

THE PLACE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN AFRICA TODAY

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Introduction

The hope of heaven for the Christians and the belief in *Jannah* by the Muslims make the followers of both Christianity and Islam focus a great deal on the afterlife as a final destination, while this earthly dwelling is considered transitory. For both religions, the present state in which we live is considered a pilgrim journey where we prepare for our final home in heaven. For Catholics, the Kingdom of God also referred to as the Kingdom of heaven, is not a remote or an abstract concept, rather is a new life lived according to the Gospel. The mission of Christ is to bring into reality here on earth the Kingdom of God: “I was sent for this purpose” (Lk. 4:43). He was sent to announce this Kingdom, to bring men and women to believe in his Gospel, and to unite all the faithful in this Kingdom. Jesus passed on this mission to the Church and over two thousand years of her existence, the Church has continued to preach the Good News of the Kingdom. Repentance and faith in Jesus are essential elements for those who want to belong to the Kingdom (cf. Mk. 1:15). Therefore, it is valid to ask if those who do not believe in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus are part of the Kingdom. What implication does this hold in our efforts to engage in dialogue with our Muslim brothers and sisters? Can we together with them collectively build a kingdom of justice, peace and love on earth? These are some of the issues this essay would try to address.

The Interface between the Kingdom of God and Interreligious Dialogue

In the Lord’s Prayer, Christians pray “thy kingdom come” (Mt. 6:10). In order to understand this petition of the Lord’s Prayer, it is necessary to understand something of the biblical concept of the “Kingdom of God.” Pious Jews at the time of Christ were waiting for the kingdom of God to come (cf. Mk. 15:43), but what gave rise to this hope? The first chapters of Genesis make it clear that God’s plan from the beginning has been to establish His kingdom on earth. Tragically, with the original sin, Satan became an usurper and established a reign of sin on earth (cf. Jn. 12:31,

14:30; 2Cor. 4:4). God, however, did not abandon His original plan. The remainder of Scripture is the history of God's work of restoring that which had been corrupted by sin or the history of redemption.

We can understand the New Testament teaching regarding the Kingdom more clearly when we grasp the fact that for the New Testament authors, the term "kingdom" (Greek: *basileia*) refers most often to the royal reign of God rather than to the specific territory over which He rules. It is also important to realize that for the New Testament authors, the coming of the Kingdom, or the reign of God, does not occur at a single moment in time. Instead, the coming of the kingdom involves a series of events that occur over a period of time (cf. Lk. 21:31). The coming of Christ is the manifestation of the Kingdom, but its completion is in the future, in heaven. However with our baptism, we already belong to the Kingdom and our mission is to sustain the values of this Kingdom even in our present and often chaotic, unjust, sinful, violent and divided world, until the final fulfillment. The visible sign of "The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (cf. Rom. 14:17),¹ therefore the Church's mission is to make these values a reality in our world, by extending the reign of God and its righteousness to all humanity, gathering together the scattered children of God.

Historically, the Church has not always played the role of building universal communion. In the past, the Church has been guilty of arrogance, triumphalism and superiority complex in her relationship with other religions. The Council of Florence in 1442 had assumed a narrow understanding of *outside the Church, there is no salvation*. The Council of Trent, a century later, affirmed in its teaching on "baptism of desire" the possibility of Salvation for those who were outside the Church; all these still remain vague with diverse theological positions. However, Vatican II (1962-65) marked a new beginning in the Catholic Church's understanding of her role in relation with other religions. Since that time, a significant shift has occurred from an attitude of tolerance at best and dialectical opposition at worst, to an attitude of positive commitment to dialogue and mutual enrichment.

There is also a level of ambivalence among theologians about the task of the Church to evangelize and to engage in dialogue. For some Christians, evangelization is the main if not the only task of the Church, which is the exclusive depository of divine revelation. According to them, evangelization means preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to the heathens and hence, Interreligious Dialogue is to be rejected since it erroneously implies that the Church does not already possess the fullness of truth and therefore still needs to learn from other religions. On the other side of the theological spectrum are those who hold that mission directed toward

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, 2818.

converting non-Christians is no longer appropriate in our age of religious pluralism in which all religions are to be considered simply as alternative and equally valid ways that lead to God and salvation. For them, only Interreligious Dialogue, in which people of different faiths share their religious experiences and doctrines as equals, is theologically justified.

Between these two extremes there are some who maintain that evangelization remains the Church's primary mission but also acknowledge that dialogue with people of different faiths is useful and even necessary. In addition, a number of theologians maintain that both evangelization and Interreligious Dialogue are constitutive and irreplaceable, yet distinct elements of the Church's mission. This argument expresses some of the issues which the Document on Dialogue and Proclamation² has tried to resolve. This article affirms that Interreligious Dialogue is part of the Church's mission and a way of building the Kingdom of God in our religiously divided and violently damaged world.

There are a number of definitions for Interreligious Dialogue, but for the purpose of this paper, I shall adopt the one given by Bevan and Schroeder which has been developed from the document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, in which dialogue is understood as "the practice of openness to, fairness and frankness with, respect for, sincerity toward and appreciation of people of other Christian churches, or other religious ways, those who hold to a particular ideology, those who have no faith at all."³ This definition embraces ecumenical, interreligious and cultural dialogue, I believe this includes the Muslims. Through Interreligious Dialogue, the Church seeks to be an instrument of communion within the human community, to effect justice, peace and the common good as a sign of the Kingdom of God already in our midst. In a pluralistic society like Nigeria, dialogue is an indispensable tool for the Church to engage the citizens across the country to work together towards a transformation which makes Nigeria a secure and happy home for every citizen, irrespective of ethnic identity, religious background or socio-political affiliation. The importance being given to dialogue as part of mission of evangelization today undoubtedly affect the way in which mission is carried out today. According to David

² There are two documents which addresses the issues of the relationship between Interreligious Dialogue and Proclamation: The first is *Dialogue and Proclamation*, by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue - Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation Of The Gospel Of Jesus Christ.

The Second is *Dialogue and Mission* - Joint Document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples, Rome, 1991, - Published in to mark 25 years after "Nostra Aetate".

³ S.B. BEVANS-R.P. SCHROEDER, *Prophetic Dialogue – Reflections on Christian Mission Today*; Orbit Books, Maryknoll, New York 2011, 29.

Tracy, there is a shift from understanding or imagining mission as “expansion” to understanding and imagining mission as a genuine and deep encounter. Mission today envisions people we encounter not as objects for conversion, but as genuine others⁴. Subsequently, dialogue requires respect, openness, willingness to learn, attentiveness, vulnerability, hospitality, humility and frankness.

The Desire for the Kingdom and the Mission of Dialogue

One big danger for the eschatological emphasis of the Kingdom of God is the tendency to suspend our commitment to building the Kingdom of God here and now, while we focus all our energies on the world that is to come. It is a constant challenge to balance both the immanent and transcendental dimensions of the Kingdom of God in our missionary outlook and commitment. The mission handed on by Christ to the Apostles and consequently to the Church is to bring the Kingdom of God into the reality of our day to day life while still on this pilgrim journey towards our final home. The exigencies of the Kingdom are expressed very clearly in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Mt. 5-7), where Jesus established a new law of the Kingdom, namely, repentance, love, forgiveness, selflessness. The kingdom which Christ came to establish is one where the little ones are given a pride of place, a Kingdom where revenge has no place, where vainglory is unthinkable and perfection of the children of the Kingdom is based on purity of heart, ability to endure wrong patiently, determination to be a peacemaker, an untiring thirst for justice and the blessedness of those who mourn and are afflicted (cf. Mt. 5:1-7, 29).

The Beatitudes are the acme of the Sermon on the Mount in which the transformative agenda of Christ’s Kingdom is clearly spelt out. The Beatitudes challenge the believer to live in and engage the world in a radically different way. This newness is the call to discipleship which affects the manner the follower of Christ relates with others. This is the reason the Beatitudes are the guidelines for all those who engage in any form of Dialogue with people of other faiths especially the Muslims. We can review our Christian life based on the Beatitudes: are we peacemakers? Do we thirst for justice? Do we rejoice when we are persecuted on the cause of right? Are we merciful? A true lover of dialogue incarnates these virtues in his or her life and thus becomes a light to the nations, Africa is in dire need of men and women who would incarnate these values to counter intolerance and violent conflict.

⁴ T. DAVID, *Dialogue with the Other: The Interreligious Dialogue*, Louvain and Rapids, 1990.

Why Interreligious Dialogue with Muslims?

Within the seven years I worked with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) as Secretary for Mission in the department of Mission and Dialogue of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, apart from my duties for mission animation and formation within our local Church and activities to promote *missio ad gentes*, we upheld Interreligious Dialogue as a way of doing mission today in the concrete reality of our country Nigeria. However, we discovered that for many Catholics, dialogue with Muslims is not positively viewed. Many people erroneously believe that dialogue means we convert Muslims to become Christians, by convincing our dialogue partners that we are right and they are wrong. For some others, there are too many prejudices against Islam and Muslims, they are adjudged violent and with a hidden agenda to Islamize the society. But the fundamental question is: why do we engage in Interreligious Dialogue?

It is pertinent to note here, that among the groups recommended for dialogue, Muslims top the list: "The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day."⁵ Our approach to dialogue is rooted in our understanding of Church. The word "Church" (Latin *ecclesia*, from the Greek *ek-ka-lein*, to "call out of") means 'convocation' or an 'assembly'. It designates the assembly of people, usually for a religious purpose (Cf. Acts 19:39). *Ekklesia* is used frequently in the Greek Old Testament for the assembly of the Chosen People before God, above all for their assembly on Mount Sinai where Israel received the Law and was established by God as his holy people (cf. Ex. 19). By calling itself Church, the first community of Christian believers recognized itself as heir to that assembly. In the Church, God is "calling together" his people from all the ends of the earth. The 'Church' is 'mission', because it is itself a gathering, one which has the duty to bring into communion fellowship of all God's scattered children.⁶ Consequently, dialogue is a means by which the Church gathers together the sheep which are not of this fold (Jn. 10:16).

There are many socio-cultural, political and even economic justifications to engage in dialogue which is even more urgent today. There is not just one purpose of dialogue but rather a number of aims. There is first the aim of helping people of different religions to live together in peace and harmony. This is a task which

⁵ CCC. 330.

⁶ T. OKURE, *Mission as Gathering In: Biblical and African Perspective* – Paper delivered to a Gathering of Missionaries in Maynooth, Ireland and circulated privately as a booklet by the Irish Missionary Union, 1994.

is ever more urgent in a world becoming increasingly multicultural and multi-religious. It is a task which implies, as we know, overcoming prejudices, battling against indifference, and creating understanding. When Interreligious Dialogue reaches a deeper level, it does not merely aim at mutual understanding and friendly relations, but it also facilitates openness to the Holy Spirit: where exchange and sharing consist of a mutual witness to one's belief and a common exploration of one's respective religious convictions and spiritual experiences which is the work of the spirit in each soul. Through dialogue, we may come to discover the presence of God in others.

Interreligious Dialogue is a pathway to true conversion to God, because sincere dialogue implies, on the one hand, mutual acceptance of differences, and on the other, respect for the free decision of persons taken according to the dictates of one's conscience. When appropriate atmosphere of trust is built, we are able to express our own faith without fear of intimidation. While working as the Executive Director of Women Interfaith Council in Kaduna, we encouraged all the members to observe their prayer routine, the Muslim women observed their prayer times, while Christians did the same. For example, the Catholics are given the space to say the Angelus and other prayers, and so the Pentecostals etc.

Challenges to Interreligious Dialogue in Nigeria

The actual practice of Interreligious Dialogue with Muslims in Nigeria is plagued with numerous challenges:

Lack of Trust due to Recurrent Conflicts

Christians do not trust Muslims and Muslims do not trust Christians. The mutual distrust makes dialogue between Muslims and Christians quite difficult. Most cities in Northern Nigeria are divided along religious lines, whereby Muslims are concentrated in one part of the city and Christians on the other. This makes the first level of dialogue – Dialogue of Life more difficult, because more than ever before, Muslims and Christians are physically separated, deliberately avoiding one another, shunning transactions and thereby increasing prejudices. For this reason, we have to create inter-faith forums to provide safe spaces for interaction. This is the mission of the Interfaith Forum of Muslim and Christian Women Associations founded in Kaduna in 2010 by the Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles to bring women of faith (Muslims and Christians) together for peace building, dialogue and working together to solve women common concerns.

Politicization of Religion and Religionization of Politics

Most of the conflicts experienced in Nigeria are indeed political and sometimes economical. Religion is only used as a cover to perpetrate division and violence for political interests. Religion is today an important part of International politics and Africa is often at the centre of this power tussle between the big powers of the West and East.

Bad Governance and Weak Judicial System

Interreligious activities are often made complicated though political propaganda and government interference. It is rather unfortunate that the political leaders benefit from the divisions and they are not held accountable for their corrupt practices and misuse of office. The poor masses are set up one against the other, so they are not united as citizens to demand for their rights.

Poverty and Economic Factors

Working in Interreligious Dialogue is indeed very complicated in situations of extreme poverty and illiteracy, where people demand for immediate gratification to satisfy their basic needs for food, shelter and welfare.

Insecurity and Risky Environment

In many cases, working for Interreligious Dialogue is like working in a war zone. People are afraid and the risk to life and attack is real.

NGO mentality – Money Centered and Little Volunteering Spirit

My experience of working in Interreligious Dialogue in Northern Nigeria has made me realize how opportunists make use of the tension and conflict to acquire money through foreign NGOs and even government. This mentality has made it difficult to get community volunteers who collaborate on dialogue and peace-building, it has become an expensive venture, because even the local chiefs and religious leaders all demand for ‘sitting allowances, transport fare, hotel accommodation, etc.

Interreligious Dialogue is a New Ministry in the Church

There are very few pastoral workers skilled for this kind of apostolate even though the Church has always interacted with many religious and have worked closely with Muslims for centuries.

Learning the Local Language/Culture

Even within a country like Nigeria, the Islam practiced in the south west is different from that of the North, to my surprise, I realized that the Islam as practiced in Kano is quite different from that of Maiduguri or Sokoto. There is a lot of cultural influences which affect the way Islam or Christianity are practiced. It is essential to learn not only the language, but also cultural peculiarities and idiosyncrasies.

Fears and Prejudices

For those who engage in dialogue, it is often a very lonely ministry. Many Catholics project their fears and prejudices about Islam to those who engage in dialogue. For this reason, anyone who engages in dialogue must be a man or woman of strong faith conviction and prayerful with the ability to endure patiently. The *Lineamenta for the African Synod*, 35 stated as follows: “No nation can prosper in an atmosphere of insecurity. No meaningful development is sustainable in a society replete with mutual rancour, bitterness and hate. Mutual prejudices hinder cooperation and exchange, and rob a people of a hope of a great nation.”

Religious Fundamentalism (Extremism)

We often think that fundamentalism and extremism are Islamic problems, but the recent happenings in the world have proved otherwise. The post-synodal exhortation, *Africae Munus*, tells us that “If all of us who believe in God desire to promote reconciliation, justice and peace, we must work together to banish every form of discrimination, intolerance and religious fundamentalism” (AM 94).

Funding

Many dioceses and parishes have little or no budget allocation for dialogue; oftentimes, it is not recognized as part of evangelization. As a result, a lot of initiatives are unapproved and unexecuted.

Lack of Constituted Authorities (to engage with)

Many sects in Islam have no structured and point of reference, many pastors, imams and sheiks are independent religious peddlers who gather and indoctrinate their followers and especially the young without a serious theological background.

Communion

As an African, I believe communion is what is greatly lacking in our continent today where there is so much ethnic and religious rivalry leading to violence,

poverty and marginalization. It is through a deeper knowledge and love of God, who is Communion, that we will gradually move towards communion in our nation, and in Africa.

Conclusion

Christian-Muslim dialogue requires an urgent response to build the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind (cf. Mt. 13:47-52); therefore, for the Church to truly be a sign of the kingdom, she must be ready to gather all these diversities of peoples. This is even more important in Africa where the diversity is often a source of conflict and division. Can the Church in Africa, through dialogue become a space of dialogue and an instrument of reconciliation, where all feel safe and at home? Dialogue is a risk, it is stepping into the garden of the 'other'; Dialogue often involves stepping into the unknown, it requires taking the risk of letting go of oneself and may entail being rejected. Interreligious Dialogue strips the Christian message of superfluous adornment and challenges it to constantly get to the essential, the heart of the Good News: *Koinonia* – communion, which makes her humble through *Diakonia* – service, and the two together lead to *martyrion* – witness and model. This is the mission of Christ and the mission of the followers of Christ. Through dialogue, Christians today can rekindle those fundamental values of the Kingdom: compassion, gentleness, justice, peace, and love, even when persecuted.

As a missionary, I have come to appreciate that both Christians and Muslims, men and women, are called to open to one another as gifts within and through which the mystery of God, God's Word, and the mystery of humanity, is continuously revealed. It will also lead us to discover more authentically the presence of Christ and the message of God's Kingdom in other religions and will help us to collaborate more authentically with people of other religions in incarnating God's Word in our today's world.