

Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligiöser Dialog

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What are we dialoguing about? Some Reflections on Inter- religious Dialogue in Africa

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Zusammenfassung

Interreligiöser Dialog ist für die Menschen in Afrika nicht ohne weiteres selbstverständlich oder plausibel. Was genau bedeutet Dialog für sie? Ein Blick in die religiöse Situation der Christen in Afrika, insbesondere in Nigeria, zeigt, dass zahllose christliche Kirchen und Gruppierungen pentekostaler Färbung wie Pilze aus dem Boden schiessen und die religiöse Szene so aufmischen, dass klare christliche Standpunkte sich in diffuse Formen verflüchtigen. Über was könnte man in einer solchen Situation diskutieren? Dafür gibt es keine abschliessenden Antworten, aber Hinweise aus der Praxis, z.B. aus Nigeria. Hier treffen sich muslimische und christliche Vertreter, um soziale und wirtschaftliche Probleme des Gemeinwesens zu diskutieren und zu beraten, wie man in Zusammenarbeit den Herausforderungen des modernen Lebens begegnen könnte. So kann interreligiöser Dialog einen Beitrag leisten zum gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt und Frieden in einem Land. Daher die Schlussfrage: Müssen wir mehr erreichen als das?

Introduction

A reflection on interreligious dialogue in Africa today would not overlook the colonial history and the Christian missionary activities in that continent. Even if we would take interreligious dialogue as an issue that – as everybody now understands – should take place, we might not be too sure that there is a consensus on the issues of religious dialogue. If, for instance, we agree that dialogue should be an integral aspect of the Christian missionary action today, on which conditions are the religions in Africa ready for dialogue and which issues are they prepared to dialogue about?

A critical look at the “religious atmosphere” in Africa today will reveal that “mushroom churchism”¹ has created an atmosphere that makes nonsense of anything you could term interreligious dialogue. Even though

¹ I mean the activities of the many ever splitting sectarian groups, fondly referred to as Pentecostal Churches.

these new Churches market themselves as Christian Churches, very often they teach doctrines that make interreligious dialogue almost impossible.

We often speak of interreligious dialogue in a sense that includes what would properly be regarded as ecumenism. In most parts of Africa interreligious dialogue lays much emphasis on relationship with adherents of Islamic faith and African Traditional Religion. Our question is, what could be the content of interreligious dialogue between the many Christians, Muslims and adherents of African Traditional Religion in Africa?

1. Mission or Interreligious Dialogue?

Any well thinking person will today see reasons to accept that interreligious dialogue is an urgent matter in an age of global interactions. Yet the African person would not easily overlook the fact that Christian missionary activities took place in Africa with a flair of superiority. If the Christian missionaries brought just *the best* for temporal life and eternity, what do you need dialogue for? People do not usually argue about a matter they consider the best for any given situation.

The most popular understanding of mission among any average Christian in Africa today is "*missio ad gentes, ad extra*". Vatican II document *Ad Gentes* describes "mission" as the term usually given to those particular undertakings by which the heralds of the Gospel are sent out by the Church and go forth into the whole world to carry out the task of preaching the gospel and planting the Church among peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ. This has been the general practice of mission in the catholic world. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* would insist that the presentation of the Gospel message is not optional for the Church. Following the command of the Lord Jesus, it is her duty to spread this Good News, so that people can believe and be saved. This message is indeed a necessary one. It is unique and irreplaceable and allows no indifference, syncretism, or compromise, for it concerns the salvation of mankind². This understanding of mission is traced back to Jesus Christ's own command to go out and preach the Gospel to the world. This was interpreted

² Cf. Hypolite A. Adigwe, "Dialogue and Proclamation as the Mission of the Church", in: *One God and Many Religions. Let us Talk* (Onitsha 2001); Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No. 5.

to mean that the sacred task of Christians is to spread the good news to non-Christians and turn them into followers of Christ. In its various forms – Mt 28: 18ff.; Acts 1: 8 – the mission command makes of Christianity, as distinct from Judaism, e.g., a “world Religion” which promises salvation to all human beings, to all peoples and to all times, and fundamentally excludes no one from this promise of salvation. Of course the realization of salvation appeared to be uniquely bound up with the figure of the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth, the only mediator between God and humanity (see 1 Tim 2: 5), in whose name alone there is salvation (see Acts 4: 12). The message of the Gospel was carried from Jesus Christ into a godless, unsaved, salvationless world. The modern practice of mission was essentially dominated by the conviction that the lack of the spread of the message of Christ meant the lack of salvation for the world (H. Waldenfels). The consequence of this understanding was that huge masses of people were converted to Christianity, and the quality of the message to be spread, justified its spread by witness or by coercion.

Unfortunately Christianity witnessed a division into rival Churches, such that the Church’s mission suddenly consisted also of the evangelizing or re-evangelizing of the “separated brethren”. It became a heroic act to bring individuals or entire groups back into the “right” fold. Do we ask the African Christian to give up this “virtuous” tendency?

There is no gainsaying that a qualitative change has taken place in the relationship between Churches and religions in recent time. If the nineteenth century was the Century of Mission, then the twentieth century was certainly the Century of Dialogue. The crave for dialogue ignited great attention on mission, its changing nature, scope, and method. Evidently much creativity, dedication, and success have been recorded in publications, understanding and even practice of mission. At the same time, a certain ambiguity and even tension has remained in the relationship of Christian mission and interreligious dialogue. Should interreligious dialogue replace mission, or is it now a matter of mission or dialogue? Do we say that mission and dialogue should go together? Or when we talk of interreligious dialogue do we mean that the content of the

Good News be disseminated by dialogue? Which religion should now operate with a flair of superiority, or are all religions just equal and the same?

2. Confusing Religious Atmosphere

The number of new Christian Churches continues to increase every day in Africa. Even though these groups are often described as Pentecostal Churches, there is nothing really "pentecostal"³ about them; they operate with an extremely exaggerated exuberance of emotions, which catapults the participants into a frenzy situation close to the influence of hard drugs on human brain. Incidentally such pseudo-Churches are registered (for instance in Nigeria) like business centres and they effectively market themselves to the ignorant people as liberating Churches. The psyche of people who are ignorant and/or are burdened with extreme hardship is very well disposed for such manipulations.

A very disturbing aspect of these splinter groups is that they propound doctrines that nurture superstition in different forms, in the bid to win followers by all means. The yet most agonizing fact is that even the established Churches, Catholics, Anglicans, Protestants, Baptists, etc. have opted to copy the different deceptive methods deployed by these "pentecostal" Churches in the name of being charismatic. The situation is such that you do not know the religious stand of most of these Churches. Indeed the new slogan is that, "you can belong to any Church and still come to us, we are not a Church; we are a fellowship". So people now go ahead "fellowshipping" according to their whims and caprices. Without a clear religious stand, what would one be dialoguing about?

The situation is such that where you go to worship depends now on the type of need you have: if you are a couple in search of babies, there is a particular place and person you go to worship. You will not be surprised to hear that a woman, whose womb, for one reason or the other, got destroyed a while ago, goes from one fellowship ground to the other, because there are pastors who have convinced her that she could still bear

³ At Pentecost people of different cultures and languages felt such a belonging together that they understood each other; they were able to overcome all those barriers that had made them discriminatory foreigners to one another.

children. "After all, for God, nothing is impossible." Even women who have reached the age of menopause opt to believe that they could still bear a child, of course by the special intervention of God. Other pastors preach prosperity, "my god is not a poor or wretched god". People, who are desperately in search of wealth, attend such fellowships. Before they know what is happening, they have been lured into one obnoxious secret deal or the other. And when they reach a point of no return, they now defend their religion as a philosophy, which does not contradict their membership in the Catholic or Protestant Church. What type of interreligious dialogue can take place in such a situation?

3. Interreligious Dialogue for Social Cohesion

One easily gets the impression that most of the interreligious dialogue meetings in Africa today are necessitated because of violence, oppression, exploitation and unprecedented abuse of basic human rights. In the face of problems, even the militant missionaries forfeit the quest to convert the heathen into the "right" fold. The dialogues, or rather discussions, take place on the social-political level. It is the level in which, according to H. Waldenfels, the "religions encounter each other through their representatives in order to address the social challenges of the times and – in the sense of the demand made of the Church in *Nostra aetate 1* – 'foster unity and charity among individuals, and even among nations'".⁴ What is of interest in such meetings is to discover and agree on what binds human beings together and on practical steps to achieve social cohesion in the concrete situation of life.

Speaking on Islamic-Christian relations in Nigeria, Abuja's Archbishop, J. Onaiyekan⁵ maintained that political, social and economic considerations contribute to the complexity of this relationship. He stated:

"Too often, political leaders play on religious sentiments for obvious political reasons. Sad to say, it is very easy to influence ordinary people, especially village people who are less informed. Fundamentalism

⁴ H. Waldenfels, "Mission and Interreligious Dialogue: What is at Stake?" in: *Christian Mission and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. by P. Mojzes and L. Swidler, Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter 1990; *Nostra Aetate*, 1.

⁵ For his two statements below cf. Interview with the Vatican agency Fides; Publication: ZENIT.org, August 5, 2001.

is also a problem. We have fanatic Nigerian Muslims who study in Iran with the Ayatollahs; others who are given scholarships in Libya, or Al-Azhar in Egypt. When they come back to Nigeria they present themselves as missionaries of Islam. They want to change things, to set up an Islamic society without which, they think, there will be problems. They are not numerous but they are very active. It must also be said that some Christians tend to be very harsh in their judgment of Muslims. These people create problems too. But on the whole, most Nigerians live side by side without difficulty. For example, I am the Archbishop of the Federal Capital, Abuja. The city's workers have come here from all over the country, from many different ethnic groups. People of different religions work together. In my own family I have close cousins who are Muslims; we get along well."

To promote interreligious dialogue there is a Nigerian Interreligious Council of 25 Christians and 25 Muslims. As J. Onaiyekan puts it:

"We meet now and again to discuss major questions of interreligious cooperation with full support of the government, which is very interested in this issue. Besides this, we religious leaders strive to build and encourage in our own communities good relations with other believers. I myself send a message of greetings to Muslim leaders in Abuja on Muslim holidays and they do the same in my regard at Christmas and Easter. These are little signs, but they have a great effect. We know each other well and we intend to continue this way. When problems do arise we religious leaders meet to try to find a solution: sometimes we succeed, but sometimes we fail."

Over the years, dialogue with Traditional African Religion (ATR) had appeared very simple to Christian missionaries. ATR is fondly known for not being a missionary religion and the God it preaches seems not to be a jealous one.⁶ Christian missionaries declared ATR pagan, and rejected its

⁶ Cf. Anthony Anijelo, "Idolatry and Superstition in our indigenous Christian Church", in: *Evangelization and Renewal in the Church of Enugu Diocese in the Third Millennium. "You shall be my Witnesses" (Acts 1: 8)*. Ed. by Ike Ani & O. Ike, [pp.132-142], 133-135.

traditional values as superstitious and oppressive. Indeed it might not be difficult to discover some oppressive traditions like the *Osu* and *Amadi* (slaves and free born) caste systems, killing of twins, etc. Today, many indigenous agents of evangelization still reject anything that has to do with ATR; this has often led to violent conflicts in some local Churches. For the sake of peace and in order to promote a more authentic Christian living in Africa, the local Churches concerned had to formulate their stand on the relationship to ATR. The Catholic Church in Nigeria, for instance, lays much emphasis on dialogue with ATR; often however, this so-called dialogue is simply a matter of *purifying* some traditional African values and making them Christian. This is generally referred to as inculturation. For the pastoral practice of inculturating African traditional values, the Catholic Diocese of Enugu in Nigeria set out three guiding principles: (i) Whatever is intrinsically good (form and content) in our culture is essentially and intrinsically good in Christianity, and should be inculturated; (ii) whatever is extrinsically and intrinsically bad in our culture is also essentially and intrinsically bad in Christianity (for example, idol worship, human sacrifice, etc.), and should not be inculturated; (iii) whatever is intrinsically good but extrinsically (accidentally) bad in our culture should be purified and inculturated.⁷ You can assess what type of interreligious dialogue is involved in this case.

Interreligious dialogue will indeed be a means of achieving peace in the country. Even those who crave for an Islamic Society know that they are in for power tussle and not for any serious doctrinal issue.

Conclusions

Most Africans will today accept that we need interreligious dialogue in order to achieve social cohesion and peace in our countries. The level of destruction of life and property in the name of religious conflict is nothing to write home about. Interreligious dialogue in a country like Nigeria tends to be reduced to Christian-Muslim relationship as a result of several

⁷ Cf. Ikechukwu Ani & Obiora Ike (Eds): *Evangelization and Renewal in the Church of Enugu Diocese in the Third Millennium. "You shall be my Witnesses" (Acts 1: 8)*. [Acts and Declarations of the Second Synod of the Catholic Diocese of Enugu] Enugu: CIDJAP Publication, 2001, 356.

outbreaks of violence and the consequent destruction of life and property. At the same time, one gets the impression that the so-called interreligious conflict is more of power tussle over political and economic wealth of the country. The values emanating from the religious heritage of the different groups can assist in establishing a peaceful one another.

The confusing religious atmosphere especially brought about by the many new Christian Churches in many societies in Africa today poses great challenges as regards the content of the dialogue. The speed at which pastors of these Churches disagree and found other new Churches raises serious questions about the ultimate purpose of their ministry. What kind of religious dialogue can take place between people who are actually quarrelling over material wealth?

It is for the sake of achieving peace in a time of serious debate over the introduction of Sharia legal system in some States in Nigeria that the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria emphasized the need to strengthen common grounds for dialogue in this multicultural and multireligious country. The intra- und interreligious dialogue the Bishops are advocating for, should be based on "what is common to the religious traditions in Nigeria". The Bishops went ahead to enumerate some of such common beliefs as: "(a) Belief in the moral principle that 'good must be done and evil avoided'; (b) Belief that humans are a composite of soul and body, beings who live in webs of relationship; (c) Belief in the metaphysical communion that exists between the living and the dead; (d) Belief in the imperative of justice as a cardinal virtue of social co-existence; (e) Belief in the existence of the Supreme Being"⁸. Will all religions share a common understanding of what is good and what is evil, of justice, and even of whom the Supreme Being is and what he has to do with our daily life? Perhaps this is already an introduction to a dialogue that will explore real theological or religious contents, and which would transcend materialistic interests of representatives of religions in Nigeria.

⁸ *The Church in Nigeria. Family of God on Mission. [A Pastoral Exhortation of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) to the Clergy, Religious and Lay Faithful on the First National Pastoral Congress] Enugu: CIDJAP Press, 2004.*