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THE CONCEPT AND PRACTICE OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

One major challenge adherents of different religions face, particularly in Nigeria is how to relate their faith with the truth of the other religious traditions. The shrinkage of space in the 21st century has made actual the fact that great number of human beings of diverse religious affiliations exist. The diverse religious traditions, practiced out there can no longer be suppressed or exterminated by sword. Thus, the concept of interreligious dialogue is placed in the front burner of contemporary discourse. The paper offers an ecumenical approach to the understanding and practice of interreligious dialogue within a pluralistic society. The discourse is applying historical and analytical methods, argues that interreligious dialogue is a sure path that promotes respect among members of different religions. The paper suggests practical ways of engaging in dialogue with adherents of other religions and concludes that exclusivist and inclusivity positions have no grounds for real religious acceptance.

KEYWORDS: Interreligious, Dialogue, Practices, Contemporary Discourse, truth

INTRODUCTION

The religious picture of the world today is an ever changing one. Urbanization, mass migration, refugees, secularization of religious centered countries, and new religious movements have done away with religious realities that were once clear and well defined. In other words, humanity's religious experience is that of religious pluralism. Jacques Dupuis captured the picture better when he said:

Everyday new knowledge of the other religious tradition comes to us creating new awareness of humanity's multi-religious context. Modern means of communication comes to add to this fact of the daily coexistence of various traditions. (Dupuis, 1991:3)

Thus, it could be said that religious pluralism is here to stay. This accounts for the reason why the concept of inter-religious dialogue has been discovered anew even when it is a reality that has always existed. To buttress this point, Theresa Seow submitted that, "inter-religious dialogue is not merely a human initiative but truly the call of God to discover Him as the only source of all living being". (Seow, 2003:85). So, there is no longer a homogeneous country with homogeneous religion. Since we are more aware of inter-religious dialogue today than ever before, we cannot but wonder how we should act in regard to it. The thrust of this paper, therefore, is an attempt towards the definitions of inter-religious dialogue and its practice from a Christian perspective.

We shall look at definitions from various sources and scholars. It is from the data gathered that we shall highlight the need for inter-religious dialogue.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the key words that emerged from Vatican Council II was that of “dialogue” along theological and social lines. Vatican Council II was the gathering of more than two thousand bishops of the Catholic Church during the reign of Pope John XXIII. This Council took place in Rome and it called for a spirit of renewal to regenerate methods that will direct the Roman Catholic Church in relation to other Faith Traditions. The Council took place from 1962-1965 and it assumed that no one has a monopoly on the truth. (Nwosu, 2010: 34)

It is within this context that John Paul II described interfaith dialogue as a Path that can promote respect among members of different religions and help to bring peace and harmony to a world torn by conflict and war, poverty, and the destruction of the environment. (Sherwin, 1999:2) In other words, John Paul II emphasized mutual respect for cultures and interfaith dialogue can help to transform the world; especially the world where violence and destruction are being carried out in the name of religion. It is often the case that when religion, cultural and ethnic identity coincide, religion becomes a pretext for conflict. In this regard, interfaith dialogue brings together the reality of reciprocal relationships of different faiths.

Therefore, the context for understanding different attitude towards other religious traditions hangs on three major poles: the exclusivist view, the inclusivist view, and the pluralist view. (Race, 1982:10). It was Alan Race that put the typology of pluralism, inclusivism and exclusivism firmly on the map of the study of religions. His influential work is titled: *Christians and Religious Pluralism*.

From the early centuries, the predominant Christian approach to other faith traditions has been that of exclusivism. Within this perspective, exclusivism is defined as:

holding that only one single revelation is true or one single religion is true and all other revelations or religions are ultimately false. Truth, revelation, and salvation are tightly and explicitly connected. (Race, 1982:10)

(Costa, 2000:20)

In its most strict application, exclusivism would mean, for instance, that Christianity is the only true way to redemption. The Christian exclusivists refer to some scriptural passages in support of their stand. For example:

I am the way, I am the truth, and I am the life. No one comes to the father except by me. (John 14:6)

In the past, the Roman Catholic Church supported a literal interpretation of the above passage. And in 1215, according to John Leith, the fourth Lateran Council stated, “There is one universal Church of believers, outside which there is no salvation at all for any”. (Leith, 1963: 58)

It is worthy of note that we can have a Buddhist or Afrelist version of exclusivism that insists that fundamentally only one single religion is true and all other religions alike are finally false. (Costa, 2000:21)

The inclusivists have much more positive view of other faith traditions. According to this approach, adherents of other traditions may attain redemption due to the fact that the grace of God is present in their traditions. Within this perspective, it is argued that truth can be found in various forms within other religions and within their different structures. The inclusivist view was developed in great detail by Karl Rahner (1904-1984). Rahner argued that the Christian tradition is “the absolute religion, intended for all people, who cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right”. (Rahner, 1981:56). However, since God desires salvation for all people, “there are supernatural, grace-filled elements in non-Christian religions”. (Rahner, 1981:61). Rahner makes bold to submit that salvation is caused by the power and grace of Christ. In fact, he considers other people outside the Christian fold to be “anonymous Christians”. The traditional implication of this position is that Christianity is regarded as the fulfillment of other religions. To what extent this stance facilitates better inter-religious dialogue remains questionable.

The thrust of the pluralist view holds that all religions have true revelations and therefore no single religion can claim final and definitive truth. This means that all religions equally have valid paths to redemption. It is within this perspective that Brian Hebblethwaite wrote that:

Christians must cease to think their faith as bearing witness to God’s final and absolute self-revelation to man. Rather, they must learn to recognize their experiences of God in Christ to be but one of many different saving encounters with the divine which have been given to different historical and cultural segments of mankind. (Hebblethwaite, 1981:8)

The question of the interpretation of scriptural texts and experience are the two main points which pluralists usually apply as strategies against any claim of absolute truth by any religion.

Based on the foregoing, Paul Knitter, in a most persuasive manner, noted that,

other religions may be just as effective... in bringing their followers to truth, and peace, and well-being with God as Christianity has been for Christians; these other religions, again because they are so different from Christianity, may have just as important a message and vision for all peoples as Christianity does. (Knitter, 1995:30)

Paul Knitter, following his submission, has a strong commitment to Christian tradition. But at the same time holds that there can be numerous paths by which human beings can seek and attain truth. Furthermore, it facilitates cordial inter-religious dialogue and harmony. Though, the need to speak clearly and objectively about a given tradition in a language that can be judged to be adequate remains one of the greatest challenges of inter-religious dialogue. This shows that the path of inter-religious dialogue is not an easy one.

THE CONCEPT OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

As we noted earlier, the contemporary situation of today is trapped in an irreversible trend of mingling cultures and peoples. The co-mingling of cultures is so intense that one another's beliefs and religious commitments can no longer be ignored. This kind of trend inevitably leads to many questions; questions that are beyond mere speculations but are immediately practical in this present time. This has caused some religious bodies like World Council of Churches (WCC) and Vatican II Council to issue documents that put a stamp of official approval on a more open-minded approach to other religious traditions. Today, we talk and encourage inter-religious dialogue.

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 6th Edition*, dialogue is about formal discussion between two groups, especially when they are trying to solve a problem, end a dispute (Wehmeier, 2001). and understand themselves. Dialogue, from every indication is becoming one of the basic principles in human relations. This is so because human mind does not know ultimate truth and we do not know other faith traditions from the inside. Again, dialogue deserves attention since others are worthy of respect and we learn from one another. It is within this context that we can see dialogue as a gate way to mutual respect, acceptance, interfaith harmony and personal friendship. As Onaiyekan noted, "dialogue is to be seen as a gentle listening to each other so as to discover those things which we hold in common so that on the basis of this common ground we can face together common challenges". (Onaiyekan, 2010).

It is in the light of the above point that Monika Hellwig described dialogue as knowledge, which leads to greater appreciation of the other's position and conviction in various matters of human concern. She added that dialogue:

embraces a sincere desire to know more about one another's traditions and to disseminate that knowledge in order to dispel prejudice and suspicion. (Monika, 1992: 150)

In a very broad sense, dialogue involves constant efforts to collaborate for peace on a worldwide basis and on all levels of society. It is an activity or exercise geared towards constant explorations for possible ways of meeting urgent human needs for peace. It is a necessity for the search for common values in human society. Ursula King puts it clearer when he said that:

dialogue is about voice of difference, about different moods and experiences, about different ways of living and experiencing, different ways of knowing, thinking, feeling, and acting. (Ursula, 1997: 116).

Ursula is more or less saying that true dialogue is an art, which must be understood and practiced. And because human beings have an inborn internationality for communication and interaction, dialogue presents itself as an activity that is not static but dynamic.

The requirements for dialogue between people of different faiths go beyond those of ordinary day-to-day conversation and human contact. This is the domain of inter-religious

dialogue. The document: “Dialogue and Proclamation” puts it thus:

in the context of religious pluralism, dialogue means all positive and constructive inter-religious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths, which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment in obedience to truth and respect for freedom. (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991).

Dialogue at the purely human level can mean reciprocal communication, leading to a common goal. At a deeper level it means inter personal communion. In the light of the great command given by Jesus Christ to the apostles to go and preach to the whole nations, dialogue becomes an attitude of respect and friendship, which permeates all activities constituting the evangelizing mission of the Church. This is appropriately known as the spirit of dialogue.

Hans Kung, a German theologian saw inter-religious dialogue as an indispensable element in dealing with global situation of the present. (Kung, 1999:169).

In this light, John Paul II speaking to the religious leaders of Sri Lanka, declared:

Inter-religious dialogue is a precious means by which the followers of various religions discover shared points of contact in the spiritual life, while acknowledging the differences, which exist among them.(Paul II, 1995)

Inter-religious dialogue therefore, is the interactions between people who belong to different religions. It is understood and practiced as a dimension of mission. It involves believers from different faiths living together in a civil society.

Inter-religious dialogue in the context of religious coexistence accepts religion as life. In this case believers draw inspiration from their respective religions for their public conduct. It is here as well that adherents of different faiths seek to collaborate to provide a moral-religious base for the creation of a society of justice, freedom and friendship. This informs Michael Amaladoss’ argument that the goal of inter-religious dialogue is harmony. (Michael, :2000:112).

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN PRACTICE.

There are four basic ways of engaging in inter-religious dialogue. They are described as: dialogue of life, dialogue of work, dialogue of theological exchanges and the dialogue of religious experience. (Salihu :2005:23)

The dialogue of life refers to an ongoing friendly exchange between believers in the course of daily life in any community. The dialogue of life prompts people to participate in some way in each other’s festivals and life cycle rituals. This form of inter-religious dialogue leads to the removal of prejudices. At this level, love for humanity, for each individual person is recognized and appreciated. It is at this level that transformation of the world begins. Again, at this level every man and woman is accepted as created by God. It was in approval of this form of inter-religious dialogue that John Paul II, speaking to participants at the World Conference on Religion and Peace in 1994 stated:

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The religious leaders must clearly show that they are pledged to the promotion of peace precisely because of their religious belief. Religion is not, and must not become, a pretext for conflict, particularly when religious, cultural and ethnic identities coincide. (Paul II, 1994). John Paul II was convinced that inter-religious dialogue as a dialogue of life is a path that can promote respect among members of different religions and help bring peace and harmony to a world torn by conflict, war and poverty. Thus, dialogue of life shows or challenges human minds to learn to acknowledge and appreciate each other as persons prior to religious affiliations.

The dialogue of work as another form of inter-religious dialogue is sometimes called dialogue of collaborative action. It urges different believers to collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people. This is what Hans Kung, in his “Global Project” means when he said that inter-religious dialogue has become an indispensable element in dealing with global situation of the present. (Kung,199:169).

The dialogue of collaborative action is a dialogue chiefly for humanitarian purposes. It is about the defense and promotion of common human and spiritual values. Religious freedom, human and social rights come under this level of dialogue. Thus, the liberation of people is accepted as an aspect of inter-religious project.

Another form of inter-religious dialogue is dialogue of spiritual experience. This form of dialogue is at a time described as dialogue of theological exchange. At this level people are encouraged to share their spiritual experience and to seek to understand each other at a certain religious depth. The document “Dialogue and Proclamation” indicated that dialogue of theological exchange is:

where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritage, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual value. (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991).

The practice of this dialogue takes various forms like sharing methods of prayer, spiritual efforts, and scriptures. This form is oriented towards personal and social transformation.

Lastly, there is dialogue of reflection or religious experience. It is the level where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches. This is practiced in the light of prayer and contemplation. The goal is to deepen faith and ways of searching for God. Amaladoss gave weight to this when he noted that,

The dialogue of reflection brings different believers together either to reflect on common challenges they all face from other areas of knowledge or to challenge each other to clarify their perceptions... of life and reality. (Michael,2000:113)

The practice of this form of inter-religious dialogue easily leads to a deepened understanding of oneself as well as of the other person.

So far, the analyses above clearly indicate that there exist different forms of inter-religious dialogue. There is need to note that they are practiced without the claim to establish among them any order of priority.

CONCLUSION

We are aware that today there is enhanced appreciation of religions, culture, and gender equality. These are the signs of the times in the world that reveals the presence, the power and the purpose of God. This inspires inter-religious dialogue. That is why, in one of the documents of Vatican II Council, the Catholic Church:

... rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways... of life, precepts, teachings which ... reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. (Vatican II Document, 1965)

Therefore, the exclusivists and or inclusivity positions have no grounds for real openness and tolerance towards other religions. The consequence of such severe position is what is often, politically translated, in Nigerian context, as a do or die missions. That is why today inter-religious dialogue has come to stay and makes room for the active sanctifying role of the Holy Spirit for peaceful coexistence on earth.

Inter-religious dialogue is a courageous attempt to condemn all forms of discrimination encouraged in the name of religion. We note that where religious leaders have built up mutual knowledge and esteem, it becomes possible for them to protest together against injustice and other social ills. This is certainly one service that inter-religious dialogue contributes to the world and African nations in particular.

Today, we are much more ready to learn from other cultures since the assumption of the superiority of one culture over others no longer grips us. Through scholarship and personal contacts, inter-religious dialogue offers us access to other traditions which our ancestors lacked.

Even though the encounter with other religious traditions, while it offers fresh opportunity for growth and vigor, can lead to the sterile choice of narrow-minded bigotry or lukewarm compromising liberalism, the option of faith comes as an antidote. That requires once again clarifying what faith traditions really stand for.

John B. Cobb noted this point from a Christian view thus:

We must show that faith in Jesus Christ is neither an attitude of rigid defense of inherited doctrines and attitudes, nor the pretense of standing on some neutral ground and supposing that from that perspective we can judge the merits of all the world's great religious traditions. (Cobb, 1982: 356).

John B. Cobb is saying that insofar as we lack faith, we will try to establish our own security. We do so either by making absolute our relative heritage or by claiming neutrality and objectivity. If we do have faith, we will abandon the effort to establish our own security and will trust Christ instead. That means we can listen non-defensively to what others believe and learn from them even when they deny Christ. In the early Church, faith led to the assimilation and transformation of Hellenic wisdom. In the process, the biblical heritage was itself transformed.

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