot be doubted. In fact, this is perhaps the first time in the history of sub-Saharan Africa to express and expound systematically the mystery of Christ in African categories.⁴⁷ Expressions like ‘Jesus the ancestor’ or ‘Jesus the master of initiation’ cannot be adequately appreciated without reflecting on their African background, hence, their originality.

Based on these seeming similarities between traditional Christology and indigenous religious beliefs and practices, inculturation has been proffered as an adequate framework for dialogue between Christianity and the indigenous religion. A critical examination however would

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Charles Nyamiti, “African Christologies”, in Robert J. Schreiter, ed., *Faces*, 11. Also cf. Nyamiti, *Christ as our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru Zimbabwe, 1984); “Ancestral Kinship in the Trinity: An African Theology of the Trinity” in *Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures*, vol.IX (Rome 1987), 29-48

⁴⁴ Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism: Towards a New Christian Encounter with Africa* (London: SPCK, 1968), 72ff

⁴⁵ Aylward Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor: An Approach to Healing and Wholeness* (New York: Orbis, 1985)

⁴⁶ This is the argument of A. T. Sanon, cf. Robert Schreiter, *Faces*, 8

⁴⁷ Cf. Nicholas I. Mbogu, *Christology and Religious Pluralism: A Review of John Hick's Theocentric Model of Christology and the Emergence of African Inculturation Christologies* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006), 382

expose the inadequacies and defects of this model. From a theological perspective, one cannot present Jesus as an ancestor or master of initiation, and pretend that it connotes the same reality as the Christian Jesus. While the Christian Jesus is equal to God, the ancestor is neither equal to God nor an object of worship. Timothy Tennent expresses my concern here rather succinctly: “Ancestors are not gods even though they are highly regarded”.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the effort to enthrone Jesus as the proto, privileged, or most perfect ancestor, to my view, is not only a mismatch and a colossal disregard of the fundamental differences between the two religions, but a religious invasion, an unconscious perpetuation of the missionary model that displaces the traditional cults and presents the western experience of divine revelation in Jesus Christ as the only valid one. It is an implicit acknowledgment that the revelation of God through the indigenous religion is not adequate.

On the practical level, the relevance of the above model is minimal. The typical Nigerian Christian in the pew does not only look at Christianity as superior to the indigenous religion, but would never refer to Christ as ancestor or master of initiation because the traditional cults are still considered ‘pagan’. The prevalent title of Christ in Nigeria today is not ancestor but Lord. It is therefore not uncommon that Christians and converted traditionalists destroy ancestral shrines in order to proclaim that they have accepted Jesus as their Lord and saviour.⁴⁹ The practical relevance leaves more to be desired. Little wonder why Bujo refers to inculturation as “being too academic and a pompous irrelevance, truly an ideological superstructure”,⁵⁰ found in theological literatures, libraries and shelves.

⁴⁸ Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing the way we Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 131. See also, Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Christ and Reconciliation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, vol.1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2013), 77

⁴⁹ For instance cf. African evangelists destroy artifacts By - The Washington Times - Thursday, September 6, 2007: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2007/sep/06/african-evangelists-destroy-artifacts/?page=all> Accessed December 02, 2014

⁵⁰ Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, trans. John O’Donohue (Nairobi: St Paul Communications, 1992), 71

The above exposition demonstrates the shortcomings of attempts at harmonization. It is time for the three religions in Nigeria to recognize the uniqueness and value in each, and to appreciate themselves as such without trying to harmonize or change doctrines or beliefs. The Igbo proverbial principle *egbe bere ugo bere* (literally: let the kite perch and let the eagle perch, or put differently, live and let live) is instructive, and highlights the contention of the mature differentiation model. Efforts at harmonization in the Nigerian religious arena recall the pluralistic model of interreligious dialogue as put forward by John Hick.⁵¹ Therefore to further expose the inadequacy of such attempts as a basis for dialogue, a brief examination of John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis is necessary. will help for a better grasp of the concerns of mature differentiation.

John Hick – Pluralism

In *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, Hick presents religion as culturally determined responses to God by the devotees.⁵² The epistemological grounding for his arguments owes much to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant from whom he borrowed the concept of *noumena* and *phenomena*. Because we have no pure experience of the *noumena*, each person's experience of it is always an interpretation specific to the individual. Applying this to the realm of religion, Hick makes a distinction between the Transcendent and the way it is expressed within various religions. As such, the Transcendent Reality is unknowable, ineffable, and trans-categorical. No religion "describes the transcendent as it is in itself but as it is conceived in the variety of ways made possible by our varied human mentalities and cultures".⁵³ Common to the different cultural interpretations is a reference to the same God. In an earlier publication, Hick had insisted that all names used for God in

⁵¹ Though Hick finds the common ground in the Ultimate Reality while the common ground considered in the Nigerian context is Christological, Hick's hypothesis is important to this paper because my concern is to demonstrate the inadequacy of looking for a common ground in the first place.

⁵² John Hick, *An Interpretation*, 235. For details, see especially 233-292

⁵³ John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 165

various religions are the same. What is meant is “the Eternal One”.⁵⁴ Along this line, Hick significantly adjusts his understanding of the person and significance of Jesus. He argues that the incarnation should be interpreted only in terms of “a mythological idea, a figure of speech, a piece of poetic imagery”,⁵⁵ or a story which is not literally true, but which invites the hearers to personal transformation. In this metaphorical sense, God was present and active in Jesus in the same manner that he was present in other religious leaders. Hick’s rejection of orthodox Christology in favour of a metaphorical interpretation exposes a genuine struggle and dissatisfaction with orthodoxy as he increasingly exposed himself to other religions. Since, according to Hick, the “great religions are all, at their experiential roots in contact with the same ultimate reality”,⁵⁶ he urges that we must shift our view from Christ to God. It is here that Hick lays the foundation for his Copernican revolution in Christianity. In *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Hick advocates that God, and not Christ become the centre of religions. He thinks that the problem between the different religions will be resolved if a theocentric rather than a Christocentric concept of salvation is advanced. This, according to Hick implies a new type of Christology in which Jesus is no longer to be seen as the final revelation and the only incarnation of God.⁵⁷ The core of Hick’s religious hypothesis could be summarized thus: (1) There is an Ultimate Reality to which the different religions are legitimate responses, (2) The various religions are historically and culturally conditioned, imperfect interpretations of this Reality, and (3) Soteriological transformation is occurring roughly to the same extent within the major religions.

If the Ultimate Reality in itself is distinguished from the various modes of human understanding, then it becomes clear why there is a plurality of religious traditions, consisting different, but equally salvific, human responses to the Ultimate. In this light, Hick’s hypothesis assumes

⁵⁴ John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 42

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 74

⁵⁶ John Hick, “The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth” in *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth Claims*, ed., John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 151

⁵⁷ Cf. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Oneworld Publications, 1993), 148

an explanatory framework for understanding religious diversity. It is thus “a second order explanation of first order data that we observe in various religions”.⁵⁸ However, as Mbogu rightly observes, Hick’s theory includes both descriptive and prescriptive components.⁵⁹ At the descriptive level he is concerned about portraying other religions as accurately as they are, while at the prescriptive level, he is calling for alteration of some existing beliefs. Definitely, there is an obvious tension between these two components. While Hick holds that there are truths that apply to everyone, he is aware that the ontologies of, for example, orthodox Christianity and Theravada Buddhism are incompatible.⁶⁰ On the one level then, Hick is clearly aware of the irreconcilable differences between the religious traditions, and his model attempts to account for such conflicting truth claims. However his proposal minimizes such differences by reinterpreting the more problematic beliefs in ways unacceptable to the believers themselves. According to Harold Netland, “the major religious traditions do not find their beliefs as understood within their respective traditions adequately accounted for in [Hick’s] analysis”.⁶¹ This reinterpretation of troublesome doctrines in order to accommodate them within the framework of his theory makes his treatment of beliefs of different religions reductionistic.⁶²

In defence of Hick’s theory, Sumner Twiss made a distinction between descriptive reductionism and explanatory reductionism, insisting that while Hick does engage in the latter, it is inevitable with any second order model and thus not actually problematic.⁶³ Descriptive reductionism occurs when one describes first order religious phenomena in terms unacceptable to the religious insider. For instance if one were to

⁵⁸ John Hick, “The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D’Costa” in *Religious Studies*, 33 (June 1997), 163

⁵⁹ Nicholas Mbogu, *Christology*, 93

⁶⁰ John Hick, *An Interpretation*, 165-169

⁶¹ Harold Netland, “Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism” in *Religious Studies*, 22 (June 1986), 249-261

⁶² Nicholas Mbogu, *Christology*, 105

⁶³ Somner B. Twiss, “The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism: A Critical Appraisal of Hick and His Critics” in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, eds., Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 67-98

describe the Christian doctrine of incarnation in a way that does not reflect what Christians actually mean by the doctrine. This would be clearly inappropriate in a model explaining what Christians believe. Explanatory reductionism on the other hand happens when one offers a second-order theory that explains first order phenomenon in terms and categories that are somewhat different from those of the religious tradition in which the phenomenon appears. Twiss believes that this is inevitable in any second order explanatory model, hence not problematic. Twiss' explanation however does nothing to reduce the problem of inappropriate reductionism associated with Hick's model. Distinguishing between explanatory reductionism which occurs within the conceptual framework of a particular religion and the kind of reductionism operative within Hick's model, Mbogu argues that the adequacy of his model is in large measure a function of its internal consistency as a theory and its capacity to account for the first order data of major religions without distorting them in the process. Thus, the fact that Hick's model 'accounts for' basic beliefs of the religions by reinterpreting them in a significant way counts against its viability as a general theory about the religions.⁶⁴

Yet, according to Hick, this model provides adequate framework for inter-faith dialogue and an explicit hope that each tradition may learn from the other. For if the religions are related to the same Ultimate Reality, interreligious dialogue become both meaningful and desirable.⁶⁵ The Nigerian experience shows that this is not as simple as it sounds. The Muslims would vehemently if not violently resist any suggestion that their particular conception of Allah is merely a penultimate manifestation of what is truly ultimate. Christians would resist a mythological interpretation of the incarnation, and the traditional religionist would reject that his/her concept of the Supreme Being is a mere hallucination. Hick's model presupposes that genuine inter religious dialogue must be founded on equality, and a religious common ground. In search of these however, his theory navigates into a head-on collision with the beliefs of believers. A theology of mature differentiation argues that such a foundation is not necessary. Religious differences must not be harmonized in order for true relationship to exist. While avoiding Hick's

⁶⁴ Nicholas Mbogu, *Christology*, see the argument on pp.105-109

⁶⁵ John Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 178

problems therefore, this model presents a more realistic, practical and contextual basis for interreligious dialogue. It is to this model we now turn.

A Theology of Mature Differentiation

The foregoing demonstrates the inadequacy of Hick's model of pluralism, and the search for a Christological common ground in addressing the problem of religious intolerance in Nigeria. By asserting that what is religiously meaningful is not to be sought within one's own religious tradition, but rather in what transcends that religion, the value of identity, which constitutes the heart of believers' practices, is compromised. As we have examined, the use of Christology to advance the pluralistic model of interreligious dialogue in Nigeria leaves more to be desired. I therefore argue that the unique elements of Christianity, Islam, and the indigenous religions must be taken seriously, and not overlooked, reinterpreted or sacrificed on the altar of common ground. Religious differences must neither be harmonized nor compromised. Attempts to do this in Nigeria have either failed or remained superficial, as we have already examined. The different faith traditions in Nigeria must realize that dialogue must not presuppose a common ground. Religions are different, but each capable of fostering relationships. Christ must not be appreciated under the same spectacle. An infinite God can validly reveal Godself through different bodies, without compromising the unity of the Godhead. This is the core of a theology of mature differentiation. This model is hinged on the significance placed on otherness and the acknowledgement of the intrinsic value in particularities. It should not however be confused with particularism, which arose as a reaction to pluralism in order to save the particulars.⁶⁶ George Lindbeck's cultural-

⁶⁶ The most important particularist authors are Joseph DiNoia, (cf. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* [Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1992]), Garret Green (cf. Green "Are Religions Incommensurable? Reflections on Plurality and the Religious Imagination" in *Louvain Studies* 27 [2002], 218-239), and William Placher (cf. Placher ed., *Essentials of Christian Theology* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003], 297-302). However, the thoughts of George Lindbeck is utilized in this

linguistic model certainly illuminates the concern here. While the mature differentiation model does not agree totally with Lindbeck's hypothesis, it draws from its concern on "the irreducible particularity of the inside-perspective of religion" (threatened by the form of pluralism advocated by Hick), and the futility of any attempt to make "tradition-specific meaning depend on an outside perspective".⁶⁷ Therefore a brief examination of Lindbeck's model will help for a better grasp of the concerns of mature differentiation.

Cultural-Linguistic Model:

Lindbeck considers pluralism as a path to the erosion of religious particularities. The reason is simple: pluralism is based on a wrong theory of religion, which Lindbeck calls experiential-expressivism.⁶⁸ In contrast, Lindbeck proposes a cultural-linguistic model of religion that entails an analogue between religion, culture and language.⁶⁹ Becoming religious is comparable to learning a language, or interiorizing a culture.⁷⁰ Religious traditions operate form distinctive religious contexts and languages. Unlike the pluralist hypothesis, Lindbeck's model rejects that different religions are exterior manifestations of the same fundamental experience. To be religious entails being particular. "It is just as hard to think of religions as it is to think of cultures or languages as having a single generic or universal experiential essence of which particular religions—or cultures or languages—are varied manifestations or modifications".⁷¹

paper partly because particularism draws heavily on his arguments (cf. Marianne Moyaert, "The (Un-)translatability", 343). Also his cultural-linguistic model partly highlights the concern of the paper.

⁶⁷George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 129

⁶⁸ Experiential expressivism considers the different religions diverse expressions of a common core experience. It also regards experience as the source of objectification. Cf. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 30

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 17-18

⁷⁰ By comparing religion to language, Lindbeck does not intend a literal understanding. It is rather a way of drawing attention to how religion functions in the life of believers, as a communal phenomenon, a comprehensive system, and a reflexive system, cf. *ibid.*, 33, 84, 101, 114

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 23

Any attempt to unlock a particular religion's world of meaning for outsiders by the use of extratextual categories, according to Lindbeck, is a translation.⁷² While attractive (which in fact makes the *Hickian* pluralistic hypothesis for interreligious dialogue charming), it is dangerous to the particularities of religions. Such translations are grossly inadequate, hence, "to the degree that religions are like languages and cultures, they can no more be taught by means of translation than can Chinese and French".⁷³ Lindbeck thus explores the principle of intratextuality, which insists that particular inside-perspectives of religions are irreducible, and rejects any attempt to explain tradition-specific motifs through extratextual hermeneutics. The cultural-linguistic model therefore denies that there exists a sort of universal extra-linguistic experience or structure, which gives the different religions their ultimate value. It rather prefers "the reinstatement of the rich particularities of native tongues above the impoverished abstractions of translation."⁷⁴ An extratextual foundation for interreligious translation does not exist. Caution is therefore necessary in interreligious dialogue because interreligious translation leads to empty generalizations.

Mature differentiation agrees with Lindbeck's rejection of extratextual categories to explain religion, and the inadequacy of diminishing particularities in search of commonalities. We have already seen this inadequacy in the Nigerian context with the failure of the use of a unified Christological category to establish a common ground for dialogue among the three religions. However, Lindbeck's theory, as Moyaert observes, presupposes a concept of religion that "implies the inevitability of a solitary world, divorced from other cultures with other values, convictions, feelings and habits, a humanity divided in discontinuous blocks, another culture and another planet",⁷⁵ leading to the "devalorisation of interreligious dialogue."⁷⁶ Thus, while it rescues religious particularities from pluralist homogenization, it simultaneously

⁷² *Ibid.*, 129

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ George Lindbeck, "The Gospel Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability" in *Modern Theology* 13 (1997), 423-450, 426

⁷⁵ Marianne Moyaert, "The (Un-)translatability", 348

⁷⁶ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 9

spells doom to interreligious dialogue, setting up a dualistic choice: either we follow the cultural linguistic focus on particularities and accept the untranslatability of religions, or we follow the pluralist hypothesis of common ground leading to the excavation of interreligious differences.⁷⁷ This however leaves the mind to wonder whether the recognition of particularities necessarily implies untranslatability of religions. While Lindbeck agrees, mature differentiation responds in the negative. Here mature differentiation parts ways with cultural linguistic model. This is because the mature differentiation is not only founded on theory, it is also anchored on experience. While ‘translation’ might be theoretically impossible, experience proves otherwise. The Nigerian experience shows that it is possible to understand foreign speakers, and to begin a ‘translation’ process, while firmly anchored on one’s particular native tongue. The mature differentiation model does not only take interreligious differences seriously, it values their uniqueness and it recognizes that particular uniqueness does not necessarily place an end to dialogue nor does dialogue erode particularities.

A theology of mature differentiation values the authenticity and uniqueness of otherness in its particular experience. This implies avoiding the tendency to swallow or encapsulate the other within one’s own categories. It is able to hold the tension between one’s faith commitment and the otherness of the other, and it is precisely within this space that interreligious dialogue is born. A proper differentiation, thus, serves as a legitimate protest against the tendency to impose a universal framework on all religions, because differences are no longer seen as obstacles. It acknowledges that there are other legitimate and valid ways of God’s revelation, and does not seek to impose a particular cultural experience of Jesus on other religions as the inculturation model seeks to achieve, nor foist a superficial common ground for mutual existence. Here, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ does not preclude the uniqueness of non-Christian revelations, nor considers them as mere ‘elements of sanctification which ultimately belongs to the one church of Christ’.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Cf. Marianne Moyaert, “The (Un-)translatability”, 350

⁷⁸ cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November, 1964, 8; Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3. No doubt this is a major shift from the theology of ‘no salvation outside the Church’ but the air of superiority still hovers around it.

Central to the mature differentiation model is the contention that there are multiple but equally valid channels of divine revelation. The model thus finds a theological anchor on an ancient conceptualization of divine selfhood and revelation extant in the Hebrew scriptures and also expressed in the African traditional religious worldview. According to this tradition, God is not constrained to a particular way of revealing Godself. This string of scriptural tradition⁷⁹ supported by archaeological findings and Ancient Near Eastern texts points to the localization of Yahweh in a number of geographical manifestations, and the multiplicity of divine embodiment, even as the unity of the Godself remains intact.

Theological Foundation: A Fluid Model of Divine Revelation⁸⁰

In the family based religion of the patriarchs of Israel as evident in the Hebrew bible, God equally and validly reveals Godself, and is worshipped in a series of *el* deities: *El-'Elyon* in Jerusalem (Gen. 14:19, 22), *El-Bethel* in Bethel (Gen.31:13;35:7), *El-Olam* in Beersheba (Gen. 21:33), *El* the God of Israel in Shechem (Gen. 33:20), and *El-Ro'e* in Negeb (Gen.16:13).⁸¹ This phenomenon is also observed in the later pre-state Yahweh religion in certain scriptural syntagmata such as Yahweh in Hebron (2Sam. 15:7), Yahweh in Zion (Ps. 99:2), Yahweh Sabaoth in Shiloh (1Sam. 1:3); and through the inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud one also knows of "Yhwh of Samaria" and "Yhwh of Teman".⁸² Here we

⁷⁹ This tradition pervades the narratives of the Yahwist and Elohist authors. The instances noted below belong to their narratives.

⁸⁰ I present here a compact summary of this theological tradition. A detailed theological foundation to this model is dedicated to a different study.

⁸¹ For a detailed study of this phenomena, cf. Rainer Albertz, *A History of the Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period vol. I: From the Beginnings to the End of the Monarchy*, trans. John Bowden, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), see especially 23-44

⁸² For the religious implications of these inscriptions, see J.A. Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud" in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche wissenschaft*, 94 no 1, 1982, 2-20; Judith M. Hadley, "Some Drawings and Iscriptions on Two Pithoi from Kuntillet 'Ajrud" in *Vetus Testamentum*, XXXVII, 2 (1987), 180-211; Othmar Keel and

see a peculiar understanding of divine selfhood, according to which a particular deity can produce many local manifestations in order to be present to its worshippers. This localized differentiation of Yahweh in accordance with God's character is also evidenced in the revelation of Godself through different channels or bodies (heavenly, human or even inanimate elements).

Genesis 18 presents a vivid example of the above conception. In verse 1 we read: *wayyera elaw Yahweh* (Yahweh appeared to him [i.e. Abraham]) while he sat at the entrance of his tent by the oaks of Mamre. When Abraham lifted up his eyes in the next verse, he saw three men (*selosah anasim*) standing nearby. The interchangeable use of *Yahweh* and *selosah anasim* (three men) from the same source, implies that Yahweh manifests Godself in the form (or body) of the three men or at least of one of them. Thus, in verse 13 and 22, one of the visitors is clearly identified as Yahweh. Here Yahweh's revelation to Abraham occurs in a human body. The visitor "is Yhwh but not the only manifestation of Yhwh... Either a localized and perhaps temporary manifestation of the deity ... speaks to Abraham, or the deity partially overlaps with one or several messengers."⁸³ Similar overlap of God and a heavenly body (*mal'akh*) is also attested in the scriptures (for instance, Judges 6:11-14). In fact, the abundance of passages that mention this conception of *mal'akh* (angel) in biblical theophanies⁸⁴ have attracted the attention of scholars. The term *mal'akh* has thus variously been described as "emanation of the Godhead,"⁸⁵ "an aspect or an incarnation of God,"⁸⁶

Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 210-236

⁸³ Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 40-41

⁸⁴ S.A. Meier has an extensive list of biblical passages that mention this conception of angel, cf. S. A. Meier, "Angel of Yhwh" in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd edition, eds., Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, Pieter W. van der Horst, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), 53-59

⁸⁵ Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (Boston: Little Brown, 1995), 12-13

⁸⁶ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 63-64; also see the commentary of Nachmanides on Gen. 18:1

or a concrete expression of the divine presence in human affairs.⁸⁷ In his book, *God of Old*, James Kugel speaks of the angel not just as a small-scale manifestation of Yahweh, nor an overlap, as Benjamin Sommer prefers,⁸⁸ but as “God himself, God taking human form...intruding into human reality.”⁸⁹ These *mal’akh* passages demonstrate the fluidity of divine selfhood so common in the Ancient Near East,⁹⁰ a phenomenon through which Yahweh is free to manifest Godself in a body (or several bodies) while not being limited only to those bodies.

Apart from human and heavenly bodies, Yahweh can also embody inanimate objects. In the famous passage of the burning bush (Exodus 3-4), we read that a *mal’akh* appeared to Moses in a flame of fire that was blazing from the midst of the bush, yet the bush was not being consumed. In the remainder of the passage it was Yahweh himself who converses with Moses, commissions him, reveals his name, and sends him to Egypt to deliver the Israelites from oppression. Here, Yahweh temporarily

⁸⁷For similar arguments cf. the excellent discussions of Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol.2, trans. J.A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 23-29; Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Toledot*, vol.1, 228; Julius Morgenstern, “Biblical Theophanies” in *ZA* 25 (1911), 139-193, see especially 159 and 183; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol.1, trans. D.M.G. Stalker, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), see especially 286-288, where he discusses the significance of the alternation of Yhwh and angel of Yhwh.

⁸⁸ Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 43. This book is a detailed study of the divine fluidity tradition

⁸⁹ James Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 34. In a similar argument that strengthens this view, S.A. Meier points out that the ancient Greek and Latin translations of the biblical passages that hint to this conception. Translators sometimes use the word ‘angel’ where the standard text preserved in Jewish tradition (the Masoretic text) merely reads YHWH, and sometimes they drop the word ‘angel’ where it is present in the Masoretic text. These textual variations strengthen the proposition that the boundary between angel and yhwh was regarded in the texts underlying the translations as indistinct. In fact, Meier concludes that the term angel “is probably secondary addition to the text in response to changing theological perspectives”. Cf. S. A. Meier, “Angel of Yhwh” 55-57

⁹⁰ Sommer discusses this phenomenon in Mesopotamia and Canaan, cf. Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 12-37

embodies an element (fire) to reveal godself and deliver his message. In the same vein, the notion that sacred trees through which Yhwh manifests himself was part of ancient Israelite conceptualization of Yahweh is hinted at in Deuteronomy 33:16 where Yahweh is described as “the one who dwells in the bush” (*sokeni seneh*). Biblical evidence also shows that divine embodiment is possible in stones. In Gen. 33:20, the ancestor Jacob names a *masseba*, which he erects in the neighbourhood of Shechem ‘*el ‘elohe yisra’el*. The translation “‘*el* the god of Israel’ is preferred to ‘God, the god of Israel (Jacob)’, which would make no sense grammatically.⁹¹ Here, ‘*el* is clearly identified with the *masseba*. Similarly, after Jacob woke up from a vision where he saw angels ascending and descending a stairway reaching from heaven to earth, he took the stone he had set beneath his head and set it up as a *massebah*, poured oil on it and called the place *Bethel* (Genesis 28:10-19). According to Philo of Byblos, “once Jacob anointed the stone, it was endowed with life.”⁹² The possibility that Philo’s contention is tenable is evidenced in Genesis 31:13, where God identifies himself with Bethel, making his presence in the *massebah* explicit: ‘*anoki ha’el Beth’el ’aser masahta sam massebah* (I am the God Bethel whom you anointed there in a pillar of stone). Interestingly, some scholars while translating this verse prefer to render it as: ‘I am the God who appeared to you at Bethel...’⁹³ But the phrase ‘who appeared to you at’ in these translations is clearly an attempt to make sense of what seems to be a difficult reading,⁹⁴ because the phrase does not appear in the Hebrew. The Hebrew simply reads ‘*anoki ha’el Beth’el*—I am the God Bethel..., with the verb *msh* taking on

⁹¹ Note that the article is absent, and the following ‘*elohim* is used as an appellative. Cf. Eckart Otto, *Jakob in Sichem* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1979), 79. Also in line with the context, it is worth noting that such names of altars tend to be confessional names (cf. Ex. 17:15; Judges 6:24)

⁹² Cited by Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 49

⁹³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Continental Commentary*, trans. John J Scullion S. J. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 486; Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 168. Some other translations read: ‘I am the God of Bethel...’ cf. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 146. But this is also an attempt at explanation because the preposition ‘of’ is not warranted.

⁹⁴ Westermann actually puts it in parenthesis, and notes the Greek expansion

a double accusative (*ha'el* and *Beth'el*) “to indicate its transformative nature.”⁹⁵ The difficulty with this verse will disappear if one appreciates the fluidity of divine embodiment, a tradition that subtly pervades the Hebrew Scriptures.⁹⁶ Here, Yahweh clearly becomes identical with the pillar of stone, and takes the name Bethel, reminiscent of Judges 6:24 where Gideon built an altar to Yahweh and called the altar ‘Yhwh who is peace’ (*Yahweh salowm*), and Joshua 24:27 where Joshua sets up a large stone under the oak in the sanctuary, and the stone is said to have “heard” (*sameah*) all the words (prayers). These instances suggest that sacred stones, like sacred trees were regarded as legitimate embodiments in some Yahwistic circles in ancient Israel, and that the conception of fluid divine selfhood found in Canaan and Mesopotamia were also known among Yahwistic Israelites.

Indeed, this conception is also entrenched in the traditions that lay claim to the Hebrew Scriptures. In Christianity for instance, the New Testament recounts that after the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit came down like a dove upon Jesus. Luke explicitly tells us that the Spirit came down “in bodily form, as a dove” (*kai katabenai to Pneuma to Hagion somatiko eidei hos peristeran ep' auton* – Lk. 3:22). Here we see the overlap of the Holy Spirit and the body of a dove. Again, in Catholicism’s theology of trans-substantiation, the deity embodies ordinary bread when a priest utters the words of consecration. In this theology, the bread changes in substance and becomes not just a sign, but the real body of Jesus Christ. The ‘real presence’ theology is reminiscent of Jacob’s *masseba* that became Yahweh after Jacob performed the ritual of anointing. Accordingly, just as the Israelite God became present in many bodies on earth as the Israelites anointed sacred poles, stones, etc., so too the Catholic God’s body is present in many locations wherever the Eucharist is celebrated.⁹⁷ The divine fluidity tradition exemplifies the

⁹⁵ Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 50

⁹⁶ Interestingly, it was the Priestly editors (who reject this conceptualization) that gave the final shape to the Hebrew scriptures, yet, this tradition still endures not only in the scriptures but in the traditions that lay claim to the Hebrew Bible (postbiblical rabbinic literature, Jewish mysticism, and Christianity), for a detailed study, cf. Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 124-143

⁹⁷ Other instance of this phenomenon could be found in the notion of the trinity, and in the very concept of the incarnation in which God takes a human body,

notion that Yahweh cannot be constituted or limited, he is a free god validly manifesting the Godself wherever and in whatever he wills.

Accordingly, the cultic, local, historical, and functional differentiations within the world of the gods in ancient Israel, (which are a reflection of geographical and social demarcations) hardly generated any religious dispute or controversy.⁹⁸ Jacob's gods could thus co-exist with the gods his family had brought from Mesopotamia without any tension.⁹⁹ Here there is a further awareness that religious demarcation hardly played any role since the Deity could authentically exist under different names and objects, and the practical worship of one god completely lacked the exclusiveness and intolerance that was later to be a vital characteristic of Yahweh religion.

This theological consciousness is also expressed in the African traditional religious worldview where the devotion to a particular deity does not preclude the validity of other channels of divine manifestation. This is evident in the traditional value system that emphasizes "a shared, reciprocal humanness with a strong sense of community that includes hospitality to outsiders"¹⁰⁰ and other religions. This phenomenon is adequately captured by the Igbo proverbial principle: *egbe bere ugo bere* (let the kite perch and let the eagle perch; live and let live), a principle that nets the contention of the mature differentiation model, theologically built on the very nature of Godself and God's revelation.

Under the above apparatus, the uniqueness of each religion is held in a constructive balance since the presence of a different religious

localizes the Godself on earth while at the same time remaining in heaven. For a more elaborate discussion, cf. Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 132-143

⁹⁸ Cf. Rainer Albertz, *A History of the Israelite Religion*, 32

⁹⁹ Not until the late Deuteronomic text of Gen. 35:2 that he calls on his household to put away the foreign gods and purify themselves. Yet even in this tendency towards intolerance so typical of later Yahweh religion, it is striking to note that the transmitters of the patriarchal narratives leave the various divine designations which have come down to them intact, limiting themselves only to identifying these designations with Yahweh, cf. Rainer Albertz, *A History of the Israelite Religion*, 32

¹⁰⁰ Martin Prozesky, "Cinderella, Survivor and Saviour: African Ethics and the Quest for a Global Ethic", in Munyaradzi Felix Murove, ed. *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 9

experience is understood as a legitimate channel of sacred encounter, nullifying the necessity of a common ground for interreligious dialogue. Unlike the *Hickan* suggestion therefore, a Nigerian Christian does not need to reject the incarnation, nor shift attention from Christ to God in order to affirm the uniqueness of other traditions, neither does a Muslim or the traditional worshipper need to compromise her/his core doctrinal beliefs. The God who is free to reveal Godself to a Christian in the person of Christ can also reveal Godself to a Muslim and a traditional worshipper through other means. Accordingly, a theology of mature differentiation balances identity and openness. It overcomes pluralism's tendency of sacrificing core beliefs on the altar of common ground, and it shows that translation is possible since it does not necessarily require detachment.

The above theological consideration also allows us to address the question of context. A fluid god who can be in various created substances is a God who is not constituted. Indeed the fluidity model reflects Yahweh's freedom, expresses Yahweh's grace,¹⁰¹ and underscores Yahweh's desire to enter into relationship/dialogue with humanity in their various religious contexts. As such, the theology of mature differentiation grapples with the real life experience of the Nigerian Christians, Muslims and traditional worshippers in their religio-cultural circumstances. Official attempts at interreligious dialogue in Nigeria today focus mostly on Muslim-Christian relationship while shutting out the indigenous religions. Yet, most of the oral and written exchanges or round table discussions are more monologues than dialogue, as there always exists a conscious or unconscious air of doctrinal superiority at the background. They usually represent a predominantly western perspective and idealist models of how Christian-Muslim relations ought to be, ignoring the African traditional ethos that has provided a hospitable home for Christians-Muslims encounter since the 19th century. Western theories of dialogue as we have considered, tend to be text-centred, doctrinally oriented, and concerned with issues of *lex credendi*. This can only metamorphose, as Amjad Ali indicates, into the search for a transcendent

¹⁰¹ cf. Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 143

anchor beyond the particulars of the dialogue partners.¹⁰² Consequently, people's religious and cultural particularities are compromised, and theology is divorced from its historical foothold. Such an approach reduces dialogue either to a "submit mentality"¹⁰³ or to "mentally constructed laboratories of objectivity, which are alien to human situations."¹⁰⁴ The result is that 'dialogue' is removed from the experiences of people who are the actual participants of any interreligious encounter.

The differentiation model therefore laments the exclusion of the indigenous religion in official dialogues as a fundamental flaw. Commenting on this subject, J.D.Y Peel observes: "we cannot speak of the encounter between Christians and Muslims within African civil societies without reference to the cultural yardstick that guarantee and condition the relationship".¹⁰⁵ A theology of mature differentiation therefore rejects the paradigms of dialogue that focuses exclusively on ideological dimensions of religion. On a practical level, the lived experience of the Yoruba people of Nigeria is a demonstration of the practicability of this model. Animated by traditional ethos, different religions live side-by-side, respectfully acknowledging commonalities and differences. The Yoruba lived experience not only challenges idealized perspectives of interreligious relations and dogmatic presuppositions imposed from outside, but exemplifies the arguments of the mature differentiation model. A brief consideration is therefore necessary.

The Yoruba Experience:

The Yoruba society with its "remarkable communal diversity and its religious pluralism still continues to serve as an important focus of

¹⁰² Charles Amjad-Ali, "Theological and Historical Rationality Behind Christian-Muslim Relations" in *Islam in Asia: Perspectives for Christian-Muslim Encounter*, ed., J.P. Rajashekar and H.S. Wilson (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1992), 7-8

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ J.D.Y. Peel, "Engaging Islam in the Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland" (NAMP Position Paper 27), 27-30

research into the internal and external factors of social and cultural change in Africa.”¹⁰⁶ Apart from the rich diversity of Yoruba traditional religious institutions, Christianity and Islam are both present with large and dynamic communities. The widespread of religious tolerance and the apparent non-politicization of religious differences among the Yoruba vindicates the people’s claim to civility and sophistication when it comes to religious broadmindedness and accommodation of other ethnic groups. In the words of Wande Abimbola “there is respect for all the religious traditions of humankind. While we hold steadfastly to our beliefs, we respect the right of others to practice their own religion in their own ways, provided they do not infringe on the rights of others”.¹⁰⁷ In Yorubaland, Christians, Muslims, and indigenous religionists live side by side, celebrate their differences and do not see doctrinal cleavages as constituting any barrier to interfaith encounters and relations. It is not uncommon to find in the same nuclear family a Roman Catholic father, Muslim mother, and children divided into different religious sects from Pentecostalism to the worship of traditional *ogun*, *obatala*, *osun*, etc. Both Christians and Muslims are awakened every morning by the vociferous sound of the muezzin from the minaret of the mosque. Christians receive Christmas and Easter greeting cards from friends, neighbours and relatives who are traditional worshippers. Muslims are present in churches for baptism, wedding, or funeral of relatives and friends. In fact there is free mingle in all aspects of human endeavour, reminiscent of the high level of tolerance in the family-based religion of the patriarchs of Israel, and a recognition of the valid multiple channels of divine manifestation as already examined.

This level of natural and happy admixture of religious faiths within individual families and the community is not a sign of mere conformity for the sake of getting along, neither is it anchored on the appreciation of Christological commonalities within the different religions, instead as Akinade notes “one of the significant points of departure in interfaith

¹⁰⁶ Stefan Reichmuth, “Education and the Growth of Religious Associations Among Yoruba Muslims: Te Ansar-Ud-Deen Society of Nigeria” in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXVI, 4 (1996), 365-404, 365

¹⁰⁷ Wande Abimbola, “The Attitude of Yoruba Religion Towards Non-Yoruba Religions” in *Attitudes od Religions and Ideologies* ed., Leonard Swidler (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 145

encounter on the level of civil society among the Yoruba people is the acceptance of the presence and legitimacy of other religions as adequate mediators of sacred encounter”.¹⁰⁸ This understanding is not derived from the evaluation of religious traditions as abstract systems or structures, or the establishment of common grounds. Rather, “it is based on an unequivocal appreciation of the experience of people who practice them and of the activity of God in their lives as portrayed in their ethical and spiritual commitments”.¹⁰⁹ This is consistent with the pervasive religious attitude among the Yoruba people. It fits with the Yoruba way of life and explains how Yoruba people remained in solidarity with one another during and after the advent of Islam and Christianity in their domains. The lived experience of the Yoruba people demonstrates that true relationship is possible even when Christ remains the core of the Christian belief, essentially a prophet for the Muslim, and non-existent in the indigenous religions. It is therefore a practical exemplification of the mature differentiation model.

Conclusion

The existence of plurality of religions in Nigeria expresses the spirit of God which blows where it wills. It is what has been referred to as the “unobstructiveness” of God.¹¹⁰ The search for a model of dialogue (or trialogue) however continues to subtly obstruct the actions of God in the Nigerian religious arena. At a time when religious identity is growing stronger, the strength of the argument offered in this essay is that it takes seriously the differences between religions, affirming their unique contributions in ordering human and spiritual destiny. It is true that the seed of uniqueness and respect for values of other religions was not planted by the early missionaries, which is partly responsible for the appalling state of interreligious dialogue in Nigeria today. But we can begin to plant that seed now by engaging the mature differentiation

¹⁰⁸ Akintunde E. Akinade, “The Precarious Agenda: Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Nigeria” Online source, <http://www.hartsem.edu/wp-content/uploads/Akinade.pdf> Accessed, January 22, 2017

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid

model. As the African proverb says: the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second best time is NOW.

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**THE FUNDAMENTAL OPTIONS OF THE CONGOLESE NATIONAL
EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE AND THE COURSE OF POLITICAL
EVENTS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO**

Ignace Ndongala Maduku¹

It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustice and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and by effective action (Paul VI).²

Abstract

Centred around the fundamental options of the CENCO, understood as the guidelines that inform the socio-political discourse of the Congolese bishops, and as the practical orientations that the bishops translate into a program of action under the form of recommendations, my contribution proposes a discursive analysis of the episcopal discourse from 1990 to 2016. It emphasizes the DRC's principal political events and means to sketch some perspectives on the renewal of the fundamental options informing the Congolese episcopal discourse.

Introduction:

I would like to contribute through this article to an analysis of the fundamental options of the Congolese National Episcopal Conference

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² Paul VI, "Octogesima adveniens," http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_197110514_octogesima-adveniens.html

(CENCO)³ understood, on the one hand, as guidelines that inform the Congolese Bishops' socio-political discourse, and on the other hand, as practical orientations that the Bishops translate into a program of action under the form of recommendations. My thoughts aim to contribute to the renewal of questions about the religious regulation of politics by the Catholic Church in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). My thesis, in a few words, is that the social plausibility and political efficiency of the Congolese Episcopate's "rhetoric" (*la production discursive*) requires a transfer of terrain from individual engagement toward collective mobilization. In this sense, my thoughts participate in the consideration of a renewal of the approach to democracy and the exercise of sovereignty by the people.⁴ I must mention straightaway that such a proposition is one of the most extensive. Pretending to develop it exhaustively in the space available to me is an exaggerated claim that brings to mind the project of trapping an elephant with a mousetrap. In order to avoid an approach that is cavalier, partial and biased, I propose circumscribing the theme of my essay by limiting its temporal space. For its *terminus a quo* my contribution begins with the year 1990, the year that launched the democratization process of the DRC. Its *terminus a quem* is the dialogue organized by the President of the Republic in 2016. The choice of this latter year enables me to avoid situations that are being reorganized and whose character of immediacy, contemporaneity, incompleteness and changeability render arduous any global evaluation that one could make of them. Based on the factual, socio-political and thematic approach taken by CENCO's position, my contribution will

³ Translator's note: the acronym CENCO stands for Conférence Episcopale Nationale Congolaise, translated as Congolese National Episcopal Conference in this article. Nevertheless, the CENCO acronym will be used throughout since there is no equivalent English acronym.

⁴ In what follows, the category "people" does not refer to the portion of the population that is produced and manipulated by the autocrat, the people-for-the-State. Rather, it applies to the people-for-the-Nation, which rises up into action in a singular popular collective. It is the ensemble of individuals capable of giving name and form to a community that engages the struggle by proclamation, collective irruption, and decision. Read in this context, BROSSAT, A, *Abécédaire Foucault*, Paris, Demopolis, 2014, pp. 215-223; BADIOU, A, *et alii*, *Qu'est-ce qu'un peuple?* Paris, La fabrique éditions, 2013 ; RANCIERE, J, *La mésentente, Politique et Philosophie*, Paris, Galilée, 1995.

proceed with a discursive analysis of Congolese Episcopal rhetoric, completed by the analysis of the practices of the ecclesial hierarchy and its base.

I propose first a rapid survey of the principal political events of the DRC. Then, I will develop how the Congolese Episcopal rhetoric regulates these events. These preliminaries will permit me to clarify the CENCO's fundamental options, and to sketch several perspectives on the renewal of the Congolese Episcopal discourse.

The Democratic Republic of Congo: Iron Furnace (Deut 4, 20)

I would like to recall, without doubt too briefly, the socio-political history of the DRC by indicating several events that mobilized the CENCO beginning in the 1990s. The decompression of the dictatorship of President J.D. Mobutu in 1990 did not bring with it the democratization of the DRC. The national conference in 1991 enrolled the Congo in a long, indeed very long transition whose challenges and promises are still, using the expression of a Congolese musician whose name I will keep to myself “*ndoto ya baba*”, the dream of a deaf-mute. Since then, the democratization of the DRC remains vitiated by the liabilities of the Mobutu dictatorship whose authoritarian enclaves:⁵ institutional, ethnic-symbolic, “player” (*acteur*), and culturally anti-democracy still cause the Congo to sink into a process of “accommodation” and “everyday acceptance” of the dictatorship. Such a process is satisfied with the political, military, financial and economic, judicial and cultural extraversion of the country.⁶ From this follows a consolidation of authoritarianisms that in their genesis, as in their renewal, support and cover regional powers on the payroll of their Western mentors with the

⁵ On this concept read GARRETON, M.A., *La sociedad en que vivi(re)mos. Introduccion sociologica al cambio de siglo*, Santiago, LOM Ediciones, 2000, pp. 124-127.

⁶ On this notion of extraversion, read BAYART, J.-F., *L'Etat en Afrique. La politique du ventre*, Paris, Fayard, 1989; *Idem*, “African in the World: A History of Extraversion,” *African Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 395, April 2000, pp. 217-267; *Idem*, « L’Afrique dans le monde : une histoire d’extraversion », *Critique internationale* 5, vol. 5, 1999, pp. 97-120.

mantle of hypocrisy and “Pontius Pilate diplomacy.”⁷ The context being that of globalization and neoliberalism, new, notably transnational actors from Western multinational corporations, with the complicity of the State’s bourgeoisie, weaken the political-economic system, work for calling into question state regulation, and place the Congo as a regime under trusteeship.⁸

Submitted to the test of reality, the democratization of the DRC has gone astray, making a fiction of political modernity, a negation of democracy. It has defined in a partisan and interested manner the rules of the political game, affecting the political regime not at all or little, dreading democratic change, fighting the turnover of elites and continuing repression and arbitrary power. By being satisfied with the official lie and an erroneous conception of the State centred on accumulation, the redistribution of wealth and the safeguard of the seizure of the levers of power, the process of democratization is caught, on the one hand, in the nets of state authoritarianism at the bottom of a “systematic” corruption and a neo-patrimonial management of the State. On the other hand, it is caught in a favouritism padded with injustice that makes participation of the population difficult in a communitarian dynamic favourable to the reconstruction of the country.

There is thus nothing surprising that the dynamic of peace that followed the dialogues of Lusaka and Sun City led only to the sharing of power. The inclusive global agreement of Pretoria with its 1+4 formula focused minds toward the end of the transition. One of the signals of the success of the latter is, according to the catechism of the international community, the organization of free elections. The selection of governments by the people, an inescapable precondition to the reconstruction of the Congo, entertained hope for a new political era in the DRC. But in 2006, the components of the political bid were only situated on the axis of nationality and not on the specificity of political programs. The construction of a political choice on this theme had led to a split between the East and the West. This did not miss the mark in

⁷ I repeat the expression from LANOTTE, O., *République Démocratique du Congo. Guerres sans frontière*, Bruxelles, Editions Complexe, GRIP, 2003, p. 241.

⁸ ARRIGHI, G., *Sviluppo economico e sovrastrutture in Africa*, Torino, Einaudi, 1974.

influencing the elections. Indeed, it was in a poisonous political context marked by conflict, stereotypes and partisan identifications, as well as suspicions about the partiality of the independent electoral commission (CEI) that the founding elections took place in 2006. The electoral litigation ended on the 22nd and 23rd March, 2007 at Kinshasa with a fight whose bitterness brought in heavy arms and opposed the regular army to the Pretorian guard of J.P. Bemba.

The insecurity in the East of the country persisted until the elections of November 2011. In anticipation of the latter, the constitution was revised and the presidential election restored to a ballot. The elections of 2011 confirmed the lack of independence of the judicial powers, the lack of separation of powers, the venality of the parliamentarians and senators as well as the deficit of media pluralism. The most common observation is that they gave rise to a violence at the limits of the criminal: institutional, verbal and physical violence.

However, the electoral pantomime did not fool the opposition and the impartial observers who talked about the electoral victor's non-fulfilment of institutional legitimacy. This one tried to correct this deficit in legitimacy by convening national consultations in 2013. The mass assembly guaranteed the power against all risk of change and saw displayed a base of pork-barrel clients avid to divide the cake of the next government of the broad national union. Anticipating the electoral deadlines of 2016, the programmed failure of national consultations heralded the revision of the constitution. From there the wild imaginings about Article 220 relative to the republican form of the State, the principle of universal suffrage, the number and duration of the President of the Republic's mandates. The article that is a part of the principles that touch upon the essence of the political regime itself sees its absolute irreversibility contested by E. Boshab⁹ and the champions of the

⁹ BOSHAB, E., *Entre révision de la constitution et l'inanition de la nation*, Bruxelles, Editions Larcier, 2013. On this subject, read SABETE, W., *Pouvoir de revision constitutionnelle et droits fondamentaux. Etude des fondements épistémologiques, constitutionnels et européens de la limite matérielle du pouvoir constituant dérivé*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006; LE PILLOUER, A., « De la révision à l'abrogation de la constitution: les termes du débat », *Jus Politicum* 3, 2009, pp. 1-20 For a critique of Boshab's book, read MBATA MANGU, A., « Mandats présidentiels et revision

presidential majority reunited under the label “Kabila désir”. Its inviolability is supported by the Catholic Church and personalities as diverse as the President of the Senate Léon Kengo wa Dondo, defenders of the rights of man, members of civil society, one hundred fifty non-governmental organizations (NGOs), believers strongly supportive of the just and the true such as the American Secretary of State John Kerry, Mr. Russ Feingold, Barack Obama’s special envoy to the Great Lakes and Mrs. Robinson, the Secretary General of the United Nation’s special envoy to the Great Lakes. Fiercely opposed to the review are some members of the majority in power, and those have left the President’s party. The constellation formed by the defectors from the presidential party and the opposition denounced the eventuality of a “shifting” of the electoral calendar and thus of a postponement of the elections of 2016.

One would agree with them: the unexpected resignation on October 28, 2014 of President Blaise Compaoré boosted the opponents of a constitutional revision. Dreading a similar mobilization in the DRC, the experts in the presidential majority gave up on the revision of Article 220 and engineered the intention of subordinating the next elections to a national census. The treachery and their convoluted calculations render certain the postponement of the elections beyond 2016. This situation of uncertainty drew the opposition into the street that organized a demonstration of protest. According to the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (IFHR), this demonstration ended in an outcome at Kinshasa with 42 deaths and several wounded. The arrangement tying the organization of elections to the census was finally removed and the entirety of the contentious article abrogated. The crisis that was born from the desire to assure the permanence of the outgoing power was still not resolved for all that since it continued as the end of the President of the Republic’s mandate approached. It gave rise to a first national dialogue under the auspices of Eden Kodjo. The failure of that dialogue occasioned another, inclusive this time, under the aegis of the CENCO. One of the realizations of its political détente is the Accord of Saint

Sylvester.¹⁰ “The dream of a deaf-mute,” this accord remains a dead letter and will not succeed as expected for the nomination of a prime minister stemming from the assembly. The persistence of crisis in the DRC makes this country into an iron furnace (Dt 4, 20). It will remain a constant preoccupation that will seek the discourse and practice of the CENCO. At least, that is what I am going to attempt to sketch out here subsequently.

The CENCO in Context

CENCO is an ecclesial institution of the Catholic Church in the DRC. It is an organ of consultation among the bishops that intends to promote the good that the Church offers to people, in particular by the forms and methods of discipleship properly adapted to the present circumstances.¹¹ With its 46 dioceses and 6 ecclesiastical provinces, the CENCO counts among its members one Cardinal, 6 archbishops, 33 bishops and 3 auxiliary bishops.¹² As a constituted body, it has a social status that makes it an authorized organ that represents the Catholic Church in the DRC. Besides the central government of the Catholic Church, CENCO, as a place of exchange, consultation and decision, is an institution in connection with regional ecclesiastical relays: The Association of the Episcopal Conferences of the Central African Region (ACEAC) and with continental relays; The Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SCEAM). It is an ensemble that is organized and structured in 12 episcopal commissions.¹³

¹⁰ The terms of this Accord stipulate that the President of the Republic will not seek a third mandate. He will remain in place, however, until the newly elected President is inaugurated. They foresee presidential, legislative, and provincial elections before the end of December. They specify that the prime minister will be put forward by the political opposition that did not sign on to the Accord of October 18, 2016.

¹¹ CENCO, *Annuaire de l'Église catholique en RD Congo*. 2012-2013, Kinshasa, Editions du Secrétariat Général de la CENCO, 2013, p. 4.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ It concerns the Doctrine of the faith, Evangelization, Seminary and Clergy, Lay Apostolate, Caritas and Development, Christian Education, Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, Justice and Peace, Juridical

The loci of power in this ecclesial organization is divided between the permanent Committee and the full Assembly. This latter is “the supreme authority of the CENCO. All diocesan bishops are ex-officio members as well as the coadjutor and auxiliary bishops.”¹⁴ It supervises the working of the permanent Committee. This is composed of the President and Vice-President of the CENCO, the archbishops and the Presidents of the Episcopal Commissions.¹⁵ The meetings of the permanent Committee and the full Assembly are prepared by the general Secretariat. Among its other prerogatives, this secretariat serves as the liaison with the outside world, notably “the relations between the CENCO and the official Congolese or Foreign Authorities.”¹⁶ Thus equipped with moral and religious authority, CENCO maintains relations with the Congolese State. As such, it is an institution that makes pronouncements. In close correlation with the social teaching of the Catholic Church whose dogmatic determinations and magisterial systematizations it observes, CENCO takes a position on economic, social, religious and political questions. It maintains a circularity between episcopal discourse, the teaching of the entire Church Magisterium and that of the ecclesial go-betweens mentioned above (ACEAC and SCEAM). Its teaching is relayed by the peripheral go-betweens of dioceses, parishes, the CEV (communauté ecclésiale vivante—Living Christian Communities)¹⁷ and the Catholic press.

Regarding its discourse, CENCO recognizes three official organs of communication. Firstly, CENCO, as the authoritative speaker and author of episcopal rhetoric, that is to say the responsible authority, guarantees the truth of the statement.¹⁸ Next, the General Secretariat as producer of the episcopal pronouncement. It plays the role of the real producer of episcopal discourse when it reads the pronouncement officially in the

Affairs, Social Communications, Pastoral Liturgy and Divine Cult, as well as National Resources.

¹⁴ CENCO, *Annuaire de l’Eglise catholique en RD Congo, op.cit.* p. 10.

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 14.

¹⁷ This is equivalent of Basic Ecclesial Communities of Latin America, or the Small Christian Communities of East Africa (Editor).

¹⁸ MAINGUENEAU, D., *Analyser les textes de communication*, Paris, Dunot, 1998, p. 41.

name of CENCO.¹⁹ Finally, every appointed spokesperson who mediates individually, while engaging the authority of CENCO. CENCO as collective speaker and the individual spokespersons express themselves in the name of the institution “the Catholic Church of the DRC” which remains “the responding author” and “the authority that answers for a text.”²⁰ CENCO is the real enunciator that one can question in terms of identity, action, value and truth.²¹

The production of a discourse that is unified and standardized by CENCO does not clear up possible conflicts. Indeed, CENCO remains a place of conflict, tension and internal divisions (along ethnic, ideological affinities and interests . . . sometimes partisan). In spite of its limits, it speaks with one voice.²² The Congolese Catholic episcopal pronouncement is an offer that is normative in a sense that inspires, or even shapes the historic future of Congolese society.²³ How does it regulate the political events of the DRC? I must wrestle with this question.

¹⁹ *Idem*, *Aborder la linguistique, Analyser les textes*, Paris, Points, 2009, p. 17.

²⁰ *Idem*, p. 17. It distinguishes the author, the authority that is represented as being responsible for the producer who wrote the text.

²¹ ODIN, R., *Les espaces de communication. Introduction à la sémio-pragmatique*, Grenoble, Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 2011, p. 49.

²² The application of what theologians call “episcopal collegiality” requires each bishop to conform to the position of the team (college of bishops). This assent or consent is concretized by signatures at the end of published documents and by a group photograph of the signatories. The signature marks the responsibility assumed by the bishops here. It authenticates their identity as speakers of the pronouncement. We see there a “production” that is significant of an institution that wishes to be seen as a “team of representation”. That said, the CENCO does not alienate the autonomy of individual bishops for all that, but accommodates itself to the exercise of the more personalized leadership by certain bishops.

²³ I am inspired here by POULAT, E., “Le catholicisme français et son personnel dirigeant », *Archives* 19, janv-juin 1965, pp. 117-124.

The Fundamental Options of the CENCO over the Congolese Socio-Political Crisis

The preceding suggests the question of the role of CENCO in the process of democratization of the DRC. This role takes on diverse contours: denunciation, consolidation, reproduction, reorientation, fight or contestation of the authoritarianism that is characteristic of regimes that have held the reins of the DRC since 1990. Since it is a question of freeing the fundamental options of CENCO with regard to circumscribed political events and some pivotal situations in the political trajectories of the history of the DRC, I propose a full analysis of the texts of Congolese episcopal pronouncements. My elaborations draw on the analysis of the discourse and remain attentive to the work of R. Amossy²⁴ and P. Charaudeau²⁵. They are about a corpus of 19 texts²⁶ whose signs/symptoms are democracy, elections, the truth of the ballot box, the sovereignty of the country, and raising the moral standards of public life. I will complete my discursive analysis by studying the practices of the Catholic hierarchy and its base.

I choose to seize the fundamental options of the CENCO from notions that the bishops build together, and that respond and complement each other to give an account of the social reality.²⁷ The Congolese

²⁴ AMOSSY, R., *L'argumentation dans le discours*, Paris, Nathan, 2000, p. 25.

Idem, « Introduction : pour une analyse rhétorique des textes politiques », *Argumentation et Analyse du Discours* (En ligne), 612011, placed online on April 15, 2011. URL <http://add.revues.org/1081>, consulted on January 17, 2013.

²⁵ CHARAUDEAU, P., *Le discours politique. Les masques du pouvoir*. Paris, Vuilbert, 2005.

²⁶ Voir SAINT MOULIN (de), L. and GAISE R., *Eglise et société : Le discours sociopolitique de l'Eglise catholique du Congo (1956-1998)*, Kinshasa, Facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa, 1998; Mgr MAPWAR BASHUTHE, F. J. *Le discours sociopolitique des Evêques de la Conférence Episcopale nationale du Congo (CENCO). T. 2 : Messages, déclarations et Points de presse des Evêques de la Conférence Episcopale nationale du Congo (1996-2006) et la Transition politique*, Kinshasa, facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa, 2008.

²⁷ FASSIN, D., « 'Souffrir par le social, gouverner par l'écoute'. Une configuration sémantique de l'action publique », *Politix*, 2006/1 no. 73, p. 138. According to him, one can call *Semantic Configuration* the ensemble of notions that are built together, that respond and complement each other to give an account of a social reality [...]. A semantic configuration takes its source from a

episcopal rhetoric remains marked by two semantic configurations. A first semantic configuration is theologico-moral and refers to notions of justice, peace and truth. A second semantic configuration is socio-political and relates to notions of democracy, transition, and election. Built by successive strokes, these different notions report the presuppositions of the CENCO's discourse, namely their anchorage points and the cultural code of the Congolese episcopate. As mentioned above, it is in terms of these semantic configurations that it is suitable to reread the fundamental options of the CENCO. The place from which the bishops speak being the social teaching of the Church, one of the presuppositions of their discourse is the affirmation of the dignity of the human person with, as correlates, the sacred and inviolable character of life²⁸ and the primacy of the conversion of the human heart over the modification of structures. A second presupposition is the definition of the evangelizing mission as a contribution to the people's well-being, a ministry of the Church in service to the Congolese nation.²⁹ A third presupposition is Christian ethics as the organizing principle of the pronouncements. Supported by the sense of the human, this ethics postulates another rapport with regard to assets, knowledge and power. From there a renewed approach to responsibility and liberty. Which socio-political options ensue from these semantic configurations and the presuppositions of CENCO's pronouncements? I would like to respond to this question by stating five themes.

The first theme gives a new horizon to political engagement and aims at the installation of the rule of law in the DRC. This option, which was strengthened with the Memorandum of CENCO in 1990, marked the descent of CENCO into the political arena. It denotes an important break and shift that renewed the plan of action of the Congolese episcopal rhetoric. This latter left the soft meadows of irenics and charitable *diakonia* for the steep paths of socio-political *diakonia*. Contrary to the discourse of the preceding decades, the bishops' audience was precise and their addresses were topical and aimed at Christians and people of

particular social world that acquires, at a considered moment, a certain recognition as an authorized descriptor of social events and as a competent promotor of social responses.

²⁸ Message of February 14, 2004, para. 16.

²⁹ Declaration of July 3, 2004, para. 2.

good will.³⁰ After having denounced the hybrid political system, the combination of liberalism and totalitarianism with its philosophy of authenticity at the bottom of a political monism, the CENCO joined in the phase of reconstruction by supporting the President of the Episcopal Conference of Zaire, Mgr Monsengwo. On April 20, 1992, following a proposal of the sacred Union, he was elected President of the National Conference without competition. In 2006, with regard to the profusion of anti-values and recurring violence that mortgaged “the construction of a really democratic Congo,”³¹ the bishops emphasized the absence of the rule of law.³² According to them, the country was not governed; the visibility of the State was not perceptible.³³ As a consequence, CENCO set as a horizon for elections “the installation of a true rule of law,”³⁴ a rule of law that functions normally,³⁵ a third Republic founded on republican values, the moral values of social life and evangelical values, pillars of peace and harmony.³⁶ And since 2006, CENCO has not deviated from this line, as indicated by the Memorandum addressed to the President of the Republic in 2013 as well as the discourse that denounced the fraud with regard to the constitution.³⁷

A second theme is the run-up to elections as an indicated way to change. The fundamental option in favour of elections makes the ballot box “the only way for the conquest of power and its legitimacy.”³⁸ The election is a moment that establishes truth, in which truth triumphs over falsehood in a climate of truth and transparency.³⁹ The bishops build the meaning of the term election by aligning it with various adjectives. They yearn for elections that are free, transparent, democratic, just, reliable,

³⁰ Contrary to the texts published after 1990, the introductions to the texts published before this period do not specify the audience.

³¹ Exhortation of February 25, 2011, para. 12.

³² All called to build the nation, para. 6.

³³ Message of June 22, 2005, para. 10.

³⁴ Declaration of March 3, 2006, para. 2.

³⁵ Message of October 5, 2006, para. 12.

³⁶ *Idem*, para.15.

³⁷ On this point, read my analyses in *Religion et politique en RD Congo. Marche des chrétiens et paroles des évêques catholiques sur les élections*, Paris, Karthala, 2016, pp. 253-283.

³⁸ Message of June 24, 2006, para. 2.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

credible, calm, in peace and legality. They propose a new approach to elections marked by ethical valorisation and founded on peace and justice, truth and liberty. Two doxic *topoi* permit the CENCO to build their discourse on elections: the sovereignty of the people⁴⁰ and the truth of the ballot box⁴¹. The bishops accord a decisive place to the people in the democratic process. In the same line as Pope John Paul II who emphasized that the people are the master of their destiny,⁴² the bishops see the people as “the primary sovereign, the holder of power”⁴³ that decides their future by entrusting their elected officials with a heavy responsibility⁴⁴. The people are, to the bishops’ eyes, one of the actors that hold in their hands the destiny of the country. Their will and choices speaking in the elections “must be necessarily respected.”⁴⁵ They call on the people’s vigilance vis-à-vis the role of the international community that can endorse electoral fraud in the sequence of elections.⁴⁶ Let us clarify immediately that the expression of the people is correlated to the truth of the ballot box. It seems fairly incontestable that the formula “truth of the ballot box” carries the ethical project of rebuilding the new Congo on republican values, the moral values of social life and evangelical values.⁴⁷ The CENCO’s horizon of propositions exceeds the level of denunciation and opens onto an ethics of proposition that, beyond the simple pretention of rhetorical order, spreads a social imagination across the essential points of reference for action. That is how the recommendations of the episcopal pronouncements are to be understood: the call to prayer, to the way of the cross, to extra-liturgical ceremonies, the investment of the CENCO for the civic and electoral education of the population by means of sessions, the development of a program of nonviolence and reconciliation, the institution of the Coordination of Actions for the Success of the Transition of the Catholic Church

⁴⁰ Free from all fear in service to the nation, para. 17, Declaration of February 5, 2005, para. 3; Declaration of August 12, 2006, para. 2.

⁴¹ Read this formula, NDONGALA MADUKU, I., *Religion et politique en RD Congo, op. cit.*, pp. 324-335.

⁴² John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, 1979, no. 16-17.

⁴³ Exhortation of February 25, 2011, para. 4.

⁴⁴ *Idem*, para. 6.

⁴⁵ Exhortation of February 25, para. 6.

⁴⁶ Declaration of March 3, 2006, para. 30, Declaration of June 24, 2006, para. 9.

⁴⁷ Message of October 5, 2006, para. 27.

(CARTEC) as well as the sending of Catholic observers to the elections of 2006 and 2011.

A third theme is the moralization of public life. The Congolese episcopate is inhabited by a conviction: “No country can be built with contempt for moral values.”⁴⁸ Such is the bishops’ certitude: “The crisis of our country is above all ethical. The country has great need of new and honourable men.”⁴⁹ “The moral reorganization of our society must remain at the centre of everyone’s preoccupations, since without ethics in political action it is difficult for the DR Congo to make progress and to develop itself.”⁵⁰ The crisis in the DRC demands the material and moral reconstruction of the country.⁵¹ It demands “the restoration of public-spiritedness, the training in a democratic culture made of tolerance, pluralism, alternation.”⁵²

According to the CENCO, the political ideal is an ethical ideal.⁵³ In this line, the bishops highlight the harmful and unhealthy mode that normalizes anti-values and accommodates itself to corruption⁵⁴, misappropriation and violence,⁵⁵ impunity, a “culture of cheating, lies and terror, militarization and the flagrant infringement on the freedom of expression.”⁵⁶ The CENCO denounces the casual and irresponsible manner with which the true and the just are depreciated, human dignity ridiculed, and the rights and freedoms of the citizens infringed upon.⁵⁷ The mission of humanizing social connections assumes the contours of a moralization of public life⁵⁸ built from evangelical values,⁵⁹ republican

⁴⁸ Declaration of February 5, 2005, para. 7.

⁴⁹ *Idem*, para. 10.

⁵⁰ For a nation better prepared for its responsibilities, para. 27, Memorandum of February 22, 2013, para. 31.

⁵¹ Justice grows a nation, para. 20, Message of October 5, 2006, para. 2.

⁵² Declaration of March 3, 2006, para. 36.

⁵³ Justice grows a nation, para. 18, New wine, new wineskins, para. 17.

⁵⁴ Justice grows a nation, para. 19.

⁵⁵ New wine, new wineskins, para. 9.

⁵⁶ Justice grows a nation, para. 4-6; 13, para. 8.

⁵⁷ For a nation better prepared for its responsibilities, para. 29, para. 11.

⁵⁸ It admits taking this term of moralization not in the sense of imposing values that would alienate individual choice, but rather of proposing rules of conduct inspired by ethics with the goal of living well with and for others in just institutions. Moralization is a proposition of hierarchized values that solicit the

values, and the moral values of social life⁶⁰ concomitantly linked to a doxic topos: the truth of the ballot box. The lexical stock of CENCO is an implementation of ethics in a precise social, cultural, political and historical context, in this case that of the disintegration of values. It is constantly preoccupied with sincerity, authenticity, and truth, from which the insistence on respecting one's word⁶¹ and the application of the signed Accords,⁶² respect for legal texts and engagements taken on, support for all forms of dialogue or consultation and the determination of the CENCO to cause all attempts at constitutional fraud to fail.

A fourth theme is the defence of territorial integrity and the rejection of the balkanization of the Congo.⁶³ The CENCO's pronouncement is carried by a conviction: "The integrity of the DRC's territory is not negotiable." The Congolese episcopate adopted an inspiring interpretative framework that makes the balkanization of the DRC and the torments that would accompany it (rape, displacement of the population, massacre, disorderly and uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources) a national problem.⁶⁴

A fifth theme is relative to the descent of Christians into the practicalities of political decisions in the name of the faith. This descent is subordinated to the *nihil obstat* of the hierarchy. As a result, the CENCO does not support the system of alliance set up by Christians who organize public demonstrations such as marches of Christians. It prefers the individual engagement of Christians and only conceives the exercise of the sovereignty of the people at the ballot box and never in the street. The CENCO supports a "monological" interpretation of action (individual

freedom of men and women, and aims at axiological coherence, a universal knowledge of direction, of significance, coherence regarding human behavior and personal and social choices. LAMOUREUX, H., *Le citoyen responsable. L'éthique de l'engagement social*, Montréal, VLB éditeur, 1996, p. 25.

⁵⁹ All called to build the nation, para. 26.

⁶⁰ New wine, new wineskins, para. 27.

⁶¹ I saw the misery of my people, para. 5; For a nation better prepared for its responsibilities, para. 10; New wine, new wineskins, para. 9.

⁶² I saw the misery of my people, para. 3; Message of February 15, 2003, para. 16.

⁶³ Happy are the architects of peace, para. 4; Message of February 15, 2003, para. 13; Declaration of July 3, 2004, para. 7; Declaration of February 5, 2005, para. 6.

⁶⁴ New wine, new wineskins, para. 7, 10.

engagement) to the detriment of collective action in the name of the faith.⁶⁵ The Christian marches of 1992 and 2012 and the CENCO's march in August 2012 remain fertile ground for questioning the notion of the people's sovereignty and to ask themselves about the provision of truth and morality of the CENCO. I will return to this shortly.

Perspectives for a Renewed Approach of the CENCO's Fundamental Options

The CENCO expresses itself in the name of the Catholic Church perceived as a mediating political force for education and persuasion, a symbolic force of representation and ethical output.⁶⁶ The shaping of the CENCO's discourse follows a documenting format aiming for the communication of information and a moralizing format centred on the transmission of values.⁶⁷ With its aim to persuade, episcopal discourse intends to influence and act on the public, reinforce its values, provide normative information and incite the public to take an active part in rebuilding the DRC.

It would be legitimate to ask oneself about the social impact of the fundamental options evoked above in relation to the reconstruction of the DRC. It is certain that the effects of these options will be in play for the duration. That noted, it isn't forbidden to question the social plausibility of CENCO's discourse and the efficiency of the practices this discourse inspires. Four research themes ensue from this kind of questioning: firstly, the teleological approach of the elections; secondly, the partial conception of democracy; third, the restrictive concept of the sovereignty of the people; fourth, the influence of episcopal pronouncements on the opinions and behaviour of the population.

The general sentiments of CENCO, full of prudence and wisdom, will permit the Church to adapt to the Congolese crisis in a consensual manner, without compromising its specific mission or risking the

⁶⁵ COLLOVALD, A., and GAITI, B., *La démocratie aux extrêmes. Sur la radicalisation politique*, Paris, La Dispute, 2006, p 206.

⁶⁶ DEFOIS, G., « L'Eglise, acteur social », dans *L'Eglise: institution et foi*, Bruxelles, Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 1979, p. 85.

⁶⁷ ODIN, R., *Les espaces de communication*, *op. cit.*, p. 53 ff.

ecclesial organization. They illustrate that one is in a closed system that will not tolerate invention. This system is satisfied with civic mobilization essentially seen as participation in public action, in elections and in citizen engagement. Here is a hierarchical tropism that puts the ecclesial institution in storage and eludes face-to-face confrontation. To accord elections with the power of democratic leverage as the CENCO does, amounts, on the one hand, to concealing the nature of the regime that organizes elections and, on the other hand, to evading the erosion of moral values in a context where judiciary, legislative, electoral areas as well as the media are exploited. To accord elections with a teleological end does not mean necessarily entering in consonance with the will of the people. For the CENCO, what would become of the sovereignty that it claims?

The fluidity of episcopal discourse that wishes to be consensual observes the sovereignty of the people with difficulty. There is an incoherence in advocating, on the one hand, this sovereignty and, on the other hand, not endorsing the concrete exercise of said sovereignty when the people wanted to move into the street in 1992 to resist dictatorship and in 2012, to restore the truth of the ballot box.⁶⁸ The only exception was to suggest that only the CENCO had the right to organize a demonstration like the one against the balkanization of the country in August 2012 and that such a march must necessarily have another target than the power of the state. In the same way, it appears contradictory to proclaim the truth of the ballot box without having the tact to state it nor the courage to support those who demand it. It is one thing to assert the sovereignty of the people and another to apprehend it in all its depth, to let it be exercised in unconventional forms. This requires a clear distinction between the values and claims of the Republic and those of democracy.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Marches are a way of speaking. One will find a development of this bursting into voice by CERTEAU, M., *La prise de parole et autres écrits politiques*. Textes rassemblés par Lucie Giard, Paris, Seuil, 1994.

⁶⁹ On this distinction, see CHARAUDEAU, P., *La conquête du pouvoir*. Opinion, persuasion, valeur. Les discours d'une nouvelle donne politique, Paris, L'Harmattan, pp. 161-174 ; MANNET, G., *L'impureté politique*. La sociologie de Pierre Bourdieu au miroir de la pensée politique de Jacques Rancière, Paris, L'Harmattan, pp. 98-105.

CENCO sees justly when it fastens democracy to a climate and environment of truth, peace, justice, security, tolerance and reconciliation.⁷⁰ However, it has a more classical approach to democracy as facts and values. In analysing Congolese episcopal discourse, one discovers that CENCO privileges representative and elitist political power as representative of the people. Its approach to democracy makes it in turn an ideal: “It is the power of the people by the people;”⁷¹ “It is a state of everyday spirit, it is a culture: a culture of fundamental human rights, a culture of the primacy of the law and especially of constitutional law founded on a superior law, natural law, a culture of excellence. Democracy is the culture of the rule of law, the love of country, the respect for the other.”⁷² It is an observable reality: respect for human rights and fundamental liberties; the strict separation of powers, that is to say no concentration of the three powers in the hands of one sole individual or group; internal and external control of the people’s representatives; participation in the power of civil society are its irrefutable signs.⁷³ If it was necessary to find adjectives for democracy, the CENCO’s discourse would accept a democracy that is participative, competitive, popular and not liberal. Seen this way, democracy is a process, an evolving project proceeding by steps, according to various modalities. It is correlative to the rule of law. As such, CENCO is right to denounce fake democracy.⁷⁴

As a principle of government, democracy presupposes the participation of the people in the act of governance. As a result, it “promotes and promises the liberty of each human in the equality of all

⁷⁰ Free from all fear in service to the nation, para.16.

⁷¹ Message of January 11, 2002, para. 8. The democratic ideal is incorporated in the literal definition of *government by the people*. Cf., CASIANO HACKER-GORDON, *Electoral Legitimation, Polyarchy, ad Democratic Legitimacy*, Yale University, The Leitner Program in International and Comparative Political Economy, Leitner Working Paper 2001-16. In this text, the author develops a critical approach of PRZEWORSKI, A., “Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense” in IAN SHAPIRO and CASIANO HACKER-GORDON, (dirs.), *Democracy’s Value*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁷² Declaration of December 5, 2006, para. 8.

⁷³ Exhortation of February 25, 2011, para. 5.

⁷⁴ Free from all fear in service to the nation, para. 8-9.

humanity.”⁷⁵ CENCO translates this as “the internal and external control of the people’s representatives.”⁷⁶ It orders the representation of the people’s sovereignty and its will to establish power according to the law. It also integrates the law with the people’s right of inspection over the act of governance.⁷⁷ Having said this, I would like to emphasize the critical function that the people are called to exercise under the form of surveillance and control, and thus in the form of a force of opposition and even contestation of its defective representatives. This aspect of democracy is hardly mentioned in the CENCO’s texts, which emphasize republican sovereignty, leaving democratic sovereignty with its prerogative of opposition in the shadows. Yet this prerogative doesn’t exclude the collective protest against the authoritarianism of the State. It accommodates itself to the democratic opportunity that street demonstrations offer.⁷⁸ The impact of the latter on the erosion of authoritarian regimes’ legitimacy has been proven.⁷⁹ In the words of P.

⁷⁵ NANCY, J.-L., « Démocratie finie et infinie », in *Démocratie dans quel Etat?* La Fabrique, 2009, p. 78.

⁷⁶ Declaration of December 5, 2006, para. 8.

⁷⁷ CHARAUDEAU, P., *La Conquête du pouvoir. Opinion, persuasion, valeur, op. cit.* p. 165.

⁷⁸ It makes clear use of the works of Michael Bratton, Nicholas van de Walle, Anthony Oberschall, Marc M. Howard and Philip G. Roessler that such demonstrations are politically important factors of change. Read BRATTON, M., WALLE (van de), N., *Democratic Experiments in Africa. Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997; OBERSCHALL, A., “Social Movements and the Transition to Democracy”, *Democratization*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2000, pp. 25-45; HOWARD, M.M., ROESSLER, P.G., “Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes”, *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2006, pp. 365-381.

⁷⁹ LIDDLE, W.R., “Indonesia in 1999: Democracy Restored”, *Asian Survey*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2000, pp. 32-42. For example, in the Philippines in 1986, the population’s protest helped to run aground the attempt to steal the opposition’s victory. The same can be said of Serbia in 2000, Madagascar in 2001 and the Ukraine in 2004. There are so many examples of democratization out of stolen elections. A recent example illustrates the effect of demonstrations against constitutional fraud. In 2014, the regime of Blaise Compaoré in Burkina Faso fell under pressure from the people. One year later, in September 2015, the putsch attempt by the Regiment of Presidential Security failed partly as the result of the mobilization of the people.

Rosenvallon, I think this form of the exercise of critical sovereignty in action by the people, with its capacity to obstruct, is practiced during demonstrations.⁸⁰ It would be better for CENCO to take it into account.

The CENCO's reminder of principles and values, as well as the evocation of its declarations of intention, would not suffice for the uprising of people-for-the Nation. Such declarations would remain empty if they are not accompanied by more realistic, effective, and unimpeachable means of action that denounce and eradicate the intolerable.⁸¹ Without doubt, that is where the perspicacity of the Congolese bishops resides who acknowledge having "already sent a message of peace and justice to the entire Nation on many occasions. [...] their numerous stands and their calls for recovery of the Nation does not seem to have borne many fruits of peace and justice."⁸² Whatever perspicacity they may demonstrate, the bishops must not elude the interrogation over the "intransitivity" and the "auto-elitism" of their discourse. Some attributed this situation to a deficit in the people's agency; others to the language of production (French); still others to the lack of a means of popularization and lack of adequacy of the mode of distribution of episcopal discourse to the realities of the DRC. Finally, others attributed it to a blind reading of reality. For my part, I am grateful to the Congolese bishops to have given voice to Catholic identity by love of others (charity), and this, in current usage, by avoiding technical words and a specialized vocabulary. From this point of view, I would suggest that they give another consistency (Frame Bridging) and an extension (Frame Extension) to their inspiring interpretative framework vis-à-vis the people's aspirations. Surely, in a context where the formation of a "Christian political party" or a "Catholic political party"⁸³ is not on the

⁸⁰ CORTEN, A., « La souveraineté instantanée », *Cahier des imaginaires*, vol. 8, no. 12, March 2015, p. 34.

⁸¹ FOUCAULT, M., *Dits et écrits 1954-1988, II*, Paris Gallimard, p. 176.

⁸² On this subject, read CENCO, « Non à la guerre, oui pour la paix et la justice. Déclaration aux fidèles catholiques et aux hommes de bonne volonté », in SAINT MOULIN (de), L. and GAISE, R., *Eglise et société. Les discours sociopolitique de l'Eglise catholique du Congo (1956-1998)*, op. cit. p. 463. For a critique of this lack of performance see METENA M'NTEBA, « À bout portant: les politiciens dans la mire des évêques », *Congo-Afrique*, 389, 2004, pp. 396-422.

⁸³ Letter of June 24, 2010, para. 18.

agenda, the question is raised about the institutional plans for equipping the people such that charity will become both social and political, as my sorely missed friend and colleague Bosangia Ile Bongonda used to say.⁸⁴ When all is said and done, I link the question of the social and political plausibility of the CENCO's discourse as much to the conditions and methods of its production as to those of its distribution and reception.

Conclusion

My contribution has endeavoured to present the fundamental options for Congolese episcopal discourse since 1990. It must be acknowledged that the discursive production of the CENCO is important and impressive as much by the number as by the quality.⁸⁵ It is certainly not by hazard if in 2016, after the failure of the dialogue presided over by Eden Kodjo, the organization of an inclusive national dialogue was entrusted to CENCO. It is to the credit of the institution of the Catholic Church that one of its bishops had directed the work of the national conference. We see here that the Congolese Catholic Church has a major role to play in the reconstruction of the DRC. It supplies from within the values of liberty and democracy, organizing them around the just and the true. But admittedly more than simply this, it would also have to be on the watch for authoritarian excesses. It would have to show that the exercise of this watchfulness is not the privilege of the bishops, priests, political elites, the opposition nor exclusively an individual duty. Once one has admitted that, one is led to propose an internal pluralism to the CENCO, a consultation of Christians and a dialogue with the other religious traditions. Leaning on that which preceded, I maintain that this proposition assures more credibility and effectiveness to the socio-political mission of the Catholic Church. It is easy to show that the civic, ethical, educative, and cultural contribution of the religious to politics shapes a particular moral and political order that entitles it to exercise a

⁸⁴ The entirety of Father Pierre Bosangia's homily is accessible at the following web site: https://www.google.be/?gws_rd=ssl#q=hom%C3%A9lie+bosangia+

⁸⁵ For example, Pope Francis refers to the Congolese bishops in his exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. He quotes from its Message of December 5, 2012 on the situation of security in the country.

regulating power. It goes without saying that it is a matter of a performance in the sense that N. Luhmann intends: “the external function that indicates the influence of religion with other subsystems, on their own turf, but in the name of its specific function.”⁸⁶ That, however, ultimately permits one to support a religious regulation of the political.⁸⁷ Let us ask the question: this latter, gauged in terms of the CENCO’s fundamental options, will it consolidate state authoritarianism, recharge dictatorship or participate in the democratization of the DRC?

The political context being one where the power of surveillance exercised by the Parliament, the media, the opposition parties and civil society diminishes with the months, the CENCO’s construction of socio-political problems in the public sphere is a textualized form of action.⁸⁸ However efficient it may be, the episcopate’s discursive practice elevates the confidence and expression of the democracy. It is a speaking of a segment of society, a manifestation of a collective sentiment, a formulation of judgments about the rulers and their actions, a

⁸⁶ LAMBERT, Y., « Le rôle dévolu à la religion par les Européens », *Sociétés contemporaines*, 2000, 37, p. 14. The Catholic Church participates in the regulation of politics by being implicated in the campaign of civic education, by giving the candidate’s profile to be voted for, and reminding the Congolese of their civic duty. It plays a regulating role in the elections by denouncing electoral fraud. Here, it is a matter of control that does not brush aside that of the State without, however, leading to a common regulation. Therefore, let us say that by betting on republican values backed by evangelical ones, the Catholic Church postulates a joint regulation whose weaknesses and incompleteness remain observable and clarify the reciprocal influences of the two spheres, religious and political.

⁸⁷ One finds an exhaustive study of such regulation in ITCAINA, X., PALARD, J., « Institutions religieuses et espace publique », *art. cit.* pp. 283-307; *Idem*, « Médiation et socialization. Les contributions du catholicisme à la regulation religieuse et politique », in P.-A. TURCOTTE, J. REMY, (dir.), *Médiations et compromis: Institutions religieuses et symboliques sociales. Contributions à une relecture des classiques de la sociologie*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1996, pp. 211-235. Read also NDONGALA MADUKU, I., *Religion et politique en RD Congo, op. cit.*, pp. 311-324.

⁸⁸ GUERIN, O., « Lecture de L. Filletaz, La parole en action. Eléments de pragmatique psychosociale », *Cahiers de praxématique* [En ligne], 43/2004, document 11, published online January 1, 2013, consulted December 1, 2013. URL : <http://praxematique.revues.org/1872>.

transmission of demands.⁸⁹ Added to that however, it hardly opens up involvement in democracy and consequently, it doesn't sufficiently integrate the means by which Christians, as well as men and women of good will, integrate episcopal pronouncements into their concrete reality.

My endpoint is to recall that such an overture and integration enables consonance between the privileged mode of action by the episcopate (individual action) and collective action. That said, I hold the following conviction: promoting a conjoined mode of action leads to the democracy of intervention, integrating all the forms of collective action which place in interdependence the designs of the bishops and the aspirations and expectations of the Congolese population. It is necessary to insist upon it, since the episcopal discourse has a pragmatic aspect that makes of it a form of action. It is a speech act, a discourse that opens onto a *poiesis*. All things considered, the challenge launched toward the Congolese episcopal discourse is that of passing from rhetoric to *parrhesia*, from compromise to rupture, from denunciation to concrete action,⁹⁰ from elitist academism to popular vulgarization, from

⁸⁹ ROSANVALLON, P., *La contre-démocratie: la politique à l'âge de la défiance*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 26.

⁹⁰ This is an important remark to retain on the subject of Congolese episcopal rhetoric. Its performativity is weak. In order to convince us further, if necessary, it is sufficient to read, for example, the *Déclaration du Comité Permanent des évêques adressée aux fidèles catholiques et aux hommes de bonne volonté* of March 3, 2006. At number 34, the bishops who announced concrete actions to take reduce these to the practice of the stations of the cross. Who would dream of denying that prayer is indispensable to the reconstruction of the Congo? But today it is forcefully recognized that it is not sufficient to change the order of things. Read CENCO, « Levons-nous et bâtissons (No. 2, 18). Pour un Congo nouveau », in Mgr MAPWAR BASHUTHE, F.-J., (ed.), *Le discours sociopolitique des évêques*, t.2, *op. cit.*, p. 157. In another message, the bishops warn the belligerent and add: "If the crisis still continues, the Catholic Church will use the appropriate means to hasten the return to peace in the DRC". Separately from the effect of announcing this phrase, that day, no one has yet seen the appropriate means for the bishops to use. As for the return of peace announced in the DRC, there is more in the bishops' texts than there is in reality. Over this message, read CENCO, « J'ai vu la misère de mon peuple (Ex 3, 7). Trop, c'est trop. Message des Evêques de la Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo, membres du Comité Permanent, aux fidèles catholiques et aux

ventriloquism to taking the voice of the people into consideration, from theological debates to a socio-political prospective, from the “serial” petrification of discourse to its vitalization by collective action, from the gains of the present to the challenges of the future, from the quest for stability to the petitions for change. These passages that I willingly liken to an exodus, or better, an Easter, have not emerged in a vacuum but are revitalized in the theology of invention of my friend and colleague L. Santedi. They integrate two imperatives: firstly, invent and structure a people endowed with a voice that speaks; and secondly, invent and make resonate an *ethopoietic* episcopal rhetoric.⁹¹

Returning to the expression of our Congolese musician, too many “dreams of a deaf-mute” are strewn among the DRC’s process of democratization. It is not suitable to continually misconstrue the aspirations, the rational hope and the language of the people. Learning this language and its “inchoative” theology is to take up its ethos, the play of references along with the practical attitudes of a people whose word has continually been taken away. It is necessary to give it back, to listen to what it has to say and to allow it to interpret its dreams in a critical dialogue with the discourse of experts, political and religious elites and moral entrepreneurs. The CENCO has to get rid of its orthopedic function of the power of the State in order to learn the function of the people’s fantasizing, to understand its expectations so as to un-muzzle them, to let it express in words and acts its dreams of democracy. Then the episcopal rhetoric will become a practice, a public and publicized action, a textual form of action and a way of mobilization, an engagement of life, a *martyria*, in brief, an effective action that Pope Paul VI speaks of in the text placed at the top of my contribution. It is up to the CENCO, to Christians, and men and women of good will to ensure tomorrow that such action sowed by the episcopal word will not fail again in a “*ndoto ya baba*”.

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hommes de bonne volonté », in Mgr MAPWAR BASHUTHE, F-J., (ed.), *Le discours socio-politique des Evêques*, t. 2, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

⁹¹ Read about this notion NDONGALA MADUKU, I., *Religion et politique en RD Congo*, *op. cit.*, pp. 337-355.

**CROSSING THE NIGER
AN ECUMENICAL OPTION FOR THE POST-REFORMATION
MISSION CONFLICT IN NIGERIA**

Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke¹

Abstract

In carrying the Gospel to mission lands, the missionaries equally carried with them the division that came out of the 16th century Reformation. Both the Gospel and the division were planted in these mission territories with detrimental effects till date. In the light of this problem, this article discusses Christian division in South-eastern Nigeria, otherwise known as the Lower Niger Region. In other words, it traces the division from the period of the missionary enterprise in the Lower Niger and links the division to the bitter consequences of the Reformation. The article however seeks an ecumenical option as a remedy to the situation today and thus argues that the ecumenical key to resolving the division can only be located within the traditional African structure of community rather than in the doctrinal discussions that often take the centre stage in contemporary ecumenical dialogue. In offering this ecumenical solution, it is suggested that the starting point of dialogue should be the question of African identity.

Introduction

The Lower Niger represents the modern region below the confluence town of Lokoja², spanning from Onitsha down to the Niger-Delta in a region that is today known as the South-South. The missionary territory designated as the Lower Niger Prefecture includes the present Onitsha, Owerri and Calabar provinces, and covers the present South-East (Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi, Abia) and South-South (Delta, Rivers, Cross River, Bayelsa and Akwa-Ibom) geo-political regions of Nigeria.

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² Reuben K. Udo, *Geographical Regions of Nigeria* (California: University of California Press, 1970), 46. The Lower Niger region extends for about 185 miles in the South towards the town of Aboh, commonly seen as the apex of the Niger Delta.

This domain constitutes the geographical centre of Igboland within which Christianity was overwhelmingly received in Nigeria, which till today remains dominantly a Christian region. However, the reception of Christianity in Igboland was not without difficulties, since the different missionary bodies in the area came with the conflicts that characterized the post Reformation Christianity. The ripples continue till today.

This study examines how the Reformation-borne rivalries and acrimonies were embodied in the Lower Niger mission. This problem, which has continued to play itself out in the Nigerian Christian communities today, makes a sincere and radical ecumenism necessary. In this study therefore, I shall examine (a) the seeds of denominational discord which came at the heels of the Reformation; (b) the breeding of this antagonism among missionaries in the Lower Niger; (c) concrete historical instances of the denominational rivalry; (d) the current state of rivalry among churches; and finally (e) an appeal to an ecumenical platform as a solution to these conflicts among Christians with some recommendations. These recommendations will focus on the potential of the uniquely African culture and identity as a way of reversing the seed of Christian discord among the churches in Nigeria.

Reformation: the Seed of Denominational Discord

Luther's condemnation of the "sale" of indulgences and his teachings on repentance, grace, Eucharist and justification, gradually emerged as a new authority within Christianity and, as a result, brought the Pope's authority into serious dispute. The fiery preacher of indulgence, Johan Tetzel and the Catholic professor Johan Eck provided a counter debate to Luther's. Luther later had to denounce papal authority and even identified the pope with the Pauline antichrist (2 Thess 2:8).³ More so, the entire controversy led to the definitive break away from the Roman Church and to the founding of the Protestant movement. With Luther's refusal to

³ Luther addressed his perception of the papal corruption of the Christian faith in most of his treatises especially in: *Address to the Christian Nobility*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*; and *The Freedom of a Christian*.

recant at the Diet of Worms⁴ and the burning of the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* on October 11, 1520, which led to his formal excommunication on January 3, 1521, the Reformation was born.

The Roman Catholic Church had, in response to the controversies, reacted with an institutional renewal initiated by Pope John III which found its high-point in the Tridentine reforms. However, before the conclusion of the Council of Trent, which was marred by myriads of crises, the Catholic-Protestant relationship had already ruptured. In fact, division and outright animosity became the norm. Carter Lindberg throws more light to the crises:

The Dutch broadside depicts 16 Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, Beza, Bucer, Bullinger, Vermigli, Knox, Jerome of Prague, Zwingli, Hus, Wyclif, Zanchi, Perkins, Flacius, and Oecolampadius) crowded around a table with a group portrait of six others (George of Anhalt, John à Laski, Farel, Sleidan, Marnix, and Junius) on the wall behind them. This harmonious union of Reformers, including their “fore-runners,” Wyclif and Hus, are presented in a kind of Last Supper scene. In the place of Christ is Luther, with a bible open upon the table, flanked by Calvin, also pointing to a book (bible?). Opposite them, in the place of Judas, are a cardinal, a devil, the pope, and a monk, who represent the fourfold form of Catholic false faith. There is a blazing candle in the center of the table, also set upon the bible, that signifies the truth of divine light brought into the open by the Reformers. The Catholic opponents are depicted as servants of darkness who are attempting in vain to blow out the candle.⁵

⁴ In April 1520, Luther presented himself before Emperor Charles V and the nobles of the German nation and there he refused to recant the content of his writings, appealing to Scripture and to his conscience. It was on this event that Melancthon, his biographer records the famous statement “Here I stand! I can do no other!” “God help me. *Amen.*” See: Michael A. Mullett, *Martin Luther* (London: Routledge, 2004), 120-128.

⁵ Carter Lindberg, “Introduction” in Carter Lindberg (ed.), *The Reformation Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Modern Period* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 5.

The above illustration by the Protestants drew a line, which not only depicted the divergent positions, but also evoked a moral judgment of the contrast between the good and the evil. Such a triumphalist presentation of the Reformation has a way of ignoring the Catholic Reform.⁶ In the same vein, any attempt by the Catholics to dismiss the truths in the Reformation would end in a perduring and unabated antagonism against the Protestants. The historical events of the time present us with both sides of this bitterness. Little wonder then that when the oil of fraternal accommodation had dried up in the Lower Niger mission field (with the reality of competitiveness), the missionaries had little to serve one another other than a bowl of antagonism.

However, we must admit the risk involved in addressing the conflict that involved many churches from a single historical background. For instance, one cannot ignore the fact that Anglicanism had a slightly different relationship to Luther's Reformation. It is clear that the 16th century Anglican antagonism towards the Roman Catholic Church as well as the Methodists (Puritans) did not arise primarily from Luther's agitation. Nevertheless, all these conflicts played out in the Lower Niger mission field. Associating the different Protestant missionary churches that operated in the Lower Niger (whether Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Qua Iboe, etc.) with the 16th Century Reformation, remains thus a matter of convenience since, in one way or the other, most of the Protestant missionaries could be linked to the Reformation event.

The results of the 16th Century Reformation were not restricted to Europe. Much theological discourse continues to invoke its import. As Bernd Moeller puts it, "We need the spiritual and intellectual energies that the Reformation has to offer. Moreover, the Christian life, the church, and contemporary theology have so many ties to the Reformation that for our own self-knowledge we should always be aware of this relationship, and should continually examine it and test its relevancy for today."⁷ It is thus no surprise that the Reformation (and its effects)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bernd Moeller, "Problems of Reformation Research" in Bernd Moeller (ed.), *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, trans. H.C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1982), 16. Francis Higman equally argues that one of the valuable contributions of church history is that it enables a better understanding of the society in contemporary

became the grounds for ecclesial conflicts in mission territories. Nigerian Church historian, Ogbu Kalu, reminds us that during the nineteenth century Christian missions in most parts of Africa “the theological and doctrinal voices were decidedly plural and the various missionary groups came into Africa with a strong feeling of intolerant rivalry and mutual suspicion carried over from the reformation event.”⁸ The attitude of the missionaries reflected the carry-over of the bitter wars that followed the Reformation with all the doctrinal as well as political connotations.

The Missionary Battleground: Setting the Stage

The Lower Niger region started experiencing missionary activities over three centuries after the tumultuous events of the Protestant Reformation. By 1846, the Presbyterian Church had already consolidated their base in Calabar with networks in other towns like Arochukwu, Ohafia, Uburu, Abiriba and other Igbo towns close to the Cross River. Coming from the present South-South region, they made no further incursions into the hinterlands due to territorial agreements with other Protestant churches.⁹ Meanwhile the Church Missionary Society (CMS-Anglican) missionaries entered Onitsha on 26 July 1857, led by Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Christopher J. Taylor. They were cordially received by the indigenes with whom they signed pacts for the establishment of missions. The Catholic missionary team was late in arriving to this part of the world: Fr. Joseph

times. Francis Higman, *Lire et Découvrir. La circulation des idées au temps de la Réforme* (Geneva: Droz, 1998), 14.

⁸ Ogbu Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria: Africa World Press, 2007), 225.

⁹ The reason for the agreed territorial delimitations was to avoid conflicts. Those involved in this arrangement include: the Church Missionary Society, CMS (Anglican), the Niger Delta Pastorate, NDP (Anglican), the United Free Church of Scotland, the Quae Iboe Mission (Protestant/non-denominational) and the Primitive Methodist Missions. Cf. Edet A. Udo, “The Missionary Scramble for Spheres of Influence in South-eastern Nigeria 1900-1952” in Ogbu U. Kalu (ed.), *The History of Christianity in West Africa* (London: Longmans, 1982), 160.

Lutz, Fr. Johan Horne, Brother Hermas and Brother Jean-Gotte arrived in Onitsha in 1885.¹⁰

Despite the late arrival, the Catholic missionaries soon advanced in the field. Before them, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, dominated most missionary activity. Initially these Protestant groups received them with charity.¹¹ But it did not last long. Friendly relations began to dissolve as soon as Catholic missionaries began to record success. Edwin Udoye observes: “the Christianity brought by the various Christian Churches from Europe and America to Igboland and to Nigeria in general bore the divisive and cicatrices of the missionary fractionalizations, frictionalizations and rivalry from the missionary fatherlands.”¹² Indeed, division and intolerance which resulted from the Reformation seemed to be happening all over again as the missionaries quarrelled amongst themselves, with each group seeking for relevance and converts.

One can therefore speak of the transregional and trans-historical effects of the Reformation, transposed through these missionaries to Nigeria. Despite taking place in sixteenth century Europe, the Reformation, in a way, flowed into the Lower Niger through the missionaries of the different Christian denominations. Kalu again reminds us, “even though the actual event seemed to be in the dim past, its effects, its echoes, the religious structures and cleavages it unleashed were abroad and seeking firmer consolidation. The fragmentation of the one church by the reformation events had continued unabated along national lines, along cultural lines, and along linguistic lines. The reformation gave various

¹⁰ Celestine Adizue Obi, “Background to the Planting of Catholic Christianity in the Lower Niger,” 1-26 in Celestine A. Obi et al, *A Hundred Years of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nigeria: 1885-1985* (Onitsha: Africana-Fep Publishers, 1985), 13; see also Felix K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1857-1914* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), 73.

¹¹ According to Chigere, “The Catholics nonetheless enjoyed initially the cordiality and mutual coexistence with the other non-Catholic Christian denominations, especially the CMS with whom they shared even land, roof and are supposed to have reciprocally exchanged ideas and feelings about evangelism in the areas.” Nkem Hyginus M. V. Chigere, *Foreign Missionary Background and Indigenous Evangelization in Igboland* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2001), 212.

¹² Edwin Anaegboka Udoye, *Resolving the Prevailing Conflicts between Christianity and African (Igbo) Traditional Religion through Inculturation* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011), 212.

groups that resented the authority of Rome the opportunity to seek their freedom and hoist their own religious flags.”¹³ Much as it is not purely an attack on the authority of Rome, one could argue that with the disintegration of Latin Christianity, disunity, and concomitantly, ecclesial rivalry became a norm. At that time the Ecumenical Movement was yet to kick off and so there was almost nothing to hold unto as a robust platform to seek Christian unity.

Indeed, disunity in the mission field was one of the reasons behind the massive mobilization of Christians for the ecumenical movement, of which the Edinburg Conference of 1910 was an acute expression. This conference collated into focus the mission-oriented ecumenical efforts of the nineteenth century. Its purpose was “to help coordinate the activities of the national missionary organizations of the different countries and to unite Christian forces of the world in seeking justice in international and inter-racial relations.”¹⁴ Serving a more globalized attempt, it called for unity in missionary activity and common fellowship among Christians.

Throughout the history of promoting Christianity in the multireligious and nonreligious world, the International Missionary Conference has acknowledged the variety and complexity of beliefs of its constituent members. It has not insisted upon a single doctrinal statement but has emphasized the need for Christian fellowship and united action. Thus, it became a key element in the development of the ecumenical spirit among the main branches of the non-Roman Catholic churches. Among its many publications that advocated fellowship and cooperation in missions the most important is the quarterly journal, *International Review of Mission*.¹⁵

¹³ Kalu, *African Christianity*, 223.

¹⁴ Ans Joachim van der Bent, *Historical Dictionary of Ecumenical Christianity* (Mctuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1994) 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 205-6. It must be recalled that the journal, *International Review of Missions* was launched in 1912 and immediately it became an effective and efficient platform for ecumenical reflections on the Christian propagation of the mission of Christ in the world. Cf. Nicholas Lossky et al (eds.), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 690.

It is plain that the Roman Catholic Church is excluded from their notion of “Christian fellowship.” While propagating open dialogue in and engaging in publications, this effort already gives us a glimpse of the state of the mission field amongst the Protestant missionary groups who warred against each other. It is no wonder, then, that when Catholic missionaries entered the scene in the Lower Niger, they were seen as a common enemy. But how, precisely, did this happen? We turn now to examining concrete instances of the conflicts.

Initial Denominational Conflicts in the Lower Niger Mission

Catholic Antagonism

Denominational conflicts can be seen through the lens of competing missionary strategies. The Catholic missionary expedition in the lower Niger, the Onitsha Wharf mission, quickly made some remarkable inroads. In 1891 Chief Idigo of Aguleri converted and later became the head of the St. Joseph Christian village, Aguleri. Idigo’s conversion had a huge effect on the Catholic mission in Aguleri, such that by the end of 1900, over sixty-five families in Aguleri had been converted. Despite the success recorded in Idigo’s conversion, Catholic evangelism in the Lower Niger up until 1900 went on a snail speed.

The missionaries seemed to have designed their conversion strategies in a manner that reflects the policy of “*cuis regio eius religio*”¹⁶ which focuses on converting prominent leaders of communities as the first task. One of the most successful of such conversions was the conversion of Samuel, the Obi of Onitsha. Fr. Alexandre Léon Lejeune, the new Superior of the ‘Holy Ghost Fathers’ and the successor of Lutz, in a letter to Msgr. Alexandre Le Roy expressed excitement over the attitude of the new convert and its significance for the mission.

¹⁶ This formula was developed after the mid-seventeenth century religious wars in Europe, at the Peace Treaty of Augsburg 1555. According to this principle, “the sovereignty of a territory determined the religion of its population”. Cf. Reinhard Henkel, “Germany: Recent Changes on the Religious Map,” 59-74, In *The Changing Religious Landscape of Europe*, edited by Hans Knippenberg (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2005), 59.

According to him, Samuel “refuses to be treated as divine, he spurns homage uttering the words of the psalm, *non nobis Domine non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam*. Monseigneur, I consider his conversion as the greatest possible victory that could be inflicted here over Protestantism and slavery.”¹⁷ The tone of this letter, which speaks of the Catholic attitude at the time, reveals their viciously competitive relationship with the Protestant counterpart. The letter speaks of “inflicting” victory on Protestantism, and compares it to the victory over “slavery”, thus depicting the Catholic offensive. A similar message was equally sent to Cardinal Ledochowzki by Fr. Lejeune.¹⁸ Pope Leo XIII was informed of this progress. He soon had a medal struck for Samuel, the Obi of Onitsha, with the inscription ‘*et Niger agnovit Pastorem.*’ He sent a statue of the Blessed Virgin, and admonished that Samuel’s duty is to help in obtaining freedom for the slaves, and to preach the gospel to them afterwards.¹⁹

Anglicanism and the Eucharist

As intended, the conversion of the chiefs had a positive ripple effect. With the conversion of Idigo and Samuel, others followed, such as the Anglican deacon Ephrem, an heir to the throne of Onitsha. It was alleged that Ephrem claimed to have entered the ‘true’ church in the aftermath of a dispute on the proper understanding of the Eucharist with the CMS pastors. According to Clarke, “doubts in the Protestant camp about the doctrine of the Eucharist seemed to have been widespread.”²⁰ It seemed that a kind of reverse-Reformation was taking place: the presence of Catholic praxis and doctrine caused others to reflect upon their own theology.

¹⁷ Quoted by Peter Bernard Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology of the Holy Ghost Fathers in Eastern Nigeria 1885-1905” in Ogbu U. Kalu (ed.), *The History of Christianity in West Africa* (London: Longman, 1980), 47.

¹⁸ C. S. Sp. Archives, Paris (30 Rue Lhomond), Boîte 192, Dossier B, Vol. II; Lejeune to Ledochowzki, 15 November 1900 quoted by Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 47.

¹⁹ C. S. Sp. Archives, Boîte 193, Dossier B, Vol. I; Ledochowzki to Lejeune, 15 February, 1901.

²⁰ Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 47-8.

The Irish Catholic scholar of Religion, Peter B. Clarke²¹ further reports that, “Jacob, an Anglican catechist, joined the Roman Catholic Church because he found the doctrine of transubstantiation both rational and in accordance with scripture.”²² This soon had some political bearings, and the event did create a negative perception of the Anglican theology of the Eucharist. On this account, it is reported that at “Ossamori an estimated seventy local people were instructed by the Anglican deacon and catechist, Akonbeza²³, to join the Roman Church. They did so and took over the Protestant church and school.”²⁴ This conquering of territories and mission areas already belonging to the Anglicans worsened the already battered relationship between the two groups.

Doctrinal Implications

From this lens, the methods of evangelization taken by the two denominations bear out the doctrinal conflicts of the Reformation. As Clarke puts it,

The Roman Church’s approach to evangelization was sacramental, it was the administration of the sacraments, a ministerial function, which was all important. The Protestant approach, and this difference was born at the time of the Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe, was fundamentally scriptural: the preaching and understanding of the ‘Word’ was all-important.²⁵

The methodological differences between the missionaries had consequences on the work of evangelization. The Protestant approach paved an easy way for the integration of the indigenes in evangelization,

²¹ Peter B. Clarke is an expert in Religion in Africa, where he spent some time in teaching and researching. He is also the founder of the prestigious *Journal of Contemporary Religion*.

²² *Ibid.*, 48.

²³ “Akonbeza” is probably Clarke’s mistaken rendering of the Igbo name “Akubueze”.

²⁴ Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 48.

²⁵ Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 49.

while the Catholic missionaries accepted a late integration of indigenes into the missionary enterprise. Catholic missionaries adopted the use of laymen for catechetical works, but this use of the catechists did more harm than good. The catechists often suffused catechetical instructions with fragments of traditional practices and superstitious beliefs, and this was not received well by the missionaries. Perhaps the focus on the sacraments, as reported by Clarke, led the theologically unenlightened catechists into thinking that everything in the form of rituals is acceptable. Hence, there was a tendency to indulge in a syncretism of some sort. Indeed, the sacramental, ministerial approach with its performative character easily captured the attention of the locals. People were enthused by the priest as he ‘performs’ the Eucharist. However, with insufficient catechesis, the Catholic approach remains problematic since it does not provide sufficient reasons behind the *performances*.

On the other hand, the Protestant missionaries were contented with their lay apostles provided they were able to read out and proclaim the content of the Scriptures. In this period, the emphasis was on the Apocalypse and the message was ‘doom for the unconverted’.²⁶ The perception of the local people as pagans/heathens and the scramble for converts may have necessitated this sort of preaching. It must be noted that even in the CMS circles the practice of some sacraments (like Eucharist and baptism) was not the primary focus since the aspect of transubstantiation was not emphasized. The Protestant strategy of preaching really brought about the conversion of many indigenes, despite their quick condemnation of the unconverted.

As a result of the deficiencies of both methods, the missionaries had to further explore the use of other less theological methods of evangelization in their effort to win over the indigenes.²⁷ These included the establishment of schools, the building of hospitals and dispensaries, and various forms of humanitarian programs. Already, for other reasons such as the low literacy of catechists and the need for adequate representation of Roman Catholics within the Colonial government, Fr. Lejeune had started a strong educational approach to mission in the East.²⁸ Bishop Shanahan was later to build on this already existing

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Kalu, *African Christianity*, 241.

²⁸ Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 48-49.

educational policy when he took over leadership around 1905. With these schools, the missionaries found a key to a more integral conversion of the indigenes. In the first place, they had absolute control of the schools, and secondly, they targeted children as a sure way of safeguarding the future of their missionary efforts. In fact, as Kalu Ogbu puts it, in multiple ways, the school became “the locus classicus of missionary conversion efforts.”²⁹ The same could be said of hospitals where the potency of Western medicine was perceived by the indigenes as a sign of the missionaries’ ‘compassionate hearts’,³⁰ especially towards women who had many health challenges relating to child bearing. Yet, the missionary strategy of caring for the sick, though evangelically rooted, was also used as a conversion tool by the missionaries.³¹ Interestingly, even in these common methods, the rivalry among the missionaries persisted, though it was more pronounced in the school system.

Impulses to the Development of the Conflicts

The Protestant approach, which focused mainly on preaching, was fiercely criticized by the Catholic missionary, Fr. Lejeune, who already had become unpopular within the Catholic mission due to his highhandedness. His comments against the Protestants did not help his already despised persona, as the people’s displeasure with him culminated in the revolt of 1903 by 19 catechists at the Holy Trinity, Onitsha. Under the aegis of the laity, these catechists composed a letter of protest against Fr. Lejeune which they sent to Holy Ghost Society Headquarters in Paris. It was signed by 70 individuals who sought for Lejeune’s removal on grounds of his public distasteful attitude both

²⁹ Kalu, *African Christianity*, 242.

³⁰ Kalu, *African Christianity*, 243.

³¹ Felix K. Ekechi, “The Medical Factor in Christian Conversion in Africa: Observations from Southeastern Nigeria,” *Missiology: An International Review* 21, no. 3 (1993): 289-309. Ekechi explores how the missionaries used medical services as ‘bait’ for converts, and equally examined the rivalry between Protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries through the provision of medical care.

towards the Catholic and Protestant brethren.³² In response to his Superiors, Lejeune dismissed the charges and blamed the whole ploy on the greed of the catechists who wanted an increase to their pay. By this time, it was clear that catechists were indispensable in establishing missionary posts in the villages, which spurred Lejeune to change his approach to missionary activity.

Lejeune's new attention towards establishing schools also helped in undermining the conflict with the catechists. It is important to note that,

The Roman Catholic method of evangelization through the schools has to be seen against the background of interdenominational rivalry. This rivalry in part occasioned and accelerated the growth of the school system of evangelization used by the Holy Ghost Society in its work in the East. The missionaries themselves were French and often showed grave concern and fear at the possible intervention of a non-Roman Catholic government in Roman Catholic schools. Things could go the same way as they did in France in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and one could be faced with the horrible problem of *école laïque*. The benevolent attitude of Sir Ralph Moor, however, dispelled this anxiety and the contest with the Protestants to gain the upper hand through the schools began.³³

Lejeune's move deepened the gulf between the Catholics and the Protestants, as expressed in the above letter with the language of "contest" and "upper hand". Everything was now seen from the perspective of 'a war.' It is important to note that at this point the focus, like many of the Reformation conflicts, concerned territorial boundaries just as much as theological boundaries. Indeed the successor of Lejeune, Fr. Joseph Shanahan, had in 1905 boldly claimed that he would use the

³² C. S. Sp. Archives, Boîte 193, Dossier A, Vol. II. A similar letter of protest was also written and signed by one 'Bernard O. Oyo' and sent independently of the collective letter. Part of the letter reads: "*since one year and a half the Christians are dropping their faith through the bad example of Mr. Lejeune who has no patience or courage ... who is that whip? We hope he will be sent away, he is not a 'Father' but a man who never has pity even unto a dog and who always thinks he is right in everything he does.*" Cf. C. S. Sp. Archives, Boîte 193, Dossier B, Vol. II.

³³ Clarke, "The Methods and Ideology," 51.

Catholic schools “to strike the last blow at the Presbyterians and others.”³⁴ His vision was to establish a Roman Catholic empire which would span from Itu River (in present day Cross River State) to Oguta Lake (in present day Imo State).³⁵

The Protestants were by no means asleep amidst all this. For instance, Bishop Herbert Tugwell reacted against the Catholic strategy to gain dominance through schools by imposing excommunications upon any Protestant that attended a Catholic school.³⁶ Bishop James Johnson, of the Anglican Communion, had to make urgent visits to Bende, Aba and the surrounding towns with the purpose of dissuading the people from welcoming the Roman Catholic schools.³⁷ It must be noted that this ‘James Johnson mission’ was not directed to the adherents of the Protestant denominations but to whole villages, most of whom had no ecclesial affiliations. His aim was to make the area immune to the Roman Catholic incursion, even if the said incursion brought about better welfare. Such a strategy, that was even ready to frustrate human development, poignantly illustrates the animosity felt on both sides.

Indeed, the conflicts divided Christianity all over again. The Methodists equally were not ready to surrender the Igbo territory to either the Roman Catholics or the Anglicans (CMS). They had before 1902 conquered the Cross River area while at the same time spreading towards the ‘Qua Iboe’ area. They bargained for territories in the heart of Igboland and were strongly opposed to Catholic school establishments in the Old Calabar region.³⁸ In fact, they made an appeal to the British colonial government in 1907 to forestall other denominations from entering the Ibibio, Annang and Efik areas, thereby claiming exclusive rights.³⁹

³⁴ C. S. Sp. Archives, Boîte 191, Dossier B, Vol. II; Shanahan to Le Roy, 5 December 1905.

³⁵ Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 51.

³⁶ Rt. Rev. Herbert Tugwell, DD (1854-1936) was by 1894 made the Anglican Bishop of Western Equatorial Africa and later in 1919 installed as the inaugural Bishop on the Niger.

³⁷ CMS Archives, G3/A3/O, Report of a missionary journey into interior Iboland, 24 February – 8 April 1903.

³⁸ PMMS Methodist Archives, London, Bocoock to Slater, 23 March 1903.

³⁹ Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 52.

However, despite the disagreements which the Protestant missionaries had among themselves, they saw the Roman Catholics as the common enemy and so had to rally together to fight the Holy Ghost missionaries. A conference to this effect was held in 1907 in Calabar where the Protestant missionaries agreed to collaborate and co-operate with each other in the mission.⁴⁰ The Holy Ghost missionaries were resolved the more to pursue their school system of evangelization aggressively since they saw it as the only sure way to victory in the 'war.' With the school, they succeeded in dismantling Protestant dominance in the region.⁴¹

Present Rivalries and the Challenge of Ecumenical Dialogue

Elizabeth Isichei reports of a Nigerian Catholic priest who gave an account of his experience as a child in the wake of the 'mission war' between the Catholics and Protestants: "For all practical purposes the first article of our creed which was our first Commandment was: "Thou

⁴⁰ CMS Archives G3/A3/O, Minutes of the Missionary Conference, 7 – 9 November 1907.

⁴¹ Fr. Lejeune and Fr. Shanahan succeeded in "creating and maintaining a vast network of State-subsidized schools and, by doing so, acquired a dominant position among the Igbo that they were never to lose. In 1906, there were 2500 Catholics in the Onitsha-Owerri vicariate; by 1926, the number had risen to 58 thousand; it was 250 thousand by 1946." Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (London: SPCK, 1995), 271. Ejizu also records that "Before the Government take-over of Mission and Voluntary Agency Schools in Eastern Nigeria in 1970, out of a total of 5,986 Primary Schools, the Anglican Mission owned 930, the Baptist had 21, Lutheran Church 78, Methodist 279, Presbyterian Mission 225, Qua Iboe Mission 170, Salvation Army 37, Roman Catholic Mission 2,406, while the County Council and the government ran a total of 1,484 Primary Schools. The story is virtually the same in Western Nigeria and the central parts of the country, especially in Benue and Plateau areas." Cf. Christopher I. Ejizu, "Christian Evangelism in Nigeria: A Blueprint for the Future" in *Mission Studies*, Vol. 5, no.1 (1988): 32. See also, Eastern Nigeria Ministry of Education, *Directory of Elementary Schools 1964* (Enugu: Government Printers, 1965).

shalt hate ‘paganism’ and all that is connected with it, with thy whole heart, with thy whole mind, with thy whole soul and with thy whole strength.” The second was like the first, “Thou shalt regard ‘Protestants’ as thy enemies.”⁴² On the other hand, Protestants “did not mince words in describing the Catholics inter alia, as ‘a masterpiece of Satan’, the ‘ancient Roman paganism rebaptised’, a religion that panders to the weakness of humanity to the neglect of true Christian life.”⁴³ Both sides condemned and preached against each other. This divide was passed down to later generations.

Part of the consequences of the rivalry and enmity, was the rise of African Independent Churches (AICs), also known as African Initiated/Indigenous Churches. These Christian communities arose as a result of different reasons which included sentiments of nationalism like in the case of Ethiopianism.⁴⁴ In general, AICs represent efforts to seek a

⁴² Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (Lagos: Macmillan, 1976), 170; see also, Hilary O. Ochulor, *The Function of Dialogue in the Process of Evangelisation*, (Owerri: Edu-Edy, 2006), 62.

⁴³ Ochulor, *The Function of Dialogue*, 63; Ikenga R. A. Ozigbo, *A Roman Catholicism in South Eastern Nigeria 1885-1931: A Study in Colonial Evangelism*, (Onitsha: Etukokwu Publishers, 1988), 90. Analyzing the ‘divided’ version of Christianity that we (Africans) got from the missionaries, Stan Anih comments: “The Christianity which was preached to us here in Igboland and Africa in general was already pregnant with both British culture – Anglicanism, and Irish culture – Catholicism. When the British and Irish domesticated Christianity was preached to Igboman and to African people we found ourselves instinctively participating in the historic cultural war between the British and the Irish, thus the Igbo Christians and indeed Africans in general found themselves in the very first century of their Christian history already acting as great captains and majors in the Britanico/Irish cultural war which of course is only cultural Christianity and not Christian Christianity.” Stan Anih, *Christian Christianity versus Cultural Christianity: A Meditation* (Enugu: Snaap, 1982), 2-3; see also, Chuks Vitalis Azike, *Religious Pluralism in Nigeria and the Challenges of Contextual Ecumenism* (Paderborn: Theologischen Fakultät, 2001), 78.

⁴⁴ John S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity: The Growth, Gifts and Diversities of Indigenous African Churches – A Challenge to the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 22-23. It must be noted that the nationalistic sentiments evident in the emergence of some AICs may also have been driven by anti-colonial sentiments at that time. Cf. Kenneth Enang, *The Nigerian Catholics and the Independent Churches: A Call to*

unique African mode of Christian expression.⁴⁵ Evidently, the emergence of AICs reveal levels of discontent with what was going on in the missionary churches at that time, including divisions along cultural or nationalistic lines among the missionaries. This assessment confirms to a certain extent that the division within the mainline churches in Nigeria derives more directly from denominational missionary rivalries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries which was fuelled by the nationalism of the missionaries.

Today, the problem is further made complex with the explosive schisms, rivalries, inter and intra Christian bickering and politics. Christian denominations continue to grow daily within the erstwhile Lower Niger area, which remains predominantly Christian. All these require that ecumenical dialogue be taken seriously. In fact, several other trajectories of division have appeared that reflect the missionary divisions of the past, and they make the same clarion call for a serious ecumenical engagement.

First, are distinctive gestures of recognition. This is mainly found in the popular greetings adopted by different denominations in Igboland. For the Roman Catholics, it is “*Otito dīlī Jesu! – Na ndu ebebe. Amen*” (Praise be to Jesus! – Now and forever. Amen); for the Anglicans,

Authentic Faith (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2012), 32-33. British colonialists established themselves in Nigeria by subduing the locals and so colonialism was never accepted by the people. Since both the colonialists and missionaries were considered as coming from the same origin, the missionaries were often associated with the colonialists, even when their intentions might not be the same. Thus, the anti-colonial sentiments were also visited on the missionaries and contributed to reasons for the founding of the AICs. Enang’s conclusion was based on the investigations by R.C. Mitchell and H.W. Turner. See, R.C. Mitchell, “Religious Protest and Social Change: The Origins of the Aladura Movement in Western Nigeria,” 458-496 in Robert I. Rotberg and Ali A. Mazrui, eds., *Protest and Power in Black Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); H.W. Turner, *African Independent Church: The Church of the Lord (Aladura), I-II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). However, contrary to the reason offered by Mitchell and Turner, the Italian Ethnologists Vittorio Lanternari, traces the origin of the AICs to the rift between Christianity and indigenous African culture. Cf. Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religion of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Cults* (London: MacGibbon, 1963).

⁴⁵ Pobe and Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity*, 24.

“*Toonu Chineke anyị n’ihi na O dị mma! – N’ihi na ebere ya ga-adigide ruo mgbe ebighị ebi.*” (Praise our God for He is good! – For His mercy endures forever).⁴⁶ To greet any person or a particular Christian community with the ‘religious vibe’ of another church is a clear indication that one is an outsider. While such identity markers are not wrong in themselves, one however observes that a problem of deep-seated repulsion of one another may arise where a person is booed or cajoled for using the wrong greeting in a particular community.

Second, is the problem of mixed marriages. Despite the canonical provisions concerning mixed marriages for Catholics⁴⁷, the reality is that such marriages still manifest clearly the depth of interdenominational bickering. In Igboland, mixed marriages are rarely celebrated. In most cases, the woman is compelled to follow the man to his church.⁴⁸ Until recently some parents even had to face punishments from the church for allowing their children to defect to other denominations for the sake of marriage. While the sanctions are no longer existent (to the knowledge of the writer), the problem continues for many parents who see their sons/daughters crossing over to the ‘enemy’ camp because of marriage.

Third, the denominational rivalry also plays itself out in the public political sphere. The denominations in the Southern part of Nigeria, which is predominantly Christian, always feel they have a great role to play in determining who wins an election, especially the gubernatorials. In some states in Igboland, elections are purely concerned with the battle between Catholics and Protestants. There is the classic case of the 2011 elections in Imo State, which saw the incumbent governor, Ikedi Ohakim (an Anglican), lose mainly on the grounds of

⁴⁶ Patrick E. Nmah, “Christianity and Antagonistic Challenges in Igbo Land of Nigeria: A Reflection” in *AFRREV IJAH (An International Journal of Arts and Humanities)*, Vol.1, no.3 (2012): 80.

⁴⁷ *Codex Iuris Canonici* outlines the canonical provisions in Canons 1124-1129.

⁴⁸ There are also instances where the woman, depending on how committed she is in her church, compels the man to wed in her church. In cases where the parents of either of the couple belong to the knighthood of their church (Catholic, Anglican, etc), or where they hold an influential position in the church (for example, the Chairperson of the parish council, the CMO/CFO, CWO presidents, etc), the problem is often more complex.

molesting a Catholic priest.⁴⁹ Another instance is Anambra State where a Catholic-Catholic gubernatorial ticket provoked denominational sentiments, and so needed to be balanced in the fashion of either Catholic-Anglican or Anglican-Catholic.

Fourth, the modern proselytizing strategies of the Pentecostal and mainline churches are yet another form of the battle for denominational territories in Igboland. Often, in order to entice people and win members, church programs are given attractive titles: Power Crusade, Holy Ghost Service, Cross-Over Night, Restoration Night, Atmosphere of Miracles, etc. Prosperity gospel is in vogue since people are besieged by economic and socio-political problems. Instead of focusing on the doctrinal teachings and practices which are peculiar to their specific Christian communities, most preachers spend time castigating other churches in a bid to win more adherents.⁵⁰ The above issues present serious challenges to ecumenical dialogue. Indeed, the situation today calls for an emergency review of ecumenical relationship among the churches.

Bridging the Gap with the Ecumenical Option

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Christian ecumenism has developed as a response to the division among Christians. According to Vatican II, Christian division “openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.”⁵¹ Ecumenism in contrast represents efforts

⁴⁹ It would be so unfair to state categorically that he lost by virtue of being an Anglican in a State with a Catholic majority, but there were indications that Ohakim would have won the election if his arrogance had not involved the molestation of the priest. This singular action attracted the condemnation of many, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Besides, it is a general impression that the ex-governor was notorious for his arrogance and total disdain for the poor while in office.

⁵⁰ This situation is equally taken up in televangelism as Pentecostal pastors become today the greatest financiers of electronic media houses. Their programmes on the TV often end with such messages as: “Worship with us at ...”; “Join a Bible-believing church...”; “Join a living church...”, etc.

⁵¹ Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (21 November, 1964),

toward unity, and it follows the model of the inner Trinitarian life of unity (UR, 2). The Council Fathers describe this unity as a ‘sacred mystery’, which can only be achieved “in Christ and through Christ”, with the continual vivification of the Holy Spirit (UR, 2). However, at the heart of ecumenism is the goal of visible unity of the church, which does not do away with the diversity or plurality of Christian communities, as expressed in their liturgical, theological and spiritual traditions. And in taking diversity seriously, dialogue as the means of achieving the desired unity, involves mutual learning and understanding to overcome obstacles in the path to unity.

For one thing, telling our stories, seeking the sources and causes of our division, defining its excesses and counting its beauties help us to understand one another especially within the ecumenical context. The divides brought about by the Reformation and its discontents are thus not to be considered irresolvable. Indeed, many beautiful things came out of it. At least the churches in the West now live in relative peace, particularly after the 20th century programs of ecumenism. A re-conception of unity as not necessarily implying uniformism helps to avert such thoughts that ‘difference’ or division is all too negative an idea. With such understanding, churches learn how to co-exist with much tolerance and mutual recognition of one another. More still, dialogue as a better means of fulfilling the mandate of Christian unity is provided a favourable ground to thrive. In line with the above, Christians in the Lower Niger (Eastern Nigeria-Igbo land), as well as the different churches in Nigeria, can learn to embrace one another in mutual tolerance and recognition. Ecumenism presents before us the opportunity to re-discover the philosophy of ‘live-and-let-live’ which is typical of traditional Igbo (African) culture.

From a historical perspective, the 1903 revolt against the attitude of Fr. Lejeune, which was partly caused by his ‘un-ecumenical’ vituperations, showed that the traditional Igbo society, despite the present divisions along religious confessional lines, did not accommodate such divisive tendencies prior to the advent of the Christian mission. The Igbo traditional religion knows of no denominations as we have in Christianity

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html (accessed 02 April, 2017), no. 1. Henceforth, UR.

or other world religions. While the concept of the Supreme Deity 'Chukwu' unites all, the differences could be found in the personal deities 'Chi' that dot every family or clan. These religious identities along family lines do not in any way instigate divisions within the community, rather they represent legitimate boundaries which ought to be respected but which also could be transcended in the interest of the communal good. One cannot totally deny that sometimes, there might be conflicts along these family or clan lines. However, even where clans may have their common shrines/oracles for sacrifices and divination, these do not prevent anyone from consulting other oracles.

This internal religious flexibility is further expressed in the Igbo philosophy of life, the principle of peaceful co-existence. This philosophy of 'live-and-let-live' could be sifted from such Igbo proverbs as: "*Ugboguru mịara m, mịara nwunye di m*" (May my pumpkin blossom, and may that of my neighbour equally blossom). This philosophy of communality is often admixed with the theology of retribution. Here the Igbo while praying with their traditional *Ofo* (symbol of truth and justice) randomly employ statements that highlight the rhythm of blessings and curses in relation to a person's attitude towards fellow human beings: "*Egbe bere, ugo bere, ma nke si ibe ya ebene, ka nku kwaa ya*" (Let the kite perch and the eagle perch as well, but let the wing of the one that refuses the other to perch break.); "*The onye na-echere mmadu, ka Chineke na-echere ya*" (As a person plans for others, so God plans for him or her) and so on.

In the light of such commonly held presuppositions, indigenes of Nigeria do not understand why the missionaries of the different denominations found it difficult to live peacefully with each other, particularly when they all spoke of the same crucified God. They could not come to terms with the mutual rivalry and 'destruction' of one another. If different missionary camps could agree that baptism is a common principle of Christian membership, then why can they not live in unity? It is in recognition of this typical African religious worldview that Parrinder states, "It has been said that God might have been banished from Greek thought without damaging its logical architecture, but this cannot be said of African thought, as God is both the creator and the principle of unity."⁵² This is not peculiar to the African or Igbo mind. St

⁵² Parrinder, G., *Religion in Africa* (London: Harmondsworth, 1969), 40.

Paul acknowledged that there is one God who is the source of all things and for whom all beings live (1 Cor. 8:6); the same God, who is the Father of all, operates through and in all despite their diversity (1 Cor. 12:6; Eph. 4:4-6). As a principle of unity, God brings about the reconciliation of all things in Christ (Col. 1:20, 22; 2 Cor. 5:18-20), and this task of reconciliation has been given to the Christians (2 Cor. 5:20) of today all over the world, including those in Igboland. The structure of this ministry of reconciliation is to be patterned according to the model of unity which exists between the Father and the Son (John 17: 21-23). One can argue then that the understanding of God as the principle of unity from the uniquely Igbo background can offer a starting point for exploring the ecumenical option.

To be derived from the above ‘God principle’ for unity is the aforementioned Igbo philosophy of co-existence. The principle of ‘live-and-let-live’ which is not contrary to the Scripture could be appropriated for ecumenical reasons, even though dialogue is more than mere tolerance. This philosophy demands that Christians “beat their sword into plowshares” (Micah 4:3-5); that they desist from destroying others who preach the same gospel message (Mk 9:38-40; Lk 9:49-50) even when there are serious reasons to raise concern. Where concerns for caution exist, these must however be addressed in fraternal attitude. Without this level of tolerance, true dialogue⁵³ remains elusive and the goal of ecumenism is defeated at the onset.

⁵³ Dialogue happens in different forms but all them are interconnected. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) lists the forms of dialogue as including a) *dialogue of life*, which involves neighbourly day-to-day interactions and harmonious co-existence, b) *dialogue of action* in which actions are taken together for the development or good of the society, c) *dialogue of theological exchange*, involving experts who discuss doctrinal issues, and d) *dialogue of religious experience*, according to which people share their spiritual heritages with one another. Cf., PCID, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (1), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html (accessed 02 April, 2017), no. 42.

Concluding Recommendations

A genuine ecumenism, one that is grounded on the above expressed Igbo philosophy of life, ‘live-and-let-live’, calls for co-operation and collaboration through fruitful dialogue among the different churches in Nigeria. This “endeavour to promote understanding and co-operation between different denominations becomes part of the universal task of establishing peace on earth and goodwill among men within and beyond Igboland of Nigeria.”⁵⁴ There is need however to address the idea of denominationalism, which, as already indicated, is foreign to indigenous African culture and constitutes part of the obstacles towards ecumenical unity in Nigeria. In his account of the collapse of the *Church Union Movement*, the pristine ecumenical movement in Nigeria which was slightly modelled after the Church of South India⁵⁵, Kalu asserts that “denominationalism is a subversion of the Church of Christ;”⁵⁶ it played a key role in the failure of *the Union*. Kalu argues that denominationalism succeeded in creating “new tribes in Christ, vested interests whose powers threaten the strength of organic bonds,”⁵⁷ and therefore ought to be completely rejected.

One wonders if such a radical recommendation to reject denominationalism would still apply in any attempt to promote ecumenical dialogue in Nigeria today. Given the ethnic divide in Africa,

⁵⁴ Nmah, “Christianity and Antagonistic Challenges”, 86.

⁵⁵ The Church of South India which was inaugurated in 1947, emerged out of a union of both the episcopal and non-episcopal churches (Church of England, Methodist Church, and Church of Scotland) in India. For an historical account of the formation of the Church of South India see, Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India: The Movement Towards Union, 1900-1947* (London: Lutherworth, 1954); John Wilson Gladstone, ed., *United to Unite: History of the Church of South India, 1947-1997* (Chennai: Oxford University Press, 1997); George Oommen, “Challenging Identity and Crossing Borders: Unity in the Church of South India,” *Word & World* 25, no. 1 (2005): 60-67.

⁵⁶ Kalu Ogbu, *Divided People of God: Church Union Movement: 1875-1966* (New York: NOK Publishers, 1978), 47. *Church Union Movement* was the attempt by the Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches in Nigeria to form a church union which unfortunately failed at the eve of its inauguration in 1965.

⁵⁷ Ogbu, *Divided People of God*, 45.

the existence of denominations should not be seen as counter-cultural, rather as I already indicated, the problem lies in the non-harmonious cohabitation of the different denominations. Kalu's verdict is based on the failure of the *Union*, and so could be considered valid in the context of a particular model of unity that may not be applicable today; namely, a model of union of churches based on common denominators. It was a union that failed for a number of reasons, including the insufficient preparation in terms of properly enlightening the laity, denominational power dynamics which controlled the pattern of negotiations, unfounded rumours boosted by inter-tribal and inter-ethnic misunderstandings, and so on.⁵⁸ In spite of this, confessional or denominational identities should not be undermined in any dialogue towards unity; rather the diversity of the Christian church must be taken seriously. Meanwhile, some lessons from the failure of *the Union* remain relevant in the practice of ecumenism in Nigeria today.

In aligning the lessons of the failure of past attempts with the future of ecumenical dialogue in Nigeria, it is important that the churches in Nigeria rediscover the African principle of communality as expressed in traditional kinship or clan structure. The clan structure provides a "cultural bond" and its inner dynamics could also afford us "a paradigm for community organization" among the churches.⁵⁹ In this, we can de-prioritize denominationalism without totally rejecting it as recommended by Kalu.

A rediscovery of the fundamental African communal structure and philosophy serves as the starting point of dialogue, because it raises the primary question of identity. Who are we? Are we to identify ourselves as Christians that are affiliated to denominations or as African Christians?⁶⁰ Either of these has consequences on the process and outcome of dialogue, because the identity of dialogue partners is of great importance. Secondly, the unique African communal structure and philosophy, helps us to seek together, from our specific background, the core of what it means to be a Christian community and to address the scandal of division within our own context.

⁵⁸ Ogbu, *Divided People of God*, 66-78.

⁵⁹ Ogbu, *Divided People of God*, 45-46.

⁶⁰ Ogbu, *Divided People of God*, 86-87.

Another important recommendation is the attitude of church leadership in seeking ecumenical unity. Part of the difficulty in ecumenical dialogue in Nigeria is traceable to what Kalu termed 'ingrained conservatism'⁶¹ which the missionaries instilled in the various churches, and is strongly represented in various church leaders. There is need to transcend this attitude which makes dialogue impossible because it operates on the ideology of competition where each church claims to possess superior knowledge of the truth and so rigidly protects this claim.⁶² Perhaps this explains why despite the departure of the missionaries, who may have found a more tolerant way to co-exist back in their countries of origin, churches in Nigeria are still embroiled in rivalry. Another dimension of leadership involves enlightening the people of God on the centrality of dialogue in Christianity. They must be fully carried along in the process of dialogue, in a 'bottom-top' approach, and not just be informed of ecumenical engagements among churches as if their opinions and participation do not count.

Of course, we cannot dismiss the fact that important ecumenical endeavours already exist in Nigeria,⁶³ but these efforts remain at the national level, and often do not promote real ecumenical dialogue among churches. Little seems to have been done at the state levels to address the rivalries, whether in Igboland or elsewhere. There is need thus to recover the communal principle upon which our traditional societies were structured and to re-read our understanding of the church in the light of this principle. Such a re-reading should take into account the African identity in order to ensure the success of any ecumenical dialogue that is

⁶¹ Ogbu, *Divided People of God*, 74.

⁶² David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 18.

⁶³ There is in Nigeria the existence of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) which is an umbrella body for all Christian denominations. CAN, as a fellowship of churches, originally has a membership that comprises five main blocks of church groups, namely: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN)/ Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Organisation of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), and TEKAN/ECWA Fellowship. In 2012, the CSN announced its withdrawal from CAN at the national level on grounds that the leadership of CAN at the time deviated from the original mandate of the ecumenical body.

directed towards churches in Africa. As for the churches in the Lower Niger and Nigeria in general, time is ripe for the Catholic bishops with their Protestant counterparts, who together had pioneered the first national ecumenical body (CAN)⁶⁴, to assume responsible and accountable leadership in the quest towards realizing Christ's prayer for unity. In this way, the post-Reformation conflict in Nigeria will be put to rest and a new dawn of ecumenical relations inaugurated.

⁶⁴ The Catholic Secretariat Lagos hosted the meeting that saw the emergence of CAN on the 27th of August, 1976. See: B. E. Merriman-Johnson, "Brief Statement on Christian Association of Nigeria" in *Christian Association of Nigeria: Order of Service of Inauguration* (Lagos: CAN, 1980), 10; Deji Ayegboyin, "Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience" in Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience* (Ibadan: University Press, 2000), 17-36. For a detailed account of the formation and the ecumenical challenges facing the CAN, see: Bauna Peter Tanko, *The Christian Association of Nigeria and the Challenge of the Ecumenical Imperative* (Rome: N. Domenici-Pecheux, 1991).

**MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE:
HELPING TO BUILD PEACEFUL NEIGHBOURS**

Amir Hussain¹

Abstract

This essay uses the metaphor of “neighbours” to better understand Muslim-Christian dialogue. As one involved in this dialogue for decades, the author begins with autobiographical information², including his teachers at the University of Toronto. The paper focuses on the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and how Smith’s work can help us to better understand the relationships between Christians and Muslims. The paper looks at examples of interfaith dialogue and co-operation in Catholic universities in general, and Jesuit universities in particular. Finally, it examines a very early example in Islam of the importance of pluralism and interfaith dialogue, the migration to Abyssinia. It relates that historical incident to the modern reality of Muslims and Christians engaged, as neighbours, in dialogue and co-operation.

Introduction

I need to begin with a confession. I was born in a Catholic missionary hospital in Pakistan, St. Raphael’s, and brought into the world at the hands of a nun, Sr. Elizabeth. Over 50 years later, I find myself teaching at a Catholic university. Holy Mother Church, it seems, has a way of bringing us all back to her. And as someone who turned 50 in 2015, I have a great affinity for other things that are almost exactly my age, especially *Nostra Aetate*, the document that redefined the relationship of the Catholic Church with people of other faiths.

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² Hussain shared this in online conversation with Loyola University community, “The Future of Islam and Jesuit Universities”, <http://docplayer.net/40737690-The-future-of-islam-and-jesuit-universities.html> (Editor)

In order to discuss the present and future of Muslim-Catholic dialogue, I need to write a few things about the past. I was born into a Sunni Muslim family in Pakistan. As a child, I received rudimentary instruction in Islam from my family. However, at the age of four, we emigrated from Pakistan to Canada. As a result, I received no formal instruction or education in my religion until I was an adolescent. Had I stayed in Pakistan, I would have learned these things (instruction in Urdu and Arabic, reading the Qur'an, etc.) in elementary school.

When we moved to Toronto in 1970, I suddenly became a visible minority, as well as a member of a religious minority. The Toronto of my youth was a place where I was isolated as a Pakistani Muslim. At that time, Toronto was a far cry from the cosmopolitan city that it has since become. John Barber, a reporter for *The Globe and Mail* newspaper, echoed the sentiments of many of his cohort when he wrote of his experiences in Toronto: "I grew up in a tidy, prosperous, narrow-minded town where Catholicism was considered exotic; my children are growing up in the most cosmopolitan city on Earth. The same place".³ In 1970, the Muslim population in all of Canada was estimated to be some 33,370.⁴ By 2011, the National Household Survey counted over 1 million Canadian Muslims, making Islam the second-largest religion in Canada.

All of this is to state that my Islam was shaped by being in a minority context, and so I had to learn about the dominant tradition, Christianity. In 1983, I began my first undergraduate year at the University of Toronto. At that time, I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up, I just knew that I didn't want to work in the same factories that my parents did. I spent summers with my father, building trucks for the Ford Motor Company, and picking up my mother at the end of her shifts from the plant where she worked making fans. Working on the assembly line made me want to pursue any other line of work. However, if you had told me then that I would become a theology professor at a Catholic university in Los Angeles, I would have said that you were crazy. At that point, I had not yet settled on my major (which

³ John Barber, "Different Colours, Changing City", in *The Globe and Mail*, February 20, 1998, p. A8.

⁴ W.E. Kalbach and W.W. McVey, "Religious Composition of the Canadian Population", in Stewart Crysedale and Les Wheatcroft, editors, *Religion in Canadian Society* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 221–240.

would be psychology with a minor in English), but I had little interest in theology and even less interest in working in a religious institution, especially one that didn't reflect my Muslim background. In fact, I chose my undergraduate college (University College) precisely because it had no Christian religious affiliation, unlike the majority of colleges at the University of Toronto.

It was through the study of English literature, specifically the works of William Shakespeare and the visionary artist William Blake, that I first became attracted to the study of religion. You could not, for example, understand Blake's poetry or art without understanding the symbolic world that he had created, which in turn was deeply influenced by the Bible. At the University of Toronto, I was fortunate to be able to learn about Blake from Professors Northrop Frye and Jerry Bentley. In trying to understand Western stories, what Professor Frye called in one of his course titles "the mythological framework of western culture," I had to learn about the Bible. In doing so, I realized that I also needed to learn more about my own Muslim religious tradition.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith: the Study of World Religions

At the university, I had the extraordinary privilege of being mentored by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the greatest Canadian scholar of religion in the 20th century. He founded and directed the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in Montreal in 1951, before moving to Harvard in 1964, where for two decades he directed the Centre for the Study of World Religions. He and his wife Muriel then moved back to their native Toronto where they lived till his death in 2000.

Wilfred's ideas on Islam were shaped during the six years that he and Muriel lived in Lahore, India (the city of my birth, coincidentally), from 1940 to 1946. At the time that he began his graduate work, before the Second World War, the study of Islam consisted almost entirely of the study, by non-Muslim scholars, of mostly Arabic and Persian texts written by Muslims. Growing up in Canada, where there were very few Muslims in 1940, he went to India, which at the time was the country with the largest number of Muslims. This was a revolutionary idea. To actually live with Muslims, and to actually ask them what they thought, and then to actually write about it. But then again, that's what one does when one is the minority, one has to learn about the majority.

They returned to Lahore in 1948, which had after the forced migrations and massacres of Partition become the capital city of Pakistan. It was there, in the ruins of Lahore, that Smith found his calling, described by Kenneth Cracknell, “so to help men and women understand each other, that religion should never again be used as an excuse for such bloodshed and such destruction”.

We Muslims and Christians have been neighbours to each other in the past, and will continue to be neighbours in the future. That is a very important metaphor, being a neighbour. Someone once asked in class, “Professor Smith, are you Christian?” If the question had been “are you a Christian”, the answer would have been a very simple “yes”. Instead, Wilfred did what he always did when asked a question. He paused, repeated the question, and thought about his answer. “Am I Christian”, he said. “Maybe, I was, last week. On a Tuesday. At lunch. For about an hour. But if you really want to know, ask my neighbour”.

Unfortunately, there are Muslims in North America and around the world who have no interest in pluralism. They see Islam as the only true religion, and often see their own particular way of being Muslim as the only way to be Muslim. I will return to them at the end of my paper, when I mention some things we might do in the future. As a teacher, I often have Muslim students who are such zealous defenders of Islam. In hearing their rhetoric of intolerance, I think back again to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who was for many of us who study religion, the paradigm of critical scholarship. From his deep knowledge, he was able to offer critique when it was needed. He was not a Muslim. He was not an apologist for Islam. Yet his critique never did violence to what it meant for other people to be Muslim. In *Islam in Modern History* he wrote: “A true Muslim, however, is not a man who believes in Islam—especially Islam in history; but one who believes in God and is committed to the revelation through His Prophet”.⁵ Those words were published in 1957. In the 1962’s *The Meaning and End of Religion*, he continued: “...the essential tragedy of the modern Islamic world is the degree to which Muslims, instead of giving their allegiance to God, have been giving it to

⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 146.

something called Islam.”⁶ Those words could have been written today, in the age of ISIS, al-Shebab, and Boko Haram, with equal force and validity.

Being a Neighbour and Dialogue

It is important to stress that there are counters to this intolerance, through the pluralism and dialogue that are also happening around the Muslim world, not just in North America. Professor Aysha Hidayatullah hosted a marvellous conference in 2015 at the University of San Francisco, which brought together a number of Muslim and Catholic scholars doing important comparative theological work at Jesuit universities.

In 2007, based out of Jordan, a number of Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals issued a call to Christian leaders with the publication of the document, *A Common Word between Us and You*. That document calls Christians and Muslims into dialogue based on the two great commandments in each tradition (Mark 12:28-32), love of God and love of one’s neighbour. In 2008, Saudi Arabia sponsored conferences on dialogue for Muslims in Mecca, and for Muslims and non-Muslims together in Madrid. In January of 2009, I was one of a dozen Muslim scholars from the US and the UK who were invited to a conference at Al-Azhar University in Cairo on bridges of dialogue between the most important university in the Sunni Muslim world and the West. That conference also had Jewish and Christian participants. In 2015, the Grand Imam of the great mosque of Mecca, Sheikh Saleh Abdullah bin Humaid, spoke at the Parliament of World Religions in Salt Lake City.

Perhaps in the future, we, as Muslims, can help you, as Christians, with a new approach to evangelization, not to change each other’s religions, but to help in spreading the message of the gospel, to literally evangelize. We can work together for common goals that we all share. I’d be happy as a Muslim, to live in a land where the ethical teaching was the teaching of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. Unfortunately, I don’t know of such a place in Jewish, Christian or Muslim lands. But perhaps we can construct it together.

⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963; reprinted, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 126.

We can be seen in conflict and competition, and we have been in both conflict and competition in our history and our present as Christians and Muslim. The Great Commission for Christians and the Qur'anic teaching on *da'wa* or calling people to Islam for Muslims are certainly in competition. It is because of those commandments in our traditions that we are the two largest religious traditions in the world. But we can also be in cooperation with each other, being in what the Catholic Church describes as a culture of dialogue. I have learned the most about Catholic perspectives on this from my friend and Jesuit colleague, Fr. Thomas Michel. About this, Michel wrote:

...the focal question is not whether the church should be proclaiming the Gospel or engaged in dialogue, but rather whether Christians are actually sharing life with their neighbors of other faiths. The basic distinction is not between being a church in dialogue or one that proclaims the Gospel, but rather the option of being a church that is following the Spirit's lead to partake humanly in life with others, and thus constantly engaged in dialogue, witness, and proclamation, or else that of being a church that is closed in on itself and exists in a self-imposed ghetto with little concern for and involvement with people of other faiths with whom Christians share culture, history, citizenship, and common human destiny. When people of various faiths live together—not simply cohabiting in the same town but sharing life *together*—the question of dialogue or proclamation doesn't arise. When they work, study, struggle, celebrate, and mourn together and face the universal crises of injustice, illness, and death as one, they don't spend most of their time talking about doctrine. Their focus is on immediate concerns of survival, on taking care of the sick and needy, on communicating cherished values to new generations, on resolving problems and tensions in productive rather than in destructive ways, on reconciling after conflicts, on seeking to build more just, humane, and dignified societies.⁷

⁷ Thomas F. Michel, *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue*, edited by Irfan Omar, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), p. 21.

Dialogue and Complex Theological Questions

There is any number of trajectories for Muslim–Christian relations that I could discuss. In the comparative study of religion, it is crucial that we have our categories correct. Smith wrote, for example, not only on connections between the Bible and Qur’an, but more properly between Jesus Christ for Christians and the Qur’an for Muslims. He wrote on theology for Muslims and philosophy of religion for Christians, on the Christian concept of the Spirit and the Qur’anic notion of God as *al-Hādi*, or the guide.

I do not want to get into discussions of the Trinity here, mostly because whenever I think that I understand that concept, or at least think that I have some idea of how it is understood, the ground shifts beneath my feet. Recently, I was talking with a theologian who described the Trinity as being non-hierarchical and co-equal, and I thought, aren’t the terms Father and Son, by definition, hierarchical and unequal, to say nothing of the Orthodox notion of the Monarchy of the Father and the rejection of the *filioque* clause. But in discussions of the Trinity, I do find useful Fr. David Burrell’s writing on the Great Commandment and the *shema*:

Christian-Muslim disputations regularly opposed Muslim insistence on the unicity of God to a Christian trinitarian presentation. Yet every student of the history of Christian thought knows that it took nearly five centuries of Christological controversies, plus another century of conceptual elaboration, to hone a ‘doctrine of trinity,’ precisely because of the *shema*: ‘Hear, O Israel, God our God is one’ (Deut 6:4). So if Muslim teaching showcasing divine unity—*tawhid*— has been developed polemically over against the ‘threeness’ of the one God, Christians need to recall how long it took to articulate ‘threeness’ in God without prejudice to God’s unity, so how easily ‘trinity’ can be misunderstood.⁸

Or, to take another example, the Hebrew Bible is read very differently by Jews and Christians. Christians read the Old Testament

⁸ David B. Burrell, “A Philosophical-Theologian’s Journey”, in Christian W. Troll and C.T.R. Hewer, editors, *Christian Lives Given to the Study of Islam* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 59.

through the lens of the New Testament, or at least through the prism of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Muslims, I would argue, need to understand both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in order to properly appreciate the Qur'an. Certainly the first hearers of the revelation were familiar with the Biblical stories, or else, to take only one example, Surah 5:27, "recite to them the truth of the story of the two sons of Adam", would make no sense. Clearly the first hearers knew something of Adam and his two sons. Here, I make a plea to Muslims to become familiar with the Biblical texts and traditions.

Islam in North America

On the Christian side, many North Americans are surprised to learn that Muslims have a long history on their continent. Historians estimate that between 10 and 20 percent of the slaves who came from West Africa were Muslim. Thomas Jefferson began learning Arabic in the 1770s, after he purchased a translation of the Qur'an in 1765. It was this Qur'an that Keith Ellison used when he was sworn in as the first Muslim member of Congress in 2007. In 1821, Jefferson wrote about freedom of religion extending to "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo and infidel of every denomination."⁹ It's sad that almost 200 years later, some current politicians don't understand the religious freedom that was the ideal of our founding fathers.

The first Muslim immigrants to North America other than slaves were from the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Many were itinerants who came to make money and then return to their countries of origin. Some, however, were farmers who settled permanently. Mosques sprung up in 1915 (Maine), 1919 (Connecticut), 1928 (New York), and 1937 (North Dakota). From the time of the slave trade, there has been a consciousness about Islam in African American communities. Today, the majority of African American Muslims are Sunni Muslims.

In the last half-century, the Muslim population of the United States has increased dramatically through immigration, strong birth rates, and conversion. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (something

⁹ <http://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/1399>

else that celebrated its 50th birthday in 2015) allowed many more Muslims to immigrate than were previously allowed under the earlier quota system. The United States census does not ask the question of religious affiliation, so there is less certainty about the size of its Muslim population. I have seen estimates as low as two million people, and as high as ten million. My own research of America's immigration patterns, birth rates, and conversion rates—similar to those of Canada—leads me to conclude that both of these estimates are extreme. Instead, I and many researchers estimate that there are around seven million American Muslims.

Benefits of Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation in Catholic Universities

Muslims are at once a very old community here, but in many ways, a very new one when it comes to building institutions. As a child growing up in Toronto, I had very few Muslim role models. The ones that were most important to me were two African American athletes, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and the Greatest, Muhammad Ali. These days, for young North American Muslims, their Muslim heroes continue to be African American athletes, but also entertainers such as Mahershala Ali and rappers and hip hop artists such as the RZA, Lupe Fiasco, or Ice Cube. For them, the connection is with other North Americans, particularly African Americans, who have long experiences of discrimination and racism that many American immigrant Muslims face.

One opportunity that interfaith dialogue brings is increased cooperation and understanding. This interfaith work also involves the attendance of non-Muslims at Muslim rituals and celebrations and the attendance of Muslims at non-Muslim religious ceremonies. The result is an “Islam” that influences and in turn is influenced by the other traditions with which it comes into contact. As a result of the interfaith dialogue in a city such as Los Angeles, many non-Muslims are aware of some of the basic elements of Islam.

We have welcomed Muslim students into our Catholic colleges. American Muslims are an American success story, equal in wealth and higher education to non-Muslims. *Newsweek* did a cover story a few years ago on Islam in America, highlighting a 2007 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life which found that 26% of American

Muslims had household incomes above \$75,000 (as compared to 28% of non-Muslims) and 24% of American Muslims had graduated from university or done graduate studies (as compared to 25% of non-Muslims).¹⁰ That Pew survey of American Muslims found that: “The first-ever, nationwide, random sample survey of Muslim Americans finds them to be largely assimilated, happy with their lives, and moderate with respect to many of the issues that have divided Muslims and Westerners around the world.”¹¹

At Loyola Marymount University we have perhaps 150 Muslim students, who attend because of the excellent reputation for both education and social justice in Jesuit and Marymount colleges. Our last Jesuit president, Fr. Robert Lawton, has spoken of the value that non-Catholic students (including not just other Christians, but members of other religious traditions, as well as atheists) have in Catholic universities. At the 2008 Mass of the Holy Spirit, the traditional beginning to our fall term, Fr. Lawton said this in his homily: “Non-Catholics and non-believers are not here at the University simply because we need you to pay our bills or raise our grades or SAT¹² scores. We want you here for a deeper reason. By helping us to doubt, you help us get closer to a deeper understanding of our God, this life and this world we share.” Muslim students can help us to understand more about faith, and we should recruit them because they can help us to be the best that we can be.

There are a number of initiatives that have happened at Jesuit universities. In 1995, the 34th General Congregation recommended the creation in the General Curia of the Jesuits of a Secretariat for Inter-religious Dialogue. It also recommended the establishment in the Gregorian University in Rome of an institute for the study of religions and cultures, as well as making the Jesuit house in Jerusalem a centre for study and dialogue with Jews and Muslims. It was Fr. Tom Michel, SJ, who directed that secretariat. This message of interfaith dialogue continued with the 35th General Congregation in 2008. In 2008, there was a conference on the Common Word document held in honour of Fr. Michel at Georgetown University, with a publication edited by John

¹⁰ “Islam in America,” special report in *Newsweek*, July 30, 2007, p. 27.

¹¹ Survey available from: < <http://pewforum.org/surveys/muslim-american/>>.

¹² Scholastic Aptitude Test obligatory in USA universities (Editor).

Borelli. There are a growing number of Muslims who teach theology in Jesuit universities, helping to advance the cause of inter-faith dialogue. One of them, Professor Irfan Omar at Marquette University has edited a collection of Fr. Michel's essays for a book entitled, *A Christian View of Islam*, published by Orbis Books. My friend, Fr. Patrick Ryan SJ, from Fordham University, is the holder of the Laurence McGinley Chair in Religion and Society at Fordham University (the post previously held by Cardinal Dulles of blessed memory), where in 2009 he delivered his inaugural lecture, entitled *Amen: Faith and the possibility of Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue*. Clearly, there are a number of initiatives by Jesuit universities in interfaith dialogue.

As Muslims, particularly as North American Muslims, we need to become more visible as individuals and communities as participants in North American life. The members of Catholic universities can help us to do this, as we have much to learn from you here. We can increase this participation in a number of ways. We can encourage our children to value the arts and humanities. We have a large number of Muslim doctors and lawyers and businesspeople. Where are the Muslim writers and artists and musicians and filmmakers and actors and journalists? We should encourage our children in these fields, which are of course at the heart of a traditional Catholic education in the liberal arts. If we want our stories told in the media, we need to do this ourselves. Zaraqa Nawaz has done this in Canada with her CBC television show *Little Mosque on the Prairie*.

Christian colleges can also help Muslim communities through the training in Islamic theology offered by some theological schools, a wonderful example of our neighbourliness. One thinks of established programs at Hartford Seminary, as well as newer programs such as Bayan College in Claremont. The Graduate Theological Union has created a Centre for Islamic Studies, and Zaytuna College was accredited in March of 2015. My own university several years ago now admitted its first Muslim imam into our MA in pastoral theology. This signals an interesting partnership between theological schools who have the experience and skill to train students for ministry, and Muslim communities who have almost no seminaries of their own in North America. Muslim communities are asking their imams, who were trained as textual scholars, to serve in roles as therapists, counsellors, social workers, pastors, and chaplains for which they often have no training.

As Catholics and Muslims, we need to stand with each other. A plea, here, to speak out when those in your community malign us, just as we must speak out when those in our community malign you. Without naming names (I am a Canadian, and we Canadians are nothing if not polite), there are a number of people in the Christian tradition who have said hateful things about Islam and Muslims. This is particularly hurtful when it comes from Catholics, because with all due respect, you should know better. You know through your history in America about what it means to be persecuted. You know that when Americans first talked about non-white foreigners who came to this country with their strange customs, odd dress, exotic foods, failure to assimilate, home-grown hatreds and allegiance to foreign authority, they were talking about Catholics, not Muslims.

Perhaps in the future, we can move from disputes about Christology to a focus on Pneumatology, looking at how the spirit of God is at work in the world. I see that in my friend Alain Godbut from Halifax, who produced a “Nazarene” bracelet to show our solidarity, as North American Muslims and Christians, with the persecuted Christians of the Middle East.

My university teachers about Islam were all Christians: Jane McAuliffe (Catholic), Michael Marmura (Anglican), Will Oxtoby (Presbyterian), and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (United Church of Canada). Of them, only Jane is still with us. It was she who first got me interested in the Christians of the Middle East, and who also got me to do a very different dissertation project, on contemporary Islam in North America.

At the University of Notre Dame, Ebrahim Moosa raised the idea of an interfaith action circle at synagogues, mosques, and churches. What if on a Friday, we had Jews and Christians circling a mosque where Muslims prayed, and later that evening for the Shabbat services, Muslims and Christians circled the synagogue where Jews prayed. And on Sunday, Muslims and Jews could circle the Church for a Sunday worship service. That would be a very visible symbol of our interconnectedness and our support for one another. This would be a small step toward repaying the debt we as Muslims owe to Christians.

Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue in Early Islam

Many people are aware of the emigration of Muhammad and his earliest followers from Mecca to Medina in the year 622. However, there was an earlier emigration to Abyssinia that underscored the value of interfaith dialogue to Muhammad. The earliest biographer of the Prophet, Ibn Ishaq (c. 704-767) and the famed Muslim historian Tabari (838-923), discuss this migration. As people began to accept Islam they met with opposition from others in Mecca. This opposition turned to physical persecution of certain members of the early Muslim community. Muhammad gathered a group of those most vulnerable, and instructed them to go across the Red Sea to Abyssinia, a Christian country ruled by a Christian king. There, the emigrants were welcomed and accepted. Indeed, the Christian king protected the Muslims against demands of extradition by the polytheists of Mecca. The emigrants stayed in Abyssinia until they re-joined the larger Muslim community in Medina.

Muhammad's act represents the first time that Muslims, as Muslims, dealt with Christians as a community. There was no sense of enmity against the Christians of Abyssinia; instead, they were seen as a people that would protect members of the nascent Muslim community. This is a very early example in Islam of the importance of pluralism and interfaith dialogue, and the debt that Muslims owe to Christians.

We can connect with each other in the poetry of our ordinary lives, exemplified in the story of Hagar. Fr. Tom Michel sees Hagar as our "Mother in Faith," and writes:

I believe that Hagar is a key religious figure and that meditation on her story can enrich the understanding of Jews, Christians, and Muslims concerning the nature of the God whom we worship and what it means to do God's will in contemporary societies. The image of Hagar and her child in the desert is part of today's reality. The low-born, hard-working domestic laborer, used and misused and cast out by her employers, the single mother abandoned by the father of her child, the foreigner and the refugee far from her native land, desperately trying to survive, frantic in her maternal concern for the safety of her child—this Hagar I have met many times.¹³

¹³ "Hagar: Biblical and Islamic Perspectives", in Thomas F. Michel, *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue*, edited by Irfan Omar, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), p. 87.

Conclusion:

Let me end with an example of vision and love as the language of God. As I mentioned earlier, as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, I had the extraordinary privilege of knowing Northrop Frye, whose last book was entitled *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion*. In his famous undergraduate course, “The Mythological Framework of Western Culture”, Professor Frye would remind us that when the Bible is historically accurate, it is only accidentally so. In the same vein, with respect to the teaching of science in places in the American Bible belt like Kansas, none of my Jewish friends think that the Bible, important as it is, is a very good science textbook. It is however much more important than history or science. It tells us about our place in the world. It gives us not facts, but something much more important, truths. Or to quote from Professor Frye:

What ‘the’ truth is, is not available to human beings in spiritual matters: the goal of our spiritual life is God, who is a spiritual Other, not a spiritual object, much less a conceptual object. That is why the Gospels keep reminding us how many listen and how few hear: truths of the gospel kind cannot be demonstrated except through personal example. As the seventeenth-century Quaker Isaac Pennington said, every truth is substantial in its own place, but all truths are shadows except the last. The language that lifts us clear of the merely plausible and the merely credible is the language of the spirit; the language of the spirit is, Paul tells us, the language of love, and the language of love is the only language that we can be sure is spoken and understood by God.¹⁴

Let us move into the future of interfaith work with the language of love.

¹⁴ Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 20-21.

**A DIALOGUE OF FRATERNITY:
NOSTRA AETATE AND POPE FRANCIS' VISION OF
THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY OF DIALOGUE**

James L. Fredericks¹

Abstract²

Like each of his predecessors since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, Pope Francis is articulating his own vision of the church's ministry of interreligious dialogue. Paul VI called for a "dialogue of salvation." John Paul II developed a "dialogue of spirituality." Pope Benedict called for a "dialogue of truth and charity." Now Francis has begun to speak of a "dialogue of fraternity" in which the focus of dialogue shifts from doctrine and spiritual practices to social concerns. I argue that the roots of fraternity for Francis lie in the principle of solidarity as developed in the social teachings of John Paul II.

Introduction:

In June 23 2015, the Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, gathered with a group of Catholic and Buddhist leaders at Castel Gandolfo. These religious leaders had come to Castel Gandolfo as part of the Vatican's celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. The Cardinal observed that, all too often, diversity is perceived as a threat in the contemporary world. He then invited his guests to enter into a dialogue with one another "in friendship and peace" as a sign of a commitment to promoting "human fraternity."³

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² A shorter version of this essay appeared in *Commonweal Magazine*, 24 March, 2017, pp. 10-11.

³ In mentioning "human fraternity," the Cardinal was tapping into a theme he had touched on in his Vesakh message to Buddhists in 2014 when he invited

At Castel Gandolfo, Tauran went on to tell his audience that he considered this meeting to be of historic importance. Past meetings of Buddhists and Catholics, at least in the United States, had been focused largely on the need to develop mutual understanding and tolerance. The Cardinal asked us to enter into a “new form of dialogue” that would build on previous encounters “by fostering interreligious collaboration” aimed at addressing social problems faced by people in the local communities that the Buddhists and Catholics share. Accordingly, the focus of the meeting at Castel-Gandolfo was to be “suffering, liberation and fraternity” and time was to be given to explore together how Buddhists and Catholics might cooperate in addressing these social problems after their return to home communities.⁴ The impetus for this new form of dialogue is coming from Pope Francis himself. The Pope believes that the time has come for Buddhists and Catholics to begin to engage in what he calls “a dialogue of fraternity.”

In this essay, I want to address Francis’ notion of a dialogue of fraternity. First, I want to place the pope’s call for this new kind of dialogue in its proper historical context by calling to mind the teachings of Francis’ predecessors since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* regarding the nature and purpose of interreligious dialogue. Second, I want to investigate the roots of Francis’ notion of “fraternity” which I will argue are to be found in the teachings of John Paul II.

Past Papal Teachings on Interreligious Dialogue

The implementation of *Nostra Aetate* has been led by four popes so far, including Pope Francis. The Declaration’s first pope was Paul VI who signed the document after the final vote on the *schema* at the Council. Commentaries on *Nostra Aetate* often take note of the fact that, even before the formal promulgation of the Declaration in October of 1965, Paul VI had already established the Secretariat for Non-Christians on 19

Buddhists to join Catholics in being “outspoken in denouncing the social ills that damage fraternity.”

⁴ Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, “Welcoming Address,”

http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/06/23/cardinal_tauran_catholic-buddhist_seeks_to_grasp_truth/1153439

May, 1964 (the dicastery within the Roman Curia that, in 1988, would be renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue). These same commentaries are less prone to observe that, shortly after establishing the Secretariat, Paul VI issued *Ecclesiam Suam* (6 Aug, 1964), an encyclical letter focused centrally on the theme of the church's need for dialogue with the world. *Ecclesiam Suam* is not sufficiently appreciated as a text that has set the agenda for the Catholic Church's embrace of interreligious dialogue, in its various facets, as a pastoral practice appropriate to the needs of the church in the world today.

In writing *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul took care not to gainsay the Council in advancing any new teachings (ES 6-7). Instead, in his encyclical, the pope sought to place emphasis on the church's need for a dialogue with the world as the central teaching of the Council itself, which was still over a year from concluding. This encyclical, therefore, was an attempt to set not so much a specific agenda for the post-conciliar church, although it does specify areas of pastoral concern. The purpose of the encyclical was to set a tone for the post-conciliar church in engaging the modern world. This being the case, *Ecclesiam Suam* has had a great impact on the Catholic Church's initial dialogues with other religious communities. Part two of the encyclical is devoted to an extended reflection on how the notion of "dialogue," a term which, back in 1964, should be imagined. Note that the very term "dialogue" had only barely entered the lexicon in Rome. I wish to make five observations about Pope Paul's hopes for dialogue as developed in the text.

First, in ES 58, Paul VI asserts that dialogue is above all else a "mental attitude" which Catholics must embrace as they begin to reach out to the modern world. This implies that the Catholic Church's efforts in regard to interreligious dialogue must be construed as an important and integral aspect of the considerably larger project of the church's *aggiornamento*.

Second, Paul VI envisions the church's overall engagement with the world as a "dialogue of salvation." By "salvation," the pope means that Catholics must not be afraid to confront questions of ultimate concern to the church in its engagement with the world, including those who follow other religious paths. In addition, a "dialogue of salvation" is called for by the fact of revelation itself. A dialogue of salvation with the world arises naturally out of revelation as a dialogue between God and the human person (ES 70). "Salvation" also means that, since "God Himself

took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation,” the church must be first in asking for a dialogue with others (ES 72) and that the church’s dialogue of salvation must include everyone without distinction (ES 76). The church’s dialogue with the world, therefore, presupposes the “state of mind” of a disciple “who sees his own salvation as inseparable from the salvation of others.”

Third, in *Ecclesiam Suam*, Paul VI argues that dialogue must not be condemnatory, crusading, or coercive (ES 78). Instead, the church’s dialogues must be characterized by clarity of self-expression, meekness, prudence and confidence in the truth of what we have to say and also in the good will of both parties to the dialogue. As a result, dialogue should lead to greater intimacy and to friendships that exclude self-seeking (ES 81).

Fourth, Paul VI also argues that the value of a dialogue of salvation lies in its ability “to encourage us to think along different lines” and to force us “to go more deeply into the subject of our investigations and to find better ways of expressing ourselves.” In this regard, Paul VI predicts that the fruits of the church’s efforts in the practice of dialogue will yield its fruit only slowly, “but it will result in the discovery of elements of truth in the opinion of others and make us want to express our teaching with great fairness” (ES 83).

Fifth, a dialogue of salvation should privilege similarity, instead of dwelling on differences. Catholics should accept “the principle of stressing what we all have in common rather than what divides us,” for “this provides a good and fruitful basis for our dialogue” (ES 109b). Even still, Catholics must reject “an immoderate desire to make peace and sink differences at all costs” as “ultimately nothing more than skepticism about the power and content of the Word of God which we desire to preach” (ES 88).

I will offer two observations about Pope Paul’s dialogue of salvation. First, as noted above, *Ecclesiam Suam* set a tone for the work of the newly constituted Secretariat for Non-Christians and its successor, the PCID, and by extension, the work of dialogue that began to be carried out in the local churches. The initial dialogues in the years after the Council can rightly be understood as dialogues of salvation as adumbrated in the encyclical.

Second, it must be said that the encyclical bears little sense that the church has anything of value to learn from the process of dialogue.

According to *Ecclesiam Suam*, a dialogue of salvation should assist Catholics in delving more deeply into its own teachings in order “to think along different lines,” as noted above (ES 83), but the role of what would eventually be called “proclamation”⁵ in dialogue is consistently stressed. In 1964, the Council far from complete, there was little sense of what Catherine Cornille has called “doctrinal humility” in the practice of interreligious dialogue or the theological discipline that is now widely called comparative theology.⁶ Instead, in initiating a dialogue of salvation, Paul VI predicts that “it will be set to our credit that we expound our doctrine in such a way that others can respond to it, if they will, and assimilate it gradually. It will make us wise; it will make us teachers.”

The long papacy of John Paul II began in 1978 and with it came a significant new era in the implementation of *Nostra Aetate*. Starting in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), John Paul had a great deal to say regarding the Catholic Church’s theological understanding of other religions and, by extension, the precise character of interreligious dialogue appropriate to this understanding. This is readily seen in an address given by John Paul to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in November, 1995.⁷ Speaking to a plenary assembly of the PCID, the pope promoted what he called “a dialogue of spirituality” and the “spirituality of dialogue” which attends to this form of dialogue. The pope begins with a comment on *Nostra Aetate*’s “reading of the human soul.” NA 1 takes note of the fact that human beings look to their different religions for answers to the “unsolved riddles of human existence.” These questions include “What is the ultimate mystery,

⁵ See “Dialogue and Proclamation,”

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html

⁶ For “doctrinal humility, see Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, (New York: Crossroads, 2008), pp. 31-43. For introductions to the practice of comparative theology, see Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) and James L. Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).

⁷ http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1995/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19951124_dialogo-interr.html

beyond human explanation, which embraces our entire existence, from which we take our origin and towards which we tend?" Then, in his address to the PCID, the pope takes note that, despite the considerable allure of materialism, there are still those who search for God and find "a response to these interrogations of the human soul *through spirituality...which is open to transcendence and to eternity*" (emphasis in original). The spirituality of the human person lies at the heart of the church's work in interreligious dialogue. Moreover, this human spirituality is the key to achieving a dialogue-in-depth, beyond merely the mutual exchange of information and comparison of doctrines. It confronts us with "the universal vocation to holiness" which can be seen in the various religious endeavours of human beings. In fact, a "dialogue of spirituality" provides "a natural meeting point for the followers of different religious traditions and a fruitful subject for interreligious dialogue."⁸

John Paul's confidence in the universality of human spirituality as a basis for interreligious dialogue finds its theological footing in a pneumatological theology of religions articulated mostly in his encyclicals. To offer but one example, in *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), the pope cites the New Testament: "the Spirit blows where he wills" (Jn 3:8). He then goes on to comment, "I have repeatedly called this fact to mind, and it has guided me in my meetings with a wide variety of peoples." The "wide variety of peoples" certainly includes those who follow other religious paths, for the pope went on to comment on his famous meeting in Assisi in 1986 where he gathered together with leaders of various religious communities to pray for peace. "Excluding any mistaken interpretation, the interreligious meeting held in Assisi was meant to confirm my conviction that every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart" (RM 29).⁹

In developing his pneumatology, John Paul appealed repeatedly to *Gaudium et Spes* 22 which teaches that "the Christian man" has been "conformed to the likeness of the Son" by the Holy Spirit and this Spirit "renews the whole man." Then the Constitution states:

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The pope took a similar position in his radio address from Manila in 1981. See *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995)*, ed. Francesco Gioia (Boston: Pauline, 1994) nos. 371-372.

All this holds true for Christians but also for all individuals of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all [cf. Rom 8:32], and since all human beings are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being associated, in a way known to God, with the Paschal Mystery. (GS 22)

John Paul's dialogue of spirituality takes as its ultimate starting point the conciliar teaching that all human beings are called to one common destiny in God's plan of salvation. For this reason, the pope can claim, as he did in his address to the PCID, that a "dialogue of spirituality" provides "a natural meeting point for the followers of different religious traditions and a fruitful subject for interreligious dialogue."¹⁰ The Catholic Church must commit itself to interreligious dialogue, therefore, out of a deep theological conviction in the presence of the Holy Spirit in the religious faith of the dialogue partner. Paul VI's vision of a dialogue of salvation was expanded considerably by John Paul II into a dialogue of spirituality. The meetings at Assisi and this pope's engagement with religious leaders in many parts of the world bear testimony to his belief in a universal human spirituality as basis for interreligious dialogue.

Benedict XVI had concerns about interreligious dialogue as understood and practiced by his predecessor, John Paul II. He also had much less to say about the matter. Nowhere in his encyclicals, for example, is the theology of interreligious dialogue addressed at any length. However, in Benedict's last encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), there is a reflection on the problem of cultural relativity in the modern world which serves to illuminate this pope's fears regarding the church's work in interreligious dialogue.

In CV 26, Benedict takes note of the fact that possibilities for interaction among cultures today have increased exponentially with the proliferation of communication and transportation technologies. Positively construed, this presents us with new opportunities for intercultural dialogue (interreligious dialogue goes unremarked). For such dialogues to be effective, however, participants must have a "deep-seated

¹⁰ https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1995/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19951124_dialogo-interr.html

knowledge of the specific identity of the various dialogue partners.” Instead of this knowledge-in-depth, the commercialization of cultural exchanges today have led to an uncritical “cultural eclecticism” in which “cultures are simply placed alongside one another and viewed as substantially equivalent and interchangeable.” It also leads to a “cultural leveling” in which all values are seen as more or less equal. Both of these factors promote a cultural relativism that works against the possibility of an authentic encounter of cultures.

These comments about cultural relativism apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the encounter among religions in the modern world as well. The proximity of religions to one another today and their commodification by global consumerism have led to an intellectual eclecticism in regard to religious teachings and a levelling of religious differences by what Benedict called, in another context, the “dictatorship of relativism.”¹¹

In an address to representatives of various religions in the United States on 17 April 2008, Benedict, after discussing the need for cooperation among religious communities to insure the protection of religious freedom, went on to say that interreligious dialogue aims at “something more than a consensus regarding ways to implement practical strategies for advancing peace.” The purpose of interreligious dialogue is to discover the truth about the origin and destiny of humankind, good and evil, and the ultimate destiny of the human person. “Only by addressing these deeper questions can we build a solid basis for the peace and security of the human family.” Moreover, in the attempt to emphasize points of commonality, “perhaps we have shied away from the responsibility to discuss our differences with calmness and clarity.” While always uniting our hearts and minds in the call for peace, we must also listen attentively to the voice of truth. In this way, dialogues will not stop at identifying a common set of values, but go on to probe their ultimate foundation.¹²

¹¹ See the homily preached by Cardinal Ratzinger at the mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice* on 18 April, 2005. Soon after this mass, Cardinal Ratzinger was elected Pope Benedict XVI.

http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html

¹² <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/document/pope-benedict-xvis-address-at-his-meeting-with-representatives-of-other-religions-176/>

With this as background, it should not come as a surprise to learn that the character of interreligious dialogue called for by Pope Benedict was a “dialogue of truth and charity.” Benedict comments on this form of interreligious dialogue in an address to the tenth Plenary Assembly of the PCID. Here, in an unacknowledged reference to his predecessor, Benedict noted that “Since the Second Vatican Council, attention has been focused on the spiritual elements which different religious traditions have in common.” The pope praised the dialogue of spirituality as a helpful way to build bridges of understanding across religious boundaries. However, “the great proliferation of interreligious meetings around the world today calls for discernment.”¹³ Moreover, Benedict went out of his way to emphasize the need for the proper formation of those engaged in interreligious dialogue. In keeping with his comments about cultural relativism in CV 26, a dialogue of truth and charity requires participants who are “well formed in their own beliefs and well informed about those of others.”

The meaning of “fraternity” in the work of Pope Francis

John Paul’s confidence in a dialogue of spirituality presents us with an appreciable theological development beyond Pope Paul’s dialogue of salvation. As noted above, in calling for a dialogue of salvation, Paul VI was urging the church at the time of the Council to engage the world in questions of ultimate religious concern. John Paul’s pneumatically oriented dialogue of spirituality sought to establish a theological basis for this encounter-in-depth envisioned by Pope Paul in a doctrine of the universal working of the Holy Spirit in the human spiritual quest for self-transcendence. Benedict’s dialogue of truth and charity functions as a reminder of the dangers attending this dialogue of spirituality in a world given over, in his view at least, to doctrinaire relativism and cultural eclecticism about the very questions of ultimate concerns Pope Paul had called the church to address in its dialogue with the world.

In June of 2015, at the Castel Gandolfo gathering of Buddhists and Catholics, Francis was calling us to a dialogue of fraternity. What is this

¹³ https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/june/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080607_interrel-dialogue.html

“fraternity” which is to characterize the Catholic Church’s ministry of interreligious dialogue and what will the dialogue of fraternity contribute to the church’s continuing implementation of *Nostra Aetate* as we begin the second fifty years since the promulgation of the Declaration?

Fraternity, seemingly, has been hiding in plain sight. *Fraternidad* and its adjectival cognates appear nine times in the Spanish version of *Laudato Si* and no less than nineteen times in the Spanish version of *Evangelii Gaudium*.¹⁴ The terms fraternity and the related term solidarity appears seven times in the Pope’s address to the joint session of the U.S. Congress in September, 2015. This is in addition to the phrase “brothers and sisters” (three times).¹⁵ So far, however, the most extensive treatment Francis has given to this theme is in the “2014 Message on the World Day of Peace,” wherein *fraternidad* and its cognates appear no less than forty-eight times in the Spanish version of this relatively short text.¹⁶

The position I will argue is that “fraternity” in the magisterium of Pope Francis is a pastoral appropriation of the more technical principle of “solidarity” as developed in the thought of John Paul II. My analysis of texts will be largely focused on the 2014 Message on the World Day of Peace and John Paul’s encyclical letter, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), where he develops his understanding of “the virtue of solidarity.”¹⁷

In Part III of *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (sections 11-26), John Paul offers an extended reflection on the contemporary world from the point of view of the nation-state and the globalization of capitalism. After taking

¹⁴ They appear six times in *Lumen Fidei*, all but one in the latter part of the text. This observation may be significant in that all but the last section of this encyclical, technically Francis’ first, is widely believed to have been prepared under the direction of Pope Benedict. The origin of the phrase, “fraternal dialogue,” may well be *Nostra Aetate* itself, where, in section 4 of the Declaration, the Council Fathers called for “fraternal dialogues” (*fraternis colloquiis*) with Jews, which, along with biblical and theological studies, should promote “mutual understanding and respect.”

¹⁵

https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html

¹⁶ https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20131208_messaggio-xlvi-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html

¹⁷ http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html

note of various problems in the development of peoples, and specifically the unequal development of the “North” and the “South” in its economic as well as its social and cultural aspects, John Paul introduces the concept of “interdependence,” which will prove to be seminal to his analysis of the ethical challenges of globalization and the concept of solidarity as a response to these challenges.

However much society worldwide shows signs of fragmentation, expressed in the conventional names First, Second, Third and even Fourth World, their interdependence remains close. When this interdependence is separated from its ethical requirements, it has disastrous consequences for the weakest. Indeed, as a result of a sort of internal dynamic and under the impulse of mechanisms which can only be called perverse, this interdependence triggers negative effects even in the rich countries (SRS 17).

“Interdependence” has been widely interpreted as John Paul’s understanding of what has come to be called “globalization.”

John Paul closes this survey by returning to the fact of our growing interdependence and endowing it with a moral import by linking it to the concept of “solidarity.”

At the same time, in a world divided and beset by every type of conflict, the conviction is growing of a radical interdependence and consequently of the need for a solidarity which will take up interdependence and transfer it to the moral plane. Today perhaps more than in the past, people are realizing that they are linked together by a common destiny, which is to be constructed together, if catastrophe for all is to be avoided. From the depth of anguish, fear and escapist phenomena like drugs, typical of the contemporary world, the idea is slowly emerging that the good to which we are all called and the happiness to which we aspire cannot be obtained without an effort and commitment on the part of all, nobody excluded, and the consequent renouncing of personal selfishness (SRS 26e).

John Paul’s hopefulness at this point in the Encyclical points to what Francis means by fraternity. The modern world may be beset by a

multitude of social, economic and political problems, but the growth of interdependence, construed economically, politically or culturally, needs to be accompanied by an increasing moral awareness of the need for solidarity among the peoples of the world.

Then, in sections 35-38 of the SRS, John Paul reflects on what he sees as the theological significance of this growing interdependence. He begins by re-asserting the unavoidable ethical implications that accompany the growth of global interdependence today. Policies for addressing obstacles to the development of nations require moral discernment. This is the case because the problems attending globalization are the result of a “moral evil,” in which the “fruit of many sins” leads to the construction of “structures of sin.”

In section 37d, he quickly clarifies the practical purpose of this theological reading of interdependence. A theological and ethical reading of the problems affecting the growth of global interdependence as moral evil suggests a path to be followed in offering resistance to this evil. Then, in SRS 38, John Paul calls for personal conversion (*metanoia*) in the face of the moral evil of structural sin, a conversion that is, in fact, a response to divine will itself.

Finally, in section 38e and 38f of *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, John Paul famously connects the fact of our growing interdependence with what he understands as “the virtue of solidarity.” To the extent that global interdependence is recognized as a moral demand that confronts us all, our response to this challenge cannot be limited to “a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far.” Rather, what is required is “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.” This commitment to the common good in response to the fact of our growing interdependence is what John Paul calls “the virtue of solidarity.” Solidarity is a virtue, not a “vague feeling,” but an enduring constituent of human character which predisposes us to respond morally to a given circumstance. The virtue of solidarity comes into play when the brute fact of our global interdependence is made to serve the common good.

My claim is that human “fraternity” as Pope Francis develops it in his 2014 Message for the World Day of Peace is his own pastoral appropriation of John Paul’s “virtue of solidarity.” An analysis of the

2014 Message will bear out this interpretation. In this text, the Pope uses language reminiscent of SRS 26e. For example, Francis takes note of the explosive growth of communication technology in the world today and the “interconnections” that these technologies promote. This state of affairs requires us to be mindful of “the unity and common destiny of the nations.” In SRS 26e, John Paul makes use of the phrase “common destiny” by way of commenting on our growing awareness of “a radical interdependence.”

In section 1c of the 2014 Message, Francis goes on to observe that in this emergent awareness of interdependence “we see the seeds of a vocation to form a community composed of brothers and sisters who accept and care for one another.” He also laments the fact that “this vocation is frequently denied and ignored” in a world marked by “the globalization of indifference.” The point to be taken from this is that Francis’ “vocation to form a community composed of brothers and sisters,” or what in section 2 he calls “the vocation to fraternity,” corresponds to John Paul’s “virtue of solidarity.” John Paul employs the language of political science (interdependence) and of Christian ethics (virtue). Francis, without ever abandoning John Paul’s language, appropriates John Paul’s teaching with the pastoral language of Christian spirituality (community/vocation).

The distinction I am drawing between the more pastoral language of Francis and the more technical language of John Paul is somewhat overdrawn. For John Paul, political action in the pursuit of solidarity is intimately connected with the practice of charity, “which is the distinguishing mark of Christ’s disciples” (SRS 40). John Paul links the virtue of solidarity in the practice of Christian discipleship. Francis turns to the language of “vocation.” Fraternity, as I am arguing, is a pastoral appropriation of solidarity.

In addition, the link between fraternity and solidarity can be seen in the sheer proximity of these two terms in the 2014 Message. Take, for example, these words from section one of the Message: “The many situations of inequality, poverty and injustice, are signs not only of a profound lack of fraternity, but also of the absence of a culture of solidarity.” In section 4 of the Message, to give another example, Francis draws our attention to *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and to *Populorum*

Progressio of Paul VI.¹⁸ These social encyclicals, Francis comments, “can be very helpful” in understanding how fraternity is “the *foundation* and *pathway* of peace” (emphasis in original). From this he concludes that peace is an “*opus solidaritatis*” and that “fraternity is its principal foundation.” In effect, Francis is glossing *solidaritas* with *fraternitas*. Also in section 4 of the 2014 Message, Francis claims that our obligations to one another are rooted in both “human and supernatural fraternity.” This “spirit of fraternity” places on those who are privileged not only the duties of social justice and universal charity, but also “the duty of solidarity.” The proximity of fraternity and solidarity in the 2014 Message makes them seem, at times, almost interchangeable. Indeed, the major distinction I see here is one of discourse. John Paul derives “solidarity” from the analytic language of political science. Francis appropriates John Paul’s teaching by recasting it with the language of Christian pastoral praxis.

The kinship of fraternity and solidarity can also be seen in the fact that the two popes have construed them in terms of Christian doctrine, especially theological anthropology and the Christian doctrine of God. This point will have repercussions for how the dialogue partners of the Catholic Church will chose to engage with Catholics in a dialogue of fraternity. In SRS 40, John Paul states that solidarity is “undoubtedly a Christian virtue.” This is the case because “solidarity seeks to go beyond itself” and to take on the specifically Christian characteristics of “total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation.” Solidarity, in other words, arises in concrete acts of self-transcendence on the part of the human person. But beyond this, solidarity is endowed with a meaning derived from Christian belief in the human person as the *Imago Dei* as well. The practice of solidarity leads us to recognize that our neighbour is not only a human being with rights and equality, but also “the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit.” Thus, the fulfilment of the virtue of solidarity in Christian discipleship will bring about “a new model of the unity of the human race”¹⁹ which is, in fact, Trinitarian in its dynamics.

¹⁸ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialas* is an extensive reflection on *Populorum Progresio*. See SRS 2-4.

¹⁹ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialas*, 40.

Francis understands fraternity in light of a Christian theism as well. But where John Paul turns to a theological anthropology of the human person as *Imago Dei*, Francis appeals to the Christian doctrines of creation and redemption. We can affirm a belief in the fraternity of all in light of the universal fatherhood of the maker of heaven and of earth. Turning to the New Testament in section 3 of the Message, Francis cites Mt. 23:8-9, “For you have only one Father, who is God, and you are all brothers and sisters.” The universal fatherhood of the Creator of all human beings “effectively generates fraternity, because the love of God, once welcomed, becomes the most formidable means of transforming our lives and relationships with others, opening us to solidarity and to genuine sharing.” A knowledge of Divine Providence provides an additional theological ground to fraternity. In the second section of the 2014 Message, Francis writes,

To understand more fully this human vocation to fraternity, to recognize more clearly the obstacles standing in the way of its realization and to identify ways of overcoming them, it is of primary importance to let oneself be led by knowledge of God’s plan, which is presented in an eminent way in sacred Scripture.

In effect, Francis is appealing to the related Christian doctrines of creation and redemption. The God of all creation is the father of all human beings. In the universal fatherhood of God the solidarity/fraternity of all is not only possible, it is a vocation to which fidelity is demanded. In addition, Francis is appealing to the Christian doctrine of redemption as well. The vocation to fraternity has an eschatological meaning which is revealed in a knowledge of God’s plan.

Finally, as is the case with John Paul’s virtue of solidarity, there is a Christological dimension to human fraternity as well. In section 3 of the Message, Francis teaches that fraternity is revealed in a paramount way in the death and resurrection of Christ. The cross of Christ is the “definitive *foundational* locus” of human fraternity which human beings cannot supply for themselves. Christ has become a “*definitive and new principle* of us all” for in Christ we have all become brothers and sister. John Paul, in section 40 of SRS, speaks of the “brotherhood of all in Christ” in whom we have an “awareness of the common fatherhood of God.” Therefore, solidarity, as a specifically Christian practice, leads us beyond

the natural bonds of citizenship, political alliance and economics to “a new model of the unity of the human race” (SRS 40).

Closing Reflection

In *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul, addressing the church before the Council had completed its debate on *Nostra Aetate*, urged the church to embrace “dialogue” as a way for the church to relate itself to the world given the signs of the times. The church’s dialogue with the world was to be a dialogue of salvation. In calling for such a dialogue, Paul VI was urging the church to engage the world in questions of ultimate religious concern. John Paul’s dialogue of spirituality established an encompassing theological basis for this encounter-in-depth envisioned by Pope Paul. Benedict’s dialogue of truth and charity functions as a reminder to the church of the dangers attending this dialogue of spirituality in a world given over, in his view at least, to doctrinaire relativism and cultural eclecticism about the very questions of ultimate concerns Pope Paul had called the church to address in its dialogue with the world.

Now, Pope Francis is inviting Catholics to initiate dialogues of fraternity with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, indigenous peoples²⁰ and others. This will entail a shift of emphasis away from discussions of doctrine and exchanges regarding spiritual practices, often at a very high level of sophistication, toward discussions that, hopefully, will lead to cooperative action aimed at alleviating social suffering. In a dialogue of fraternity, terms that come easily off the tongue of many Roman Catholics—terms such as social justice, liberation, the critical reflection on praxis, the preferential option for the poor, human dignity, and human rights—will be inserted into our dialogues as never before.

²⁰ See Pope Francis’ speech at the World Meeting of Popular Movements in La Paz, Bolivia, on 9 July, 2015. Fraternity and its cognates appears six times in this short address.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150709_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html

How will our dialogue partners respond? At the very least, Roman Catholics must not assume that their friends who follow other religious paths either understand what is meant by a dialogue of fraternity or can accept its many presuppositions. This is especially the case given the depth of Christian doctrine into which John Paul and Francis have rooted the concepts of solidarity and fraternity. My point is not simply that our dialogue partners will have to take hold of the notions of solidarity and fraternity and translate them into their own religious thinking. Given the hermeneutical complexities of interreligious dialogue, this would be quite naïve. My point is that a dialogue of fraternity may not necessarily make religious sense to our dialogue partners at all. Since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, those who follow other religious paths have gathered with Roman Catholics for dialogues motivated by a variety of reason. To be quite clear, most of our dialogue partners have participated faithfully and eagerly with Catholics in dialogues based on their own deeply held conviction that dialogue with Catholics can be mutually transforming. But those who follow other religious paths have engaged in dialogues with Catholics over these last fifty years since the end of the Council for a variety of reasons. Some come to dialogue with the sole purpose of soliciting support for the State of Israel or pressuring Catholics to address the Christian theological problem of supercessionist theologies of Judaism. Some are motivated by the desire to remind Roman Catholics of their church's complicities in colonialism and its atrocities. Some come to dialogue motivated by a desire to proselytize. To assume that all those interested in interreligious dialogue with Roman Catholics will be interested in exploring the possibilities for cooperation in addressing social problems would be naïve, if not arrogant.

The dialogue of fraternity, however open and inclusive it may sound in the ears of Roman Catholics, comes freighted with theological presuppositions and pastoral priorities that have been developing within Roman Catholicism since well before the opening session of the Second Vatican Council, let alone the final vote at the Council on the *schema* that we know today as *Nostra Aetate*. For a dialogue of fraternity to be successful, that is to say, for such a dialogue to contribute to human flourishing, as an initial step, Roman Catholics must be successful in articulating what they mean by "fraternity." Only then will each dialogue partner be able to reflect on what Catholics are saying about fraternity, its

meaning, if any, for themselves and finally their interest in engaging in such a dialogue.

In addition, we have to ask if a dialogue of fraternity is possible without first going through the lengthy process of coming to understand one another in depth that has been the goal of most dialogues during these first fifty years of *Nostra Aetate*. Do we have to walk before we can run? Perhaps we will discover together that a dialogue of fraternity must begin in dialogues of spirituality and of truth and charity before it can proceed to practical discussions that lead to mutual cooperation in addressing the suffering of the world. And beyond this, in keeping with the notion of the hermeneutical circle as articulated by various proponents of the theology of liberation, after Catholics and their dialogue partners engage in *praxis*, then they must gather for critical reflection on that *praxis*. Pope Benedict was right to place heavy emphasis on the paramount importance of articulating our own religious beliefs with clarity and, indeed, charity and also maintaining an in-depth understanding of the religious convictions of the dialogue partner.

Let me conclude by recalling Pope Francis' reflections on interreligious dialogue in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*.²¹ Here, although there is no explicit mention of a "dialogue of fraternity," the basic vision of such a dialogue as proposed in the 2014 Message and as begun by Cardinal Tauran at Castle Gandolfo is laid out.

In EG #250, Francis observes that Catholic dialogues with those who follow other religious paths must be founded in an attitude of openness to truth and commitment to love. This language, of course, is reminiscent to Benedict's proposal for a dialogue of truth and charity. Francis, however, also took note of the obstacles posed to interreligious dialogue by "fundamentalism on both sides" of the dialogue table. He then went on to say that "interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities." Our dialogues are to be "a conversation about human existence" in which we come to accept others and "their different ways of living, thinking and speaking." This has certainly been the experience of Catholics who have involved themselves in the church's ministry of dialogue since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* at closing

²¹ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

session of the Council. The more we have come to learn about those who follow other religious paths, the deeper we have come to hold one another in esteem, not just in forbearance and tolerance.

In his invitation to us to engage in dialogues of fraternity, however, Francis is saying that a new period in the church's ministry of dialogue is called for. The conversation about human existence that lead to mutual acceptance is but an initial phase of a dialogue-in-depth with those who follow other religious paths. Based on our interreligious friendships generated by our previous encounters, we can then join one another in taking up the duty of serving justice and peace, which should become a basic principle of all our exchanges. A dialogue which seeks social peace and justice is in itself, beyond all merely practical considerations, an ethical commitment which brings about a new social situation (EG 250).

AFRICA BOOK MATTERS
PRESENTING *HIV AND AIDS IN AFRICA*, & *THE CHURCH WE WANT*

On September 27, 2016, the Center for African Studies, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA hosted a book discussion on two recent texts on African topics published by Orbis Books: Azetsop, Jacquineau, ed. *Hiv and Aids in Africa: Christian Reflection, Public Health, Social Transformation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016 (xxxiii, 424 pages); and Orobator, Agbonkhanmeghe E., ed. *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican Iii*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2016 (272 pages).. a noted scholar spoke about the book For each book, A noted scholar spoke about each of the two books, while a Duquesne University faculty responded. The conversation around the two books were made available on the website of the Gumberg Library, Duquesne University. We reproduce below the presentation and comments/responses on the books.¹

Presenting *HIV & AIDS in Africa*

Elochukwu Uzukwu C.S.Sp. (Theology Department, Duquesne University)

I thank Jacquineau Azetsop, the editor of the collective work *HIV and Aids in Africa: Christian Reflection, Public Health, Social Transformation* for enabling me to present this collection. The African Jesuit AIDS network committee has done a lot in encouraging and enabling theological voices to be heard on the important issue of HIV/AIDS. It is also important to thank Joseph Healey, a Maryknoll priest and Orbis Books Africa consultant, for encouraging that the fruits of the wide-ranging research be published by Orbis Books.

We have come a long way in Africa and the world; a long way from the denial and disregard of this epidemic in our various families, communities, and countries, to its acceptance. This has prompted a serious engagement in collaborative work to stress that this epidemic, with the stigma attaching to persons, families, countries and continents, is not just about Africa, about them, but about all of us (Kofi Annan); and, in particular as Church-community, it is about all us, “the body of Christ” (Shawn Copeland).

¹ See Gumberg Library site, <http://guides.library.duq.edu/africa-matters-book-discussion>

HIV/AIDS is a public health issue that reveals, according to Azetsop, “a social immune system that is deeply compromised.” This raises a major challenge for the contributors to this volume. Healing calls for “a new vision of society grounded in a social justice perspective that integrates all social constituencies and seeks to promote the welfare of all.” (xvii) Consequently, the major contribution of this book, what makes it different from so many books on HIV/AIDS in Africa these past 30 years, is the firm conviction that “social transformation” is “the best means of HIV prevention and AIDS management.” (xvi)

This point is important for policymakers worldwide, as well as for community health providers, and the Church spread throughout the world ready to tap into the insight of ethicists and theologians who reinterpret the Church’s Social Teachings. Indeed interdisciplinary conversation between bioethics (ethical social discourse that includes global ethics that researches and promotes healthcare for everyone on the planet eliminating “disparities in access to health” Egan 240) and Catholic social ethics may reveal “a more pastoral, pragmatic, and social ethic...reflects a broader and deeper approach to Catholic theological ethics” rather than the dominant trope of “official catholic teachings on AIDS prevention that seem to emphasize personal sexual behavior at the cost of broader justice, health, and flourishing.” (Anthony Egan, 250)

When reading this collection, one should note that this is initiation into an interdisciplinary research process in a disease that has revealed the limitation of facing disasters/catastrophes in isolated ways. But of course the book does not pretend to proffer the last answer. Questions are raised, questions are answered, and many more unanswered questions remain:

Wilfred Okambawa inspired the project addressed by this through an earlier essay, “African HIV/AIDS theology: Towards a Holistic Approach to the HIV/AIDS issue.” The theological questions he raised led organizers of this collection to include pastoral, moral, spiritual and healing dimensions as well as systematic theological reflection demanded by this discussion. Wilfred Okambawa’s theological-biblical response to HIV/AIDS in the present collection can be summed up in his argumentation on the potency of vicarious suffering in Isaiah 53—the suffering healer, images of healers emerging from profound suffering as found in Jewish, African and Hindu literature and practice—displays, as in the rite of passage, the style of moving from suffering to intercessory

ministry. Questions remain. For example, is vicarious or redemptive suffering defensible in the case of HIV/AIDS?

The conclusion of my contribution in this collection favours redemptive suffering and the school of care that sufferers transform into through the ritual passage that renders so fragile both sufferers and community of caregivers: “God is present and speaks in the cry of the sufferer and the cry of the Just, in the cry of the HIV/AIDS victims and the abandoned Ebola patients, not in violent wind and earthquake, not in the fire and brimstone of condemnations, but as participant/motivator in quiet and silent solidarity, in the services and research, to bring the succor that alleviates Ebola and HIV/AIDS, enable the excluded to reclaim their humanity and to renew the community.”

The above optimistic conclusion is verified more profoundly than I could have imagined in the pastoral care to HIV/AIDS carriers provided by **Home-Based Care** in Zambia (in the 1980s when the mere announcement of HIV/AIDS was a death sentence): the “caring women” stepped into the void created by pure “despair”—absence of a cure, the increasing number of the infected, the failure of the healthcare system, rejection by society, and “collective paralysis” (Leonard Chiti, 382: “initially the home-based-care system emerged as a community/grassroots-based initiative to deal with a very serious matter of inadequate capacity of the state health delivery to cope with the challenge of increasing numbers of patients testing positive for HIV”, 378). Instead of abandoning the sufferers, the “Caring women”—nurses, family and friends—took over the responsibility of caring for those rejected and abandoned to die. HIV/AIDS patients felt they belonged; and hope of finding meaning in their life was reignited (382).

Problems over HIV/AIDS persist all over Africa and the world, but *HIV and Aids in Africa: Christian Reflection, Public Health, Social Transformation* appears to be part of the solution.

RESPONSES

A Healthcare Professional's Reflection on *HIV & AIDS in Africa: Beyond the Medication*

Jordan R Covvey, PharmD, PhD, BCPS, Assistant Professor; Division of Pharmaceutical, Administrative and Social Sciences
Duquesne University School of Pharmacy; Pittsburgh PA 15282

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on this important topic. I am currently an Assistant Professor in Pharmacy Administration here within the Duquesne University School of Pharmacy. I am originally trained as a pharmacist with experience in both community and hospital-based clinical settings. I transitioned to become a clinically based researcher and now my teaching focuses on public and global health, of which HIV/AIDS is a continually important topic. I speak today not as an expert on this particular topic (either in HIV/AIDS or theology), but as a general healthcare professional, educator and global citizen with interest in how society can eventually move toward an AIDS-free generation.

As I read aspects of *HIV & AIDS in Africa*, I reflected back to one of my earliest clinical experiences working with patients with HIV/AIDS here in the USA, on an advanced pharmacy practice experience in one of four Ryan White-funded HIV/AIDS clinics in my state, a program that provides comprehensive care to over half a million patients with HIV/AIDS across the USA. As a young pharmacy student, I helped provide care to patients within the clinic in concert with other healthcare professionals, with a focus on medication adherence, adverse effects and other related issues.

What perhaps struck me as most eye-opening through the experience was that access to primary care and support services through the clinic was an essential piece of the puzzle, but the 'cure' to HIV/AIDS would involve so much more. Patients recounted stories of how they worked to maintain their lifestyle with confidentiality, scenarios of stigmatizing behaviour among family and friends, feelings of guilt over how they contracted HIV or fear for their quality of life moving

forward. But not all sentiments were discouraging; many others expressed hope in how care had advanced since the first discoveries of the virus, opportunities to educate others on the disease, and how the disease had inadvertently led to a healthier view of their life.

What I took away from that clinic more than anything was that HIV/AIDS, perhaps in a way unlike any other condition, was a societal issue relevant to all of us. The biomedical model of disease which I had first studied was not completely explanatory, and the psychological, social and economic aspects of HIV/AIDS were just as relevant.

The text of today's discussion, *HIV & AIDS in Africa: Christian Reflection, Public Health, Social Transformation*, examines these issues within the African context and from a theological perspective. What I found most informative within the text as a clinician was the examination of the factors underlying the origins and prevalence of the disease on the continent. While the spread of the virus may be commonly thought of in a solely behavioural context, the text of the book discusses several key non-biomedical contributors within Africa: poverty, the status of women in society, cultural norms, and familial structures. It has taken time to understand the disease within these influences, and how society's response will ultimately fail without incorporating them into policies and strategic plans.

That is not to say that the biomedical origins and treatment of the disease are not just as important. HIV/AIDS denialists who reject the science of the disease are a dangerous opposition that hamper progress in the fight against the epidemic, as evidenced by the effect of policies set in place by former South African president Thabo Mbeki.² Our understanding and response to HIV/AIDS must be shaped by all contributors to the disease and how they are interconnected.

As a pharmacist, it is natural for my focus on HIV/AIDS within the African context to drift to effective antiretroviral access on the continent,

² Chigwedere P, Seage GR 3rd, Gruskin S, et al. "Estimating the lost benefits of antiretroviral drug use in South Africa." *J Acquir Immune Defic Syndr*. 2008 1;49(4):410-5

and how government and organizational policies can continue to support this lifeline. Significant progress has been seen in recent years in expansion of treatment provision. The World Health Organization estimates that in sub-Saharan Africa, antiretroviral access increased more than 100-fold between 2003 to 2014.² However, gaps are still largely prevalent, particularly within healthcare infrastructures being modernized and financially stable enough to support delivering effective treatment to individuals in need. Diverse and renewable funding sources for HIV programs are needed across the continent. It is also essential to work to remove barriers to antiretroviral access, including high pharmaceutical costs, political unrest and government regulation through tariffs/taxes. Here in the USA, PEPFAR, or the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, has been a key initiative in the expansion of funding for HIV/AIDS globally since 2003. However, the volatile political climate in the USA may render the future of this program shaky.

In conclusion, it is my belief that all opportunities in life begin with education. The text we discuss today provides a unique social perspective on HIV/AIDS in Africa, and is a first step for any of us to learn, grow and challenge our understanding of this topic. In my lifetime alone, HIV/AIDS in the USA has shifted from an acute and deadly illness to a chronic and manageable disease. It is essential that we strive to achieve the same goals in Africa as we continue to work toward a global AIDS-free generation.

Response to *HIV& AIDS in Africa*:

Dr. Bridget C Calhoun (Chair and Associate Professor, Rangos School of Health Sciences, Department of Physician Assistant Studies)

The world-wide burden of HIV infection is almost unimaginable. We now know that HIV-infection is a life-long disease with no cure. Much of my work in HIV/AIDS research involves working with people living with HIV-infection. In many cases, they aren't just living, they're thriving! What was once a fatal infection, with an expected life expectancy < 10 years, is now a manageable, chronic condition when

antiretroviral medications are taken as prescribed. Much of the research in HIV/AIDS in developed nations is now concentrated on the chronic, adverse effects of the medications, rather than on the infection itself. However, antiretroviral medications aren't available to everyone, and for those who don't have access to them, or who can't take them on a consistent basis, there is a high likelihood of succumbing to the infection.

The science of HIV is not particularly difficult to understand. The human immunodeficiency virus is an intracellular parasite. It requires a living host, and is easily transmitted from one person to another via exposure to blood, semen, vaginal secretions or breast milk. World-wide, the primary modes of transmission include sexual activity, and transmission from mothers to infants during birth, referred to as vertical transmission. A secondary mode of infection is exposure to infected blood.

Once HIV enters the body, it selectively infects human T cells which are very abundant in the circulation. T cells are crucial to immunity by fighting infection and destroying native cells that are dysplastic, precancerous or cancerous. Infected T cells can no longer perform their normal duties, and are destroyed by other cells in the body. The bone marrow produces more T cells to compensate for the loss, but the rate of destruction often exceeds the rate of production, leading to a gradual decline of T cells over time. The selective destruction of T cells among those not treated for their HIV infection explains why they are most likely to eventually die from co-infections and cancers.

Without antiretroviral medications, those with HIV infection will die, usually within a decade or so of becoming infected. Modern treatment involves using a combination of medications to interrupt viral replication within the human host. Unfortunately, these medications remain very expensive. When taken as prescribed, modern antiretroviral therapy can suppress the virus to undetectable levels in most people. Life expectancy among those well treated for HIV infection is now several decades.

So, the science of HIV is relatively simple. The deadly virus, easily transmitted from host to host can devastate a village, region, country or continent. What complicates HIV as a communicable disease is that the host is highly sophisticated!

The human host, the person infected with HIV, experiences many emotions in addition to the physical changes associated with the

infection. They experience fear, isolation, guilt, desperation and in some cases, a sense of worthlessness. Many times neighbours are victim-blaming and may even be violent towards those infected. HIV infected individuals have a long history of being marginalized by their own social and cultural world. The extent to which this happens varies from region to region and nation to nation. Important topics such as these are well explained in *HIV & AIDS in Africa*. The well-known public health principles of social determinants are also explained. Social determinants are strong predictors of health and disease everywhere in the world, but especially in the face of poverty.

Social determinants such as social class, economic status, literacy skills, position within the cultural hierarchy and self-efficacy are highly influential, and can directly contribute to whether someone *lives* with HIV infection or prepares to *die* with HIV infection.

This book, *HIV & AIDS in Africa* is a collective piece of public health, public policy, social transformation, history, theology, politics, anthropology, human rights, compassion, concern and hope for the future in the context of HIV/AIDS. The text considers the social determinants mentioned above, and identifies reasons why prevention strategies effective in industrialized nations, are often ineffective in developing or underdeveloped nations, particularly within Africa.

It is well documented that the African continent was disproportionately affected by the AIDS epidemic, and explanations for this are provided within this text. Relevant statistical information is also included, and reflects the fact that within the first 20 years of the epidemic, 17 million Africans died. These tragic deaths left 12 million orphans. In 2008, Africa had 11% of the world's population, but approximately 67 % of people living with HIV or suffering from AIDS. This disproportionate burden of disease reflects informal stratifications of social class, culturally acceptable sexism, little understanding of viral transmission, and a large population with few marketable skills. The combinations of these things make some African nations particularly susceptible to HIV epidemics. There is compelling evidence that social inequalities not only affect the *distribution* of disease, but also the *outcome* of the disease.

The book further explains the particular risk of HIV infection among women. Among the poorest women, commercial sex work (either formal or informal) develops and evolves as a survival strategy for themselves and their families. Many times, these disadvantaged women cannot

safely demand their partners wear condoms or negotiate safer sex practices.

One of the most widely publicized HIV prevention strategies is the ABC approach, which is described in the text. “A” for abstinence “B” for be faithful and “C” for condoms. This approach is meaningless for women coerced into sex, forced into sex, married when young teens, or infected by their husband.

HIV & AIDS in Africa appropriately describes a more appropriate approach, “SAVE”, which means safer practices, access to treatment, voluntary counselling and testing, and empowerment. This likely serves more women, particularly in cultures where widow inheritance, marrying underage girls, genital mutilation, polygamy, and urban migration of men in search of jobs (with casual sex in the process) are prevalent.

The book further explains how public health practice is different in resource poor areas. In developed nations we can focus our efforts on medical research and advancements. In underdeveloped nations, efforts must be focused on the basics of acquiring medications, providing proper nutrition, and training health care providers.

Frequently, in resource poor nations, such as many within Africa, the only people present when a person dies of AIDS are the healthcare workers and clergy members. Sadly, many of the victims have been disowned by their family, ignored by their former friends and shunned by neighbours. What happens on the personal level is amplified by what happens on a national level. Many national governments were slow to act, and in some cases even initially denied the devastating AIDS epidemic, which delayed acknowledgement of the epidemic.

The Catholic Church, with its extensive network of hospitals and clinics in Africa and elsewhere, is the world’s largest private provider to medical care to people living with HIV. This is reinforced throughout *HIV & AIDS in Africa*. The crucial roles of faith, and the faithful followers, are stressed throughout this text. *HIV & AIDS in Africa* will be of interest to anyone interested in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. For me, the context of this book can be best summarized by a statement within the book which reads, “for Christians, our neighbour is not the person who lives close, but rather the one who is in need.”

PRESENTING: *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*

By Joseph G. Healey, MM³

African Conversational Theology: A New Way of Doing Theology

I am delighted to be here at Duquesne University this morning. I bring warm African greetings from our two editors Emmanuel Orobator in Nairobi, Kenya who likes to be called “Bator” and Jacquineau Azetsop in Rome, Italy. They are deeply with us in spirit.

I am an ordinary and regular member of St. Kizito Small Christian Community (in short, SCC) in the Waruku Section of St. Austin’s Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Country of Kenya, Continent of Africa, world. I like to begin this way. To be faithful to this new way of being church, my main credibility is that as a priest I have no special responsibilities in our SCC. The lay people are the leaders of our SCC. I am happy to be a student, a learner. As we say in Swahili: “*Mimi ni mwanafunzi*” (“I am a student”).

I recall my long and meaningful friendship and pastoral activities with many Spiritan missionaries in both Tanzania and Kenya going back to 1968—that is 48 years ago, long before some of you were born. The present Pastor of St. Austin’s Parish is a Kenyan Spiritan—and my former student at Tangaza University College in Nairobi that is like the Kenyan mini-version of the Catholic Theological Union (CTU) in Chicago.

I teach a course on "Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as a New Model of Church in Africa Today." I am 78 years old. In our first class the students who are in their 20s started calling me *Mzee*, the Swahili word for "elder," as a title of respect. But I said, "No. Not yet. Not yet. Please give me another name." So the next day they started calling me "a youth from a long time ago." I like that a lot better.

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For many years African theologians have searched for a genuine, authentic African method of theology. At the Padua Conference on Theological Ethics in Padua, Italy in July, 2006 the Ugandan theologian and historian John Waliggo emphasized the importance of African narrative theology and said:

Africans can now stimulate theological development. We refuse to leave our cultures and traditions behind. We have much to say about inculturation, offering new models for theological reflection. Our theological style is very concerned with narrative, expressing teachings in story. Our people listen better when you give them a story. This means using local expressions and rituals, linking the Gospel to their story.⁴

Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole⁵ emphasizes that African theologians listen to the real life stories of the African people. Stories are not just anecdotal. African Storytelling is a way of living, a way of listening, a way of being theologian. It includes oral theological conversation and importantly, it honours women's stories and experiences. Stories give texture to theology. They illustrate the lives of people living the theology, preventing theology from being just a series of propositions. Importantly, storytelling honours women's stories and experiences.

⁴ John Waliggo in an interview with John Allen, "An African Perspective," *National Catholic Reporter (NCR)*, 14 July, 2006, NCR Website, retrieved on 2 July, 2017, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/african-perspective>, p. 2.

⁵ Emmanuel Katongole as quoted in "Opening Prayer and Meditation" in "Book Event -- Three New Books on Africa" at Hekima College – HIPSIR, Nairobi, Kenya, 15 October, 2016 in Joseph G. Healey, MM. *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website retrieved on 2 July, 2017, http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf, p. 451.

African theologians are developing African Conversation Theology, or more specifically African Christian Conversation Theology, as a “New Way of Doing Theology.” In Africa we prefer the term African *Palaver* Theology, but we realize that the word *palaver* carries a lot of negative baggage in the Western world. For us it is both the name of a method or process of theology and the name of a type of content of theology (much like Liberation Theology). Method heavily influences and determines content and vice versa. It is a two-way process that illuminates and enriches African values and Christian values. It is similar to Mango Tree Theology and Storytelling Theology.

Bator describes this distinctive method or process very clearly in the “Preface” in our new book, *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*. This is African Theology as Conversation, Active Dialog, Intensive Listening and Learning from Each Other (described as “listening in conversation”) and Consensus. This new way of doing African Christian Theology is participatory, collaborative, democratic, cross-disciplinary and multigenerational.

Bator expands this conversational theological methodology by saying:

Strong, dynamic currents are shaping the flow of theological discourse in Africa. A unique characteristic of this discourse is the widening circle of conversation partners. African theologians are no longer content with talking to like-minded theologians; they engage bishops, civil society groups and government representatives as conversational partners in a rational dialogue and critical analysis within society and in the [Catholic] Church. This conversational methodology breaks new ground in theological scholarship in Africa and represents a new way of doing theology in which collaboration and conversation win over confrontation and adversarial positions. The result is a process of mutual listening and learning, a vital ingredient for constructing what veteran African theologian Elochukwu Uzukwu designates “the listening church.”⁶

⁶ Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (ed.), *Practicing Reconciliation, Doing Justice, Building Peace: Conversations in Catholic Theological Ethics in Africa*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2013, pp. 130-131.

Elochukwu Uzukwu published his important Orbis book *A Listening Church, Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* in 1996. To use a play on words perhaps Pope Francis “listened” to him when the pope emphasizes that the Catholic bishops and other leaders today must be a Listening Church first and a Teaching Church second.

The starting point of this kind of African Christian Theology is both context and experience. Many of the essays in this book draw on grassroots experiences and practical “on the ground” research. In the spirit of Pope Francis African theologians try to listen to the cries of the poor, the marginalized and those on the peripheries of society. This method draws on the ideas and writings of Bénézet Bujo, Jean Marc Ela, Emmanuel Katongole, Teresa Okure and Elochukwu Uzukwu—the last three having essays in *The Church We Want!*. Local, contextual theologies can be constructed in Africa with the local communities as “theologian.”

Bator developed this distinctive method or process in convening the three international Theological Colloquia on Church, Religion and Society in Africa (in short, TCCRSA) from which the essays of this new book are taken. This “Three-year Theological Research Project in the Currents of the 50th Anniversary of Vatican II” took place in Nairobi in 2013, 2014 and 2015. These conversation-style theological research seminars used *palaver* sessions, *baraza* sessions and informal, interactive roundtables on African theology to provoke conversation, discussion and dialog. Over the three years there were 60 participants from very diverse backgrounds. The 20 writers in this volume include 10 priests, five lay women, three religious sisters and two bishops. Significant is the contribution of the eight women.

I would like to illustrate this method by using my own essay called “Beyond Vatican II: Imagining the Catholic Church of Nairobi I.” Bator first invited writers to draft papers on specific themes. I invited many African pastoral workers including members of grassroots Small Christian Communities and theologians such as Laurenti Magesa into the “conversation” on my paper and incorporated their comments and insights. Then the papers were circulated to the colloquium participants to read and reflect on ahead of time. Some gave feedback to the presenters. For example, one priest from South Africa gave me a very helpful and detailed written commentary on my paper with many practical suggestions.

At the colloquium itself I presented a summary of my paper in a plenary session. Here is the opening paragraph under the heading “Be Bold and Creative” taken from No. 33 of Pope Francis’ *The Joy of the Gospel*. I quote from page 189 of our new book:

The editor of this volume, Bator, Jim Keane, the Acquiring Editor of Orbis Books, and I met to discuss a book that could evolve out of TCCRSA. In brainstorming about a possible title and cover we tried to think outside the conventual box. We drew a line through the words “Vatican III, Rome” on the cover and wrote “Nairobi I.” We could have as easily written “Kinshasa I” or “Lagos I.” Going further afield we could have written “Manila I” or “Sao Paulo I.” The idea was to challenge the natural assumption that the next ecumenical council has to take place in Rome. If the center of gravity of the Catholic Church is moving from the West to the Global South, why not have the successor to Vatican II meet in one of the great cities of the Southern Hemisphere?

My co-presenter was Nontando Hadebe, a lay woman theologian from South Africa, that in itself shows the rich diversity of the participants. Afterwards, a half hour plenary session combined comments from the floor and questions and answers on our papers. Bator, a man of many talents, simultaneously recorded this “conversation” on my paper in his computer and “miraculously” handed me a half page summary at the end of the session. During the coffee breaks and meals I dialogued further with participants on my paper. In the spirit and practice of this colloquium using the method or process of African Christian Conversation Theology, I incorporated the comments and insights of the participants in the final draft of my essay for this book.

Two final take aways: First, in the spirit of the pastoral challenges of Pope Francis, and the theme of this new book, the final section of my essay proposes pastoral solutions to the “Two Meanings of the Eucharistic Famine in Africa:”

1. Ordination of Married Community Elders or Locally Ordained Ministers (Married Priesthood).
2. African Stages of Marriage.

Let our conversation, discussion and discernment on these pastoral challenges in Africa evolve and grow.

Second, Uzukwu is planning to collect the texts of our book presentations, responses and a summary of the Questions and Answers of this event and make them available on the Discussion Forum of the *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* (Volume 29)—both the print and online digital (electronic) versions. Interested people are invited to post their comments and further insights in this online forum. We hope a rich and online “conversation” and exchange will take place. This is a perfect way for our African Christian Conversation Theology to develop and grow. The voices of Africa are important. We have to continue to emphasize that “Africa Matters.” We can share the gifts of Africa with the Global Church and our world society.

In the spirit of the collaborative, collegial and synodal style of our African Conversational Theology let us follow the well-known African Proverb that is also very popular in Western countries: *If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together.*

Response to: *The Church We Want:*

James Chukwuma Okoye (Duquesne University, Center for Spiritan Studies)

The book intends to “provide a critical understanding of present reality and to create paths towards growth, transformation, and change in the church” (xviii). The essays are grouped into three sections: The Francis Effect and the Church in Africa; Critique of Theological Methodology and Ecclesial Practice; and A Church that Goes Forth with Boldness and Creativity. The operating theme is *transformation*.

Pope Francis is a product of the Latin American church, where praxis is contextual and the program of conscientization is *transformative* (18, 48). SECAM has produced many documents; the two Synods on Africa have focused on the Church as Family of God. Healy (197) suggests the model of Small Christian Communities, the ordination of community elders, perhaps also a two-year catechumenate for Christian marriage (200, 202). Stan Ilo (12) outlines his fears about an African pope (a bit of a caricature but with elements of truth): he [the African pope] would see contextual ecclesiology as ecclesiological relativism or tribal Catholicism, impose unquestioning obedience, respond to

challenges by calling for more spiritual depth, further sacramentalization of the people, greater spiritual devotions and pious activities.

Question

What in Africa would produce such an African pope and what should we be doing about it?

How does the SCC model of Church compare to the transformative Basic Communities of Latin America?

What transformation has come from the model of Church as Family of God?

African Catholicism is in the throes of a drama of *life* versus *law/tradition*. A few examples: There are firm directions on the use of contraceptives, but not on Christian participation in violence and killing (167) or on violence against women and “corrective rape” of “sexual minorities” (214, Hadebe). Thousands of women are dying because their husbands are HIV positive (61). Katongole (162) asks, why is sexual orientation a basic right but drinking good water is not? Mwaura reminds us of the thousands of street children in urban settings (151), manifesting the breakdown of family solidarity. The UN reckons there are 13 million orphans in sub-Saharan Africa (152). By 2020, more than 50% of African youth will be illiterate and unemployed. There is growing charismatization of African Catholicism (166, note 9, Katongole). The editor reminds us that some customs may be beautiful, but may no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel (xxx).

Question

What impact are church and religion having on society and sound government?

What about the necessary discernment of culture? Do we too easily “sacralize” culture?

There is yet no agreement on resources to hand. The African church is not a New Testament church. All we need is the New Testament as unique source, and it calls us to be a Eucharistic church (97-98, Okure). Problem is, there are cultural ways of being Eucharistic. Eucharistic chapels and hourly adoration may do little to alleviate inhumanity, fratricidal violence and oppression of the poor! We need just two sources, says Nyamiti: the Bible, with particular emphasis on the official teaching

of the church, the magisterium, and the African socio-cultural situation (123). Well, both Bible and magisterium need be read with African eyes. Béré names the following resources: Bible and African traditional religions, Christian revelation and African philosophy, analysis of sermons, vernacular translations of the Bible (123). And he suggests we look at the criteria for the word of God in *Verbum Domini*, 2008—Christ, Scripture, tradition, cosmos; to which he adds conscience (which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1778 calls the “aboriginal Vicar of Christ”). Some in the Church currently downgrade the role of conscience, lest people decide for themselves. Pope Francis effectively combined the spiritual, theological, and scientific for ecology (233). And our editor chimes in: “theological evaluation is not enough ... sociological analysis and anthropological study are equally important for understanding the meaning and function” (xxiv, speaking of the family).

Question

African religions are said to contribute the values of harmony, solidarity, and a non-exclusivist tone (110). How have they helped in healing ethnic strife?

What contribution has African Theology made in the lives of the people?

How do you read? The Bible is the language of evil spirits, demons, angels, dreams; we must reject demythologization and affirm the logic and spirituality of witchcraft, polygamy, divination, traditional healing practices (87, Magesa). Have we studied what belief in witchcraft and demon possession do to the African psyche? The evangelist John demythologized demon possession for the division within the heart of truth and falsehood, light and darkness. There is no uniform New Testament ecclesiology (111, Uzukwu); an African ecclesiology will involve choices. The global and the local need be integrated, so also Christian and African cultural values and meanings (79, Magesa). Béré (124) opines that “the Bible as a key source of theology has simply been left out of African theology... no systematic methodology has so far proven operational.” The editor rejoins that TCCRSA has successfully initiated a new way of doing conversational, cross-disciplinary, collaborative, and multigenerational theology” (xiii). Let the discussions begin.