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Towards developing an atmospheric space for inter-religious dialogue in Africa

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The practice of religions and spirituality is common in Africa. In many ways, religion may be considered as a routine of life, living and practising it either as inherited or borrowed. Religious pluralism is a reality in Africa, dating back to the 1st century up to the 19th century when Africa became a bedrock of traders and colonisers both from Europe and Asia. The paper explores plural religiosity with a view to developing a conducive atmosphere that may promote a suitable inter-religious dialogue in Africa. Largely, the most pronounced and practised religions are Christianity symbolised by the cross, Islam symbolised by the crescent, and African indigenous religion that does not have a common symbol nor sacred scriptures. We note that, for generations, religions have caused division among communities, but have in the recent years developed the quest to create good relations and dialogue with each other. Because of the diverse nature of insecurity in Africa, it is hoped that inter-religious dialogue may cause community cohesion, integration, inclusivity, and co-existence. In the wake of different types of inter-religious dialogue that are globally being researched, this paper suggests a specific inter-religious dialogue that Africans can exercise: 'dialogue for life'.

Contribution: Inter-religious dialogue for life is contextual in that, it touches upon the life situations of ordinary people in society. The author argues that, by embracing it religiously, inter-religious dialogue for life shall address crucial issues such as poverty, radicalisation, terrorism, climate change, bad governance, and human trafficking that adversely affect African society.

Keywords: pluralism; absoluteness; exclusivism; inclusivism; inter-religious dialogue of life; radicalisation; inter-religious education.

Introduction

In his work, Mbiti (2015) justifies African people to be reputably religious, because they live and practise, inherited and borrowed religions. Africa, both in her countryside and urban centres, is occupied by communities that belong to different religions and cultures. Christian Green (2016:IX), in his study, affirms the existence of religious diversity in Africa, in one way or another. He contends that religious and cultural pluralism in Africa has its foundation from a historic encounter of communities both from within and outside the continent, caused by immigration because of notable circumstances such as trade, conflicts and wars, food insecurity, and other pandemics (Chidongo 2021:36). People have always borrowed from one another's traditions to create hybrid traditions in both culture and religion, to the point where modern Africa is unable to claim to have genuine, original religious and cultural norms. Arguably, religious diversity has caused some dilution of cultural as well as religious traditions in Africa.

Johannes Fabian (1985) explains religious pluralism as a phenomenon that responds to the world of religious diversity by means of accommodating a multitude of religious groups and institutions in their different understanding about the images of God. This initiative defeats the claim about the supremacy of a particular religion over others, and creates a platform of tolerance, understanding, and mutual respect between religions in their variety.

In the context of Africa, religious diversity is manifested in cities and in the countryside, where one can find people putting on Arabic and European attire, using foreign names, and speaking foreign languages with a claim that these are religious entities. In several places such as the Coast of Kenya, there are chapels and mosques built beside each other. Therefore, when African Muslims go for prayers, African Christians on the other side are in their chapels worshipping the

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almighty. There are also billboards along town streets and roads for traditional healers advertising how able they are in sorting out health, business, and issues that involve cases found in the marital courts. According to Prince Sorie Conteh (2009:2), religious diversity in Africa has generated religious divisions at family levels, institutions of learning and places of work, and yet socially people continue to interact. As per history, religious division was a scheme devised by early Christian and Muslim missionaries when they were steadily competing to convert Africans, hence, speaking negatively of each other's faith. Sanneh (1983:76) mentions Ajayi Crowther, an African Christian missionary who had uncompromising views on non-Christian, Islam and African indigenous religious faith traditions in West Africa. Similarly, Iwe (1979:203–205) as well as Conteh (2009:2–3) express how foreign religions caused depreciation of African culture and religion. The former information indicates the product of religious diversity being: absoluteness, exclusivism and extremism as in culture, faith and practice. The same was emphasised in schools that had been introduced by missionaries (Dougall 2011; Gathogo 2009:167–192; Kenyatta 1938:269–271), where religious doctrines were taught and practised.

From converting the religious other to inter-religious dialogue

Religious pluralism as indicated earlier is another methodology that responds to the enigma of religious diversity. According to religious scholars, as indicated in the 1988 Lambeth conference deliberations (1998:7–10), other responses have been exclusivism, and inclusivism. Globally, religious pluralism engineered Christianity to initiate efforts of positive inter-religious relations that focussed on engaging in dialogue. Failletaz (1978:1–5) explains the efforts that began taking shape after the Second World War. Globally, these efforts did not imply a call to religious equality, but to address the outcomes of the World Wars that were devastating to human society — socially, economically, politically and religiously. Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church Secretariat (RCCS) and the protestant World Council of Churches (WCC) felt the need to consider inter-religious approaches on addressing issues of peace, justice, and conflict resolution. Earlier than this, and what was thought to be the beginning of a modern inter-faith movement with a view to engaging in dialogue, was when 10 religions of the East and West global communities assembled on 11 October to 27 October 1893 at the city of Chicago World's Congress Auxiliary Building (Forward 2001:28–29). It was during this congress that the Parliament of the World's Religions was formed, being the most impressive than the centenary held in 1993.

The idea of positive interfaith relations was initiated by Pope John XXIII, and later developed by Pope Paul VI. On 28 October 1965 the *NOSTRA AETATE,* a declaration document on Christianity relating to non-Christian religions by the Roman Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council was promulgated by Pope Paul VI. The document became popular and of interest in the Christian public domain. *NOSTRA AETATE* brought relief and challenged the earlier established doctrine that 'there is no salvation outside the Church'. Religious scholars such as Failletaz (1978:1–5) later continued to contribute to the debate by emphasising that Christians should not live in ghettos as an isolationist community of faiths; instead, Christians' horizons were to include new awareness of other cultures and religions of the world. While the Roman Catholic Church was coming into terms with the reality that Christianity was a living religion among other religions practised by human society, the Protestant Church took time to organise conferences that discussed what the Holy Bible directs, regarding people of other faiths. The most famous was the 1910 International Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh that discussed mission and Christian mission in multi-faith context (Selvanayagam 1995:1–15).

Israel Selvanayagam (1995:13–16) elaborates that in the following years, from 1971 and among the protestants, the WCC established a special separate programme on dialogue with people of other faiths. Protestant Christians and related institutions such as the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), United Religious Initiatives (URI) and those that offered theological education such as the University of Edinburgh, saw the need to acquire an in-depth understanding on how God speaks to other communities of faith on issues that touch upon the basics of life such as socio-political issues, poverty and injustice, cultural and theological perspective through dialogue. The efforts were a means to build a community of conservation in order to address issues affecting society with a common consensus (Ariaraja 1999:13–14).

Religious pluralism in Africa

Religious pluralism in Africa that fosters engaging religions into dialogue is yet to be given attention because of the fact that, there is a view from among African religious groups that it is a neo-colonial incursion into Africa's rich soil (Christian Green 2016:IX). As Mbiti (1990) and Dube (2006), both emphasise on the concept of 'I and You', traditionally, African communities tend to live a communitarian culture in many aspects of their life while also sharing the ubuntu culture. On the aspect of communitarian culture, Battle (2009:9–10) while not writing in the African religious context, argues that human identities are uniquely made to be more cooperative than competitive and to be connected to their communities. Similarly in Africa, religion is among the most valued heritages and has multiple roles that it plays in society. Among the roles are to unite, reconcile and maintain peoples' cultural values and standards.

Therefore, division of communities and staying in isolation from others, as discussed by Sanneh (1983:75–76), are not African religious and cultural values and are not encouraged. However, as said earlier, gaps of being apart that are experienced, were historically created by those who

introduced their religions as the only true religions, perfect and absolute. Harold Coward (1985:13) argues that, pluralism is so pressing a challenge because of the exclusivist missionary approaches adopted by Christianity over the past several 100 years; this therefore has in the recent years, generated special religious groups in the Mombasa, Kwale, Kilifi and Lamu counties of Kenya that give radical teachings that lead to terror attacks. Allan Race (1993) observes this mentality as self-centralism:

> [O]ur community, our tradition, our understanding of reality, our encounter with God, is the one and only truth, excluding all others… that all other religions are necessarily wrong and unreal, ours is self-sufficient and superior to all other religions. There is no need to learn from any other religion. (p. 237)

The exclusive type of religious attitude that disregards the other is argued by Xiao (2006:1–4) referring to Max Muller that 'those who know only one religion know none'. However, as challenges of life continue to grow in a multi-religious society, it is surfacing globally that there is rapid acceleration of a call for positive interfaith relations and dialogue, a willingness and appreciation of the religious other for enrichment. In Africa, it is not clear yet whether this inter-religious movement is because of a general religious change or as a result of people's global interaction.

The idea of forming a religious pluralistic platform, that would create a sustainable environment of inter-religious dialogue in Africa, in order to create cohesion and integration among common communities that have been divided by religions, is a task that needs lengthy accommodative talks. This is based on the historic religious negative approach towards the other and injustices applied by the adherents of foreign religions who lacked patience, tolerance, and the urge to learn from the religious other (Conteh 2009:6). In the 1988 Lambeth conference report, members realised that:

> During the last four centuries of missionary endeavor, contacts with these other religions of Asia have increased, while in Africa, America (both North and South) and the Pacific, the Gospel has been preached against a background of traditional religions. (p. 3)

It was in the period of Pope Paul VI, when he viewed Africans as religious. His 1967 article the '*Africae Terrarum*', expressed for the first time that Christianity should show respect and value to African culture and religion. This exhibited a milestone on religious pluralism, particularly on positive interfaith relations that would bring religions together to dialogue in Africa. At the same time, created suspicion between African Christians and those who belonged to other faiths. On this initiative, Shorter (1978:542) argues that the probability of starting the movement was sparked by both the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and the fourth assembly of the WCC at Uppsala (1968), where both of these institutions placed the emphasis on human, human culture and development, the local Church and the local community as a priority for the Church.

However, there are questions raised and argued by the author with regard to the concept of inter-religious dialogue in Africa. Firstly, whether the new concept is a religious development that originates from Africans or a foreign ideology? Secondly, whether Africans feel it necessary to initiate dialogue at all among the religions they practise? And thirdly, whether inter-religious dialogue should be based on learning from each other's doctrines or based on addressing crucial issues that affect human society by the use of common religious voices?

Discussing the first question, on whether inter-religious dialogue in Africa is a home-grown movement or a concept borrowed from outside is crucial. Little did African Christians and Muslim theologians have in mind that a period of religious tolerance would be experienced, to lead people towards religious conversation rather than towards conversion. Therefore, in spite of the long tenure of foreign religions being practised alongside traditional religions thereby enhancing religious pluralism, it can be argued that the concept of inter-religious dialogue is new in Africa, initiated by Western and Eastern Christian theologians and clerics. Selvanayagam (1995:1) explains that the International Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910 and the Vatican II of the Roman Catholic Church, both show the gravity of interfaith dialogue being foreign in Africa. The well-known and vocal churches in Christianity (Roman Catholic and Protestant) began changing techniques of associating and relating with people of other faiths in Africa.

The underlying argument, as it is also explained by Martin Forward (2001:28), is that inter-religious dialogue is a non-residential and non-home-grown concept. It is foreign and established by non-Africans, mostly driven by European and American established Churches, with a view to reconciling religious communities across the globe that have suffered from religious disconnect (Forward 2001:28). On the same note, Wesley Ariarajah (1999:100–106) explains that when the concept of inter-religious dialogue was introduced during a conference held in Nairobi, Kenya in 1975, it met stiff resistance from those who feared that it would lead to betrayal of the Christian mission. In Kenya, for example, the most active churches in the dialogue agenda according to Coast Interfaith Clerics Council Trust (CICC)[1] are the mainline or missionary-founded ones, rather than the Pentecostal and African Independent Churches. Whereas the movement is gradually picking up, African Christians and those of other religions are still in doubt and they contend that their religions are more absolute and more significant than the others, holding the belief that there is no relationship between light and darkness.

The other question we may struggle to answer is about whether Africans across the continent see the necessity at all of inter-religious dialogue. This is because of the fact that there is an overgrown attitude of religious absoluteness and exclusivism; African Christians, Muslims and those who believe in the indigenous religion seem to be at limbo on the face of interfaith relations (Coward 1985:13). Again, they are

1.The Coast Interfaith Clerics Council Trust is an interreligious body formed at the coast of Kenya to address issues of peace, conflict management, and foster for unity, cohesion, and integration.

not sure about the type of inter-religious dialogue they should adopt and practise. Temple (2002:47–54) as well as Maviri (2000a; 2000b) argue that interfaith relations in Africa should be necessary, based upon the experiences of continued poverty, endless wars and conflicts, incurable diseases, unjust governance, unbearable economies that have not been stable, and a lack of giving priority to education in order to add value to society. Ideally, the movement should be real and practical, and should offer answers and possible solutions to the existing and foreseen problems of Africa. When inter-religious dialogue is approached through this perspective, it is acceptable as a necessity to African religious communities.

Inter-religious dialogue of life

Acharya (2005:279) refers to the view of Pope John Paul II that an inter-religious dialogue of life is the most relevant type that ought to be embraced by African communities. Harold Kasimow (2005:11) argues that Pope John Paul II views an inter-religious dialogue of life as one being characterised by openness, cooperation and clarity; thereby exercising comprehensive and meaningful conversation that covers all the possible fields of life. It is assumed to permeate and influence people's lives including those of community development, governance, politics, climate change, human trafficking, and economy. As such, it can help repair and transform a world that is torn by conflict and war, poverty, destruction of the environment, a world that is captivated by materialism and secularism.

Similarly, Suraya Sintang et al. (2012:70–73) referring to Cardinal Francis Arinze (2004), Archbishop Marcell Zago as described by Haney (2009), Ubaka (2003), Hensman (1999) and Ugwoji (2008) explain dialogue of life as a process of social interaction whereby multi-religious communities promote co-existence for human development, liberation, justice, and peace. It is a type of dialogue that extends deeply into all aspects of human relationships. Further, Cardinal Arinze (2004:14–25) emphasises that dialogue of life takes matters of human person more seriously, and views it as a platform that encourages religious communities to share hopes, joys, sorrows and consensus on defined projects in order to improve life standards.

Reflecting upon the challenges that Africa encounters such as general insecurity, Africans are in deep need of leading a significant existence. Therefore, we argue that a dialogue of life may become key in playing the role of Africans moving forward together, with continuity, by a meeting of minds, wills and hearts towards achieving their individual and collective goals. It is this category that can make African religious communities engage and address their unjust and life-denying situations. Sarpong (1988), reflecting on the address statement of the WCC in Mindolo, Zambia September 1986 argues that:

> There is increasingly in our world today the acceptance of the fact that all religions are concerned with the search for answers to ultimate questions of life and for solutions to human problems. This makes it desirable for the adherents of various religions to dialogue with each other in this common search. (p. 301)

The argument I make in this paper is that an inter-religious dialogue of life is the most adequate and acceptable in Africa. The heart of any religion in any society, as discussed by Ěla (2009), is that:

> When faith seeks to understand itself then it has to verify itself and to account for itself in the context of a community. That means faith must begin with the people's struggle to escape from the hellish circle in which they risk being permanently imprisoned. Therefore, Africans need to prioritize an inter-religious dialogue of life, at the ground level and clarify the paths that faith can take in the structures of daily life. (p. 67)

Equally, Abimbola (cited in Ucko 2004), a Nigerian African indigenous religious priest expressed in his address to the World Council of Churches (WCC) Conference that:

> Dialogue between the religions of humankind is necessary to solve pressing problems of the world; Dialogue to empower women, and provide the best education, and the best environment for the children and young people of the world. Dialogue, to eradicate hunger, thirst and needless suffering in the world. Dialogue to end wars, terrorism, greed, hatred, religious conflict, ethnic cleansing and racial bigotry. But dialogue on an equal basis, in an atmosphere of respect, and equality. If dialogue can be staged on these terms, INCLUDE US. If not, LEAVE US OUT. (pp. 16–21)

The other aspect that necessitates a dialogue of life in a religious pluralistic Africa is the empirical reality of religious superiority (Green 2016:6). Green continues to mention that religions in Africa have, by all means, to be genuine and honest when engaging in a dialogue of life. They should endeavour to bury and avoid unacceptable arrogance and pride, and instead promote religious reconciliation, love, justice, peace, freedom, and truth. This is based on their former history where it is known that Christianity as well as Islam often destroyed other cultures, religions, and world views. Abraham Adu Berinyjuu (1988) asserts that:

> Christianity has to repent to her sin of arrogance, condemnation and, at times, judgement of other religions. For Christianity has been known to be distrustful of other religions and also very suspicious to ATR in particular. (p. 89)

Globally, religious diversity has created enmity in society because of religious extremists who instil false teachings. Religions have been apart from each other and this has caused dangerous outcomes on account of practices of radical teachings that have resulted in a lack of trust among neighbours, avoiding each other, causing conflicts in families, and promoting terrorist attacks. Of all the countries in Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Somalia have suffered most in terrorist attacks. Williams (2007) describes Africa as a haven of terrorists, and a potentially dangerous continent, a source of risks, threats and diverse problems. Indeed, such life-threatening issues in a plural religious society need inter-religious order, for people to feel safe and live at peace with each other. It is time for the African communities to embrace

the dialogue of life; to agree to talk to each other, to discover from each other different images of God than to live in a culture of dissension.

The Lambeth Conference (1988:27–28) upholds that when an inter-religious conversation is established, it reveals how God also has spoken to other communities of faith and that salvation is also found in other religions. It is through understanding other communities of faith that we create an environment of co-existence. From this perspective, an inter-religious dialogue of life progresses to become a way of life where families meet as neighbours, children playing together and where men and women work side by side or stand together in the unemployment queue. By the end of it all, dialogue becomes a style of living within any relationship.

The underlying argument is that inter-religious dialogue of life in Africa should be an effort of promoting harmony in communities that have had religious traditions of tearing into each other, preaching against each other, and causing a discontinuity of communitarian culture. This will revitalise the culture of needing as well as accepting each other. Thanzauva (2022:136), although not writing in a religious pluralism context, explains the relevance of communities of diverse religions and cultures embracing each other with love. Communitarianism, as discussed by Thanzauva, is a key concept and life principle of tribal community in which homogenous people live together sharing their joys and sorrows in mutual love and care. In Africa, the sense of belonging to each other allowed communities to share common social life heritage practices. It is only religious diversity that prompted communities to separate. The views of Opoku (1982:154) apply in this context that the setting of African communities was not only about personal relations such as family ties and clans but also involved life realities in the community and in nature. Inter-religious dialogue of life in Africa may also be about revitalising a religious heritage that brings communities together. Africans embrace religion as a tool that keeps on girding and keeping alive extended relationships for the purpose of enhancing unity and promoting friendly co-operation. The same is argued by Peter Sarpong (1993) that in Africa:

> One has to be in relationship with other people; one has to take part in community exercises, share community joys and sorrows, take part in community beliefs, ceremonies and rituals, be part of the ups and downs of the community before one is considered a human being…relations among people on earth at the level of the community and the village must be good. Individuals can attain freedom only in community with others. (pp. 274–275)

Reflecting on the arguments of this paper, it is acceptable for a pluralistic religious society such as Africa to devise amicable approaches that shall make Africans own, embrace, and identify themselves with an inter-religious dialogue of life as a home-grown concept. It means that inter-religious dialogue has to be born and nurtured to grow in African spirituality. It must be felt as an African call similar to the way African theologians came up with indigenisation, Africanisation, and inculturation of Christianity.

A suggested approach that may promote an inter-religious dialogue of life in Africa is reforming the system of religious education (RE) in schools, colleges and universities. Gloria Durka (2010:10) shows in her work that postmodernism has indeed touched every field; that, while in the last century religious groups and individuals found themselves in a world of religious pluralism, the case is more pertinent today. There are unique challenges experienced by global religious educators and Africa in general. We understand that RE is key in the spiritual and social life of the general public. However, in Africa, RE was introduced and taught in schools, Sunday schools, in Churches, madrasa for Muslims to nurture young Africans and adults in embracing the doctrines and values of foreign religions (Chidongo 2021:36). The case of religious pluralism needs a well revised system of RE that can nurture religious leaders, and a community and scholars who can spearhead inter-religious dialogue for life and address issues that affect human society. We find African Christian and Muslim theologians across the continent with vast knowledge in comparative religions. However, RE has been taught in exclusivity, with no intention of learning from the religious other.

It is unrealistic to engage in an interfaith dialogue for life in Africa at advanced stages when children and students at the school and college levels are divided by religious education. Hull (2009) in his work argues on the same, that religious encounter in schools has to be taken as a tool for cohesion, integration and co-existence rather than division. If inter-religious dialogue has to grow, flourish and be felt in Africa, it has to start with well-defined and structured programmes of inter-religious education in schools and colleges.

The hope is that, when a proper inter-religious education curriculum is developed and introduced in African schools, the young generation will grow up in a new awareness, understanding, appreciating and respecting other people's religions. This will form a religious climate change, reducing radical teachings, hence promoting cohesion in society.

It has to be noted that there are adults who may not wish to o to college; however, inter-religious adult education programmes can be facilitated through seminars by professionals of interfaith organisations. The concept should not only be an academic platform, where academics critique each other without considering the stakeholders at the ground level. There can be organised interfaith clubs of common interests such as football, music, and social groups for a sustainable development agenda. Visual communication such as pictures put on billboards and placed in public places or centres of interest may create awareness to the general public.

Conclusion

This paper has delved into discussing religious pluralism in Africa and the concept of inter-religious dialogue which is a new religious phenomenon on the continent. The paper has reflected on the styles in which foreign religions were introduced and how this impacted African converts negatively because they were indoctrinated into the absoluteness of these religions that gradually made them embrace exclusivism. While Africans have religiously lived on these restricted demarcated lines, the new concept of inter-religious dialogue makes them suspicious and doubtful about taking immediate decisions for dialogue. The argument has been that dialogue among religious communities may take long to be appreciated. Because of the enormous challenges facing Africa, achieving solutions cannot be through one party but through combined and collective efforts. The paper has suggested a 'dialogue of life' as was put by Pope John Paul II as an entry point that would hopefully work in a plural religious Africa. This type of dialogue touches the common person; it is keen on those life-threatening issues that affect human society. Further, inter-religious education both for adults and young people should be introduced as a special programme in elementary and high schools in Africa. The suggested methodology will hopefully create and promote a suitable environment for inter-religious dialogue that may in future use collective voices to address common experienced challenges in Africa.

Acknowledgements

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