

36. Lk. 8:2-3.

37. Mk. 16:1-8.

38. N. A. "Pope John Paul II Speaks on Africa and to Africa", in the *African Ecclesial Review* 22 (1980) 212.

39. Pope John Paul II, "African Theology" in *La Documentation Catholique* 1852 (1983) 261-263; also *African Ecclesial Review* 25 (1983) 313-315

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FAITH IN ONE GOD:

CHALLENGES FOR INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE

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Introduction

The Christian profession of faith in one God stands somewhere between the "diffused monotheism" of African Traditional Religion and the radical, uncompromising monotheism of Islam—two religious currents, that, in the view of this writer, will make their impact felt increasingly in Africa during the next few decades. It would seem that some of the challenges to the Christian creed will be forthcoming from precisely these two religious currents.

African Traditional Religion: A new awakening

As is well known, the wind of political independence blew across most of Africa in the 1960's. In black Africa, the need was felt for an independence of the "spirit" as well, primarily through a return to the cultural roots of the African people. Perhaps inevitably, somewhere along the line, the theory was hatched that the authentic religion of Africa and the Africans was the traditional religion of their forefathers—commonly labelled as "African Traditional Religion".¹ This has certainly been the experience in Nigeria. Both Christianity and Islam have, in consequence, come to be categorized as *foreign*, having been introduced into the continent from Euro-American and Middle-Eastern sources.

This has been quite an intriguing turn of events. Until quite recently (up to about only twenty years ago) African traditional religion was on the run and receding before the joint onslaught of Christianity and Islam. It was assumed that it was only a matter of time before what was then known as "animism", "fetishism", or "paganism" would be wiped out, and one or the other of the two great world religions, Christianity and Islam, replace it. It was simply not "civilized" or "modern" at that time to profess traditional religion. Not any more. Now, it is the turn of Christianity and Islam to be on the defensive against the charge of being foreign in origin and content and serving foreign interests, inimical or, at least, unsympathetic to the genuine interests and aspirations of Africa and the Africans.

Today, not a few educated Africans, even intellectuals and academics, openly profess traditional religion.² It is now altogether respectable to do so. Not infrequently, it is considered even more patriotic so to do than if one professed Christianity or Islam.

Somewhat ironically, certainly unintentionally, the enterprise of reviving traditional religion in Africa has been helped not a little by

the efforts within Christian circles—notably, the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II—to adapt the gospel message to local cultures.

The reasoning on the part of the traditional believers appears to have been as follows: If Christians, who once debunked African beliefs and religious practices as base and primitive, are now interested in integrating so-called positive elements thereof into their religion, then perhaps those beliefs and practices were not so objectionable after all; now, perhaps they should be dusted up and presented as a viable—even better, being indigenous—alternative to either Christianity or Islam!

African Traditional Religion and Faith in One God

In view of the foregoing considerations, the African traditional conception of God must pose some challenges for the Christian faith in one God.

“Diffused monotheism” is how one African scholar has labelled the African conception of God.³ Perhaps for too long, foreign investigators were led into believing that Africans were polytheists, much like the ancient Greeks and Romans. The fact of the case, as the said scholar has said, is that Africans are monotheists, polytheists and pantheists, all rolled up in one. They acknowledge one Supreme Being, God, who is lord and maker of all things in both the spiritual and physical spheres. To that extent, they are monotheists. But much of their cultic life is directed towards divinities and ancestors. Then they are polytheists. Finally, they acknowledge something of God (e.g. “vital force”,⁴ “soul”, “spirit”, “fiat”,⁵ etc.) residing in every single being in both the spiritual and physical domains. There, they would be pantheists. Whence the use of the label “diffused monotheism” for their brand of belief in God.

Probably as a result of their “diffused monotheism”, the Africans’ idea of the Supreme Being, God, is that of a *deus remotus et incertus*.⁶ Where he is not said to have used intermediaries (divinities) in creating the world, he is believed to have withdrawn effectively from the world after creating it. He does not concern himself very much with it, and is certainly far from the thoughts of the average believer. Since his will is believed to be immutable, there is not much sense in worshipping him.

The Christian faith in God is unequivocally monotheistic. It does not recognise any “divinities”, who would be like vice-gerents of God in his dealings with men. Christianity professes emphatically that its faith in a triune God does not translate as polytheism, since what is professed is three persons in the one God-head, not three gods. The Christian faith in a triune God is also totally other than the “diffused monotheism” of traditional African believers. The three persons in one God are equal in God-head; none is subordinate to the others, nor made (“created”) by them, unlike the “divinities” in African traditional religion, who are believed to be entirely subordinate to the Supreme Being, and are created by him.

In the face of the current resurgence of African traditional religion within not a few patriotic African circles, the challenge must arise for Christianity to justify its faith in a God that is both three and one, without being polytheistic or diffusely monotheistic like that of the traditional Africans.

Also quite capable of generating some controversy is the Christian faith in a God who is provident, interacting directly with the world he created, as against the *deus remotus et incertus* of the Africans. What sense can it make to pray to God or worship him? Is it conceivable that his will can be influenced by anything man does or does not do?

The fact must be acknowledged of certain congruencies between the Christian faith in God and the African traditional conception of him.

To begin with, God’s existence is accepted without question in either case. Whereas some Christians have been known to attempt to demonstrate or prove God’s existence, Africans see that as a wholly unnecessary business. As one African scholar says, there are no atheists in traditional African society, such that an African (Ashanti) proverb can say, “No one shows a child the Supreme Being”.⁷ That is to say, everybody, including even the child, knows God’s existence, almost by instinct.

In African traditional religion, as in Christianity, God is believed to be the creator of all that exists. But the notion of God creating the world *ex nihilo* does not seem to have found any place in the former as in the latter. All the known myths of creation in Africa portray God as having fashioned the world from pre-existing material. There is also the fact that the same myths often cast God’s creative image as that of a moulder (Ila people) or a carpenter (Tiv people).⁸ The traditional Africans, it would seem, did not go the further step to ask where the material God used in creation came from.

The idea of God being “personal” is not as explicit in African traditional religion as it is in Christianity. But certain attributes given to God in the former are suggestive of a belief in a personal God. For instance, God is portrayed as seeing, hearing, talking, thinking, feeling, sometimes even eating and drinking. All of these attributes, put together—especially thinking, feeling, and talking—suggest a person (or persons) behind them.

The fact of these areas of agreement between the Christian faith in one God and the African vision of God offers hope for success in an eventual dialogue between the two faiths—which is a lot more than one, can say of the dialogue between Christianity and Islam. The reason, is, in part, to be found in the fact that whereas the Christian and Islamic positions are somewhat monolithic and absolutist in character, the African view-point is fragmentary and tolerant of alternative view-points. Such that, notwithstanding the new-found muscle of African

traditional religion, it can fairly be expected still to come to terms with a gentle, nonconfrontational presentation of the Christian view-point. There is possible, therefore, dialogue, with reasonable hope for success, between traditional African "diffused monotheism" and Christian triune monotheism.

Islamic Monotheism versus the Christian Faith in One God.

Everyone is aware of a growing militancy of Islam the world over. A commentator wrote two decades ago that "the missionary efforts of Islam, especially in modern times, has been directed to Africa and India".⁹ Such a statement would pass for a gross understatement today. The fact today is that Islam is engaged in a militant programme of expansion even into the traditional bastions of Christianity in Europe and America. The trend is readily explained by a new confidence which Islam now has in itself, thanks to the ascendant weight of the Islamic Arab nations in world affairs, arising, no doubt, out of their prominence among producers of the "Black Gold", petroleum. It must be the case, then, that Christianity will be called upon to justify her faith in one God in the face of conflicting Islamic claims on the same subject.

The radical, uncompromising monotheism of Islam is proverbial. In its view, "True faith (iman) . . . consists of belief in the immaculate Divine Unity and Islam in one's submission to Divine Will".¹⁰ Or else, as an Islamic scholar puts it,

The God of Islam does not reside in several divinities. He is absolute: the repository of all that is good and noble and sublime. Islam does not deny goodness and sublimity in others but it does not assign divinity to them because divinity, according to Islam, must be absolute and unadulterated with any human shortcomings or limitations. This amounts, as if it were, to the extraction of the qualities associated by some with divinity out of all divinities and vesting them in One who transcends the limitations of others considered as divine.¹¹

Implicit in this statement is an unequivocal rejection of the Christian doctrines of the "Trinity" and "Incarnation".

In Nigeria, today, it is becoming increasingly clear that a majority of muslims are intent on propagating Islam at the expense of Christianity. Besides dotting the landscape with huge monumental mosques, the muslims have launched a massive campaign to propagate Islam and, in not a few cases, discredit Christianity, using the mass media, both the electronic and the print media. A particularly disturbing feature is their penchant to mount loudspeakers on their mosques and other praying houses, from which, much too often for comfort, issue severe indictments of the Christian faith. More often than not, the but of their attack is precisely the Christian faith in a triune God.

A standard muslim sermon or address would thus begin like this:
Allah is one. He has no equal, no rival, no partner. He can have no son either, since he has no wife to bear him a son.

Given the fact that both the Christian and muslim positions are absolute in character, each claiming the authority of divine revelation, and unwilling to water itself down, however minimally, it is hard to see how any attempt at dialogue between them, in the prevailing circumstances, can be anything but still-born. This writer once heard a muslim leader introduce a dialogue with a number of Christian counterparts in the following way:

You Christians and we muslims have everything in common. The only point on which we differ is that you say Jesus Christ is God, while we say he is not.

Quite understandably, the moment that last point was made marked the end of any meaningful dialogue. For if Christians and muslims disagree on that one point, any other point that they may agree upon is of minimal relevance.

This writer is of the view that if both sides were able to admit the obvious limitation of human language in expressing divine truth, the possibility of dialogue between them might be enhanced.

In this connection, one could perhaps suggest that there is a need for re-examination of the Nicene formulation of the trinitarian creed. One would here be suggesting that, perhaps the formula of *mia ousia, treis hypostaseis* does not convey the same meaning today as it did in the year 325 A.D. In our experience today, people do not easily and readily understand the teaching that there are *three persons* in the *one nature* of God, when in every other context that they know, the reverse is the case: namely several natures uniting to constitute one person (for instance, body, soul, spirit in the human person).¹²

It is probably this difficulty that has prompted an alternative way of looking at the concept of personality as it refers to God. According to this approach, God should be said to be "*personal*", not one, two or three "*persons*". In other words, whatever God may be, he should not be said to be person(s), since persons, in people's experience nowadays, are invariably human. To say that God is three persons could thus be misleading and suggest that God was three human persons, which would be a most unacceptable anthropomorphism. On the contrary, what is meant by saying that God is "*personal*" is that he is not less than persons; he has all the attributes of persons, and more. Whatever that "*more*" is, is beyond the scope of human comprehension. One philosopher of religion has stated all this, quite succinctly, as follows:

Most theologians speak of God as "*personal*" rather than as a "*Person*". The latter phrase suggests the picture of a magnified

human individual. . . . The statement that God is personal is accordingly intended to signify that God is "at least personal", that whatever God may be beyond our conceiving, he is not less than personal, not a mere It in relation to man, but always the higher and transcendent Thou.¹³

Might not this approach to understanding the concept of personality in God open new avenues for meaningful dialogue between Christianity and Islam, especially if, as was suggested earlier on, both sides were willing to recognize the limitation in their formulations of the truth about God? The approach is certainly well worth pursuing and exploring further.

The Incidence of the Indigenous Christian Movements

The indigenous Christian movements (largely known as "Aladura" in Nigeria, i.e. the "praying people") provide some sort of counterweight to the expansionist ambitions of Islam in parts of Africa—much more than do the mainline, established churches (Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic). The indigenous churches too are spreading like wild fire. In the seventy years or so since the first of these groups sprouted in Nigeria, for instance, their number has grown way beyond what anybody can count. Their energy to divide and subdivide does not appear to be anywhere near spent yet. More and more of them are being hatched each day, it would seem.

So far as this writer is aware, the indigenous churches have not elaborated any doctrine of the triune God distinct from that of the established churches, from which all of them broke off. They too profess belief in the trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They seem more prepared than the established churches to counter the challenge of Islam head-on, through open-air revival services and the mass media. In all such appearances, they are apt to proclaim the traditional doctrine of the trinity unequivocally, without compromising anything. For them, the muslim rejection of the trinity is the fruit of ignorance, borne out of the fact that they are simply deprived of the authentic self-revelation of God.

The indigenous churches tend to be pentecostalist and "charismatic" in nature. Prayer, healing and visions are at the heart of their systems. It is only to be expected that the Holy Spirit would receive greater notice among them than would the Father or the Son. Of the three, God the Father seems to be most in the background, thus making him somewhat similar to the *deus incertus et remotus* of African traditional religion. He is certainly recognized as being there. But, for all practical purposes, not much reference is made to him. For the rest, is it not possible to charge even the mainline churches with a similar neglect of the Holy Spirit in their own systems?

Conclusion

Faith in one God, as this article has tried to illustrate, is a shared patrimony of Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion. But the way in which this faith is articulated varies from one religious tradition to the other, up to the point of constituting a serious obstacle in the way of any meaningful dialogue between them. If dialogue is important—and many would say that it is—then the way in which the conflicting views are reconciled will very much determine the course that dialogue will take and the outcome to be expected therefrom.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Africans generally, and traditional believers in particular, no longer accept labels such as "animism", "fetishism", or "paganism" for the religion of traditional Africans. This article has thus settled for the more respectable label of "African Traditional Religion" (abbreviated as "A.T.R."). cf. J. S. Mbiti *African Traditional Religion*, London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975, pp. 16ff.
 2. It is perhaps instructive that the current Vice-Chancellor of one of Nigeria's most prestigious universities is an avowed priest of Ifa, one of the traditional divinities of the Yoruba.
 3. E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, London: S.C.M. Press, 1973, p. 135.
 4. See Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959, *passim*.
 5. See Issiaka Prosper Laleye, *La conception de la personne dans la pensee traditionnelle Yoruba*, Berne: Editions Herbert Land, 1970/, pp. 220ff.
 6. See J. D. Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 31.
 7. J. S. Mbiti, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
 8. See *ibidem*, p. 40.
 9. Felix M. Parejo, "Islam" in *Sacramentum Mundi, An Encyclopedia of Theology*, Karl Rahner and others, (eds.) London: Burns and Oates Limited, 1968, vol. 3, p. 170.
 10. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1980 edition, s. v. "Islam".
 11. I. H. Qureshi, "Muslim Art" in *God and Man in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, Charles Malik, ed. Beirut: American University of Beirut Centennial Publications, 1972, p. 115.
 12. In this connection, it is again perhaps instructive that African interpreters of sermons have great difficulty with translating "three persons in one God" into the vernacular. Sometimes, they have simply retained the word "persons" in the translation, since the use of the vernacular for "person" could suggest that there were three human beings in one God.
 13. John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973, p. 10.
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