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16 | Polarity and the Quest for Identity: Inter-religious Dialogue and the Problem of the Polarisation of African Christians

Introduction

"The sons and daughters of Africa love life. It is precisely this love of life that leads them to give such great importance to the veneration of their ancestors [...],"so once remarked the late leader of the Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II. The words of John Paul sum up what lies at the heart of the African philosophy of life, a kind of philosophy which many feel at pain to be made to leave behind and embrace what they are made to believe is a 'civilised' religion, Christianity. With particular focus on the Catholic Church, this chapter examines the polarization that is suffered by many African Christians and tries to salvage the situation by calling for inter-religious dialogue between adherents of Christianity and those of African traditional religion. The end in view is to try and resolve the problem of the past and present onslaught of Christianity on African Traditional Religion.

The African dilemma

Since the advent of Christianity in Africa, African converts have been made to believe that their religious and cultural traditions were nothing other than the products of the Evil One, hence had to be discarded as a matter of urgency. In the eyes of those who first brought Christianity to Africa, there was totally nothing to be admired in the lives of Africans whom they believed dwelt in a state of barbarism. Instead of them admiring and praising African customs and ways of life, they rather saw Africans as 'savages' to be civilised, 'cursed sons of Ham' to be saved, 'big children' to be educated, for in their eyes, there existed no African culture, only tribal customs, no religion save foolish superstitions and devilish cults. Newcomers to the mission field south of the Zambezi, as noted by J. Baur, were informed, "here we do not shake hands with Africans" (Baur, 2001, 422). Africans were thus torn apart between the world

of Christian beliefs and their world of African traditional values and beliefs. Since those early days up to this present time, African Christians suffer from this 'split-personality syndrome'. More like their brothers and sisters living beyond the borders of the African continent, they suffer from:

> [...] a double tendency that makes them live their Christian life in two parallel lines that hold them between their fidelity to Christ and their fear of *vadzimu* (ancestral spirits). This polarity becomes a confusing and disturbing factor in their Christian behaviour. It creates a painful tension in their conscience. And this tension, so devastating to their Christian faith [...] must at all costs be resolved (Mavhudzi cited in J. Elsener and F. Kollbrunner, 2001, 45-46).

Since their reception of Christianity, however, Africans have always been seeking to live their faith within the context of their own cultures. Condemnation of what they held as treasure was the only thing hampering them. The desire to live the Christian faith within their own context soon saw a re-awakening kind of spirit sweeping across Africa. It was more of a fight for self- identity and recognition as African Christians (Baur, 2001, 425). This was, in other words, an emerging of African Christian consciousness. By the 1950s, this self-assertion was becoming too powerful to resist. Those who had been fortunate enough to pass through the mission schools began coming together and forming some organisations. One example of such lay organisations in Zimbabwe was that of the Catholic African Association (CAA) which was formed in 1934 under the leadership of Ambrose Majongwe. The initial idea of forming an association for the laity, as noted by Gundani (2001) had actually been started by Fr Bernard Huss of Marianhill in Natal (1934).

After its formation, CAA was later changed to the Catholic Association (CA) to express its non-racial character. In 1971 it was registered as a welfare organisation under the Welfare Organisation Act (1966). Despite its new non-racial face, a few of the whites who had been registered with it soon left, leaving it predominantly a black association. The formation of the Roman Catholic Council for the Laity in 1968 and the Diocesan Councils for the Laity in the early 70s, however, saw CA being eventually superseded at national, diocesan and parish levels. It was actually in the annual general meetings of this organisation that different questions were raised and discussed at length. Thus indeed, for the first time, Black Catholics had found an opportunity to express their views and aspirations to each other and to the white hierarchy in the public forum. Inspiring CA in the first place was the greater cultural freedom that the

Church allowed on the eve of Vatican II and the period after this Council (Abbot, 1996, 151-152).

While the battle to express their own views freely about their own culture and religion had begun, that battle was far from being over. Since those early days, the damage that missionary catechesis has effected upon Africans was so huge to be reversed in a short time. Due to such a polarisation it is not easy for Africans to de-entangle themselves from the tentacles of a Christianity that has been brought to them under the garb of Western culture. Making matters worse is that some fellow African Christians have become champions also in tearing down their traditional customs. It is from this context that I make the proposal that it is only through a process of inter-religious dialogue that we can possibly see a solution to the great polarisation of African Christians.

Dialogue – a step towards resolving the dilemma

Inter-religious dialogue surely sounds a novel phenomenon of the modern world. We could not conceive of it, let alone do it in the past if one brings into memory the historic crusades of the medieval period. Dialogue thus understood in the religious sphere means a formal process in which authoritative members of at least two religious communities come together for an extended and serious discussion of the beliefs and practices that separate the communities. It is, in other words, witnessing to one's deepest convictions and listening to those of one's neighbours. A more formal definition of inter-religious dialogue was given by John Taylor, a former missionary and Anglican bishop of Winchester. Taylor defined it as "[...] a sustained conversation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognise and respect contradictions and mutual exclusions between their various ways of thinking" (Taylor cited in Baker, 2008). Arguing along almost similar lines, Panikkar defines religious dialogue as 'the exchange of views and insights by means of concepts expressed in words that are based on previous agreement concerning the common, which the dialogue thereafter tries to widen and deepen, so as to pinpoint divergences, similarities, complementarities, and criticisms, as well as to find the loci where mutual influence or fecundation may take place' (Panikkar cited in Adamo, 2011).

Church dialogue with African Traditional Religion

The African Synodal spirit within which this chapter is framed notes the necessity of dialogue with ATR adherents basing it on various solid grounds. In the first place, the Synod observes that as with all men and women of good will, irrespective of the religious faith to which they belong, the Church must dialogue with adherents of ATR since,

> the Living God, Creator of heaven and earth and Lord of all history is the Father of the one great human family to which we all belong. As such, he wants us to bear witness to him through our respect for the values and religious traditions of each person, work together with them for human progress and development at all levels. Far from wishing to be the one in whose name a person would kill other people, he requires believers to join together in the service of life in justice and peace (John Paul II, 2000).

Secondly, in view of the foregoing remark, the Synod was quick to note that it was now high time to give attention to ATR. It regretted that ATR had not been given the recognition it deserves as a valid partner in dialogue nor the attention it should receive on a pastoral level. On a sad note, however, it has been seen as a deposit for prospective converts. Echoing almost the same sentiments with the African Synod, Ezra Chitando notes that the preoccupation with the 'sacred text' has tended to push religions that do not privilege the written word to the periphery and he singles out ATR in particular, arguing that it does not feature prominently in inter-religious dialogue as propounded by eminent theologians (Chitando, 2004: 3). The end result of this, as he notes, "has been to write off ATRs from the process of conversation and to relegate the religion of millions to mere footnotes."

The third reason why the Synod advocated a serious dialogue with ATR adherents is because ATR is still very strong and widely practised in many places. In its January 1998 report, the Association of Members of Episcopal Conference in East Africa (AMECEA) noted, for example, that over 23 million people are still adherents of ATR in its area. In the Republic of Benin, about 64% of the population were still adherents of ATR while about 12.6 million in Nigeria and about 29.1% of Ghanaians were still followers of ATR (Ikenga-Metuh, 2012). The picture reflected in these numbers and percentages simply shows that in the majority of African countries, ATR is still the all-pervasive determinant of the life and culture of these peoples. It is actually part and parcel of the cultural heritage and it determines the spontaneous and subconscious reactions of these people and their interpretation of reality. The Synod was able to

note also that some African intellectuals are actually returning to this religion and are reorganising according to modern principles. These bare facts made the Synod to conclude that the Church cannot afford to marginalize these followers hence making dialogue with ATR an urgent necessity.

Another push factor to dialogue with ATR is the understanding that such an exercise can reveal many of the values which are common to both Christianity and ATR which can serve as a *preparatio Evangelica* 'preparation of the gospel' or as stepping stones for introducing African adherents of ATR into full acceptance of the Christian faith. These values will in the long run prove a great asset when it comes to inculturation.

Obstacles to dialogue with African Traditional Religion

Probably the greatest hindrance to dialogue with ATR is Christianity's hegemonic tendencies. Christian adherents thought and still think that they alone have an exclusive access to God and all other religions are simply wasting their time unless they convert to the true faith, which is Christianity. Christians tend to hinge their conviction on the words of their Lord and Master, Jesus Christ who said: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). On a related issue, Jesus is known also to have once said: "All who came before Me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (John 10:8-9). When read from a canonical point of view, these "I am" statements of Jesus point out for us the exclusive nature of salvation. Jesus here argues that He is "the door," not "a door." He is the 'only door' by which people may enter and be saved (John 10:9). What this implies is that He is the only means of receiving eternal life (John 3:16) and there is no other way. This is tantamount to saying all other religions are empty pursuits.

Due to Jesus' insinuating words that salvation cannot be found anywhere else except through him, Christians found ground to erect a wall of prejudice between them and those they define as the 'other,' adherents of ATR included. With the coming of Christianity, we find that missionary catechesis has for the most part taught African converts to hold ATR in disdain and its adherents in great contempt. Using Zimbabwe as a case study, Chavunduka (2001) observes that in the attempt to

build churches in Zimbabwe, early missionaries saw it best to "destroy not only the childish African religion, but their culture as well, and transplant a Christian faith with all its European cultural background, imagery and orientation." Early journals on Africans and their religion were fraught with derogatory terms. As observed by Mercado (2004, 2005), they were labelled 'pagans', 'heathens', 'idolatrous', 'polytheists', 'barbarians', 'superstitious', 'fetishists', 'primitive.' Adamo (2011) adds that to some Christians, African Indigenous Religions are synonymous to misery and superstitions. Missionary catechesis has done nothing better except to reinforce these derogatory terms in a much more practical way. This is evidenced by the way ATR devotees were chucked out from Christian villages. Such a disdain of ATR should hardly be conceived as a thing of the past only for it exists even to this day. As noted by the African Synod,

> Christian Catechesis in Africa still sustains its polemics that it is stupid to be an adherent of ATR, which it sees as the citadel of Satan, and its ministers disdainfully called Juju priests, fetish priests, witchdoctors, as agents of the devil (Ikenga-Metuh, 2012).

Due to the close association between Christianity and European culture, Christianity in Africa has also assumed a superiority complex resulting in the labelling of ATR as primitive and not progressive. Summarizing the general attitude of Christian churches in sub-Saharan Africa, Shorter (1991) had this to say:

> The churches in Sub-Sahara Africa could afford to ignore Islam, as long as Muslims were backward ... Christians could also afford to antagonize the adherents of ATRs. It was felt that they had no future within or outside the Church, and a relentless war of annihilation was fought against them. Dialogue with ATRs appeared laughable under this circumstance (Shorter cited in Adamo, 2011).

Thus, there is need to treat adherents of ATR with respect and esteem if significant progress in dialogue is to be achieved.

Yet another obstacle that lies in the path of dialogue is the argument that dialoguing with ATR which the Church has since vehemently condemned would look like it was now endorsing it. In addition to that, it is often argued that it is not easy to listen to others with respect, charity and patience without running the risk of watering down one's faith (Ikenga-Metuh, 2000). While indeed one has to admit that it is a risky business in engaging a dialogue, it is such an important step without which the Church cannot accomplish her mission. The Church has a mandate to proclaim Christ to all creation (Mk 16:16). If dialogue is to be

among equals and each being capable of defining himself/herself, there would not be any danger of the dialoguing partners risking their faith. The only possible risk is when one of the partners in dialogue is less informed of his/her faith position. When engaging a dialogue with an ATR adherent, a Christian must always be true to the name, bearing the obligation to witness Christ.

Equally propping up as an obstacle to dialogue with ATR is the mistaken notion that ATR is almost dying out hence no reason to dialogue. Due to modernity, youngsters are seen as abandoning ATR in huge numbers, hence its demise is seen as a matter of time. Though such an observation may appear true, it is altogether not true that ATR is fast dying out. As argued already, ATR is still very strong and widely practised in many places on the African continent. It is equally not a far-fetched possibility that even in the Diaspora where some Africans are scattered, ATR is still being practised even though they are in the heartland of the so-called civilisation. Ignorance about the exact nature of ATR is what is often leading some to think that the traditional religion is dying out.

A rather denigrating obstacle to dialogue with ATR is the mentality in some that it is not easy to find competent people to dialogue with since most leaders of ATR are illiterate. While this may sound true if one maintains a minimalist understanding of what dialogue is all about, the reality, however, is that dialogue cannot be limited to an abstract theological exercise requiring literacy and systematic reasoning. Dialogue encompasses also spiritual sharing, active collaboration in life situations and more especially, the sharing of life's experiences. This finds echo also in call for dialogue among cultures and civilisations, adopted by the *International Symposium on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations Sana'a*, 11 February 2004, which points out that "dialogue among cultures and civilisations is a necessity in the contemporary world in order to overcome obstacles, prejudices and re-emerging ignorances and to understand and learn from and about others and their experiences." The African Synod made equally a good observation when it noted that,

> Christian missionaries and local pastors have been dialoguing with leaders of ATR communities, chiefs, priests, clan heads, prophets and diviners over matters which touch on traditional religious beliefs like converting former shrine sites into Christian mission sites, on aspects of traditional festivals, initiation rites and different types of taboos with varying degrees of success. Through dialogue, they have in some places prayed and taken joint action to broker peace, organise the education and medical services for the community (Ikenga-Metuh, 2012).

The reality thus, is such that the same community with which one discusses other matters would also be partners in dialogue over traditional beliefs. One needs to bear in mind also that so many things in Africa have since changed, including the rate of literacy. Many adherents of ATR are now educated men and women who, if engaged in dialogue, can actually speak on behalf of their genuine ATR community of believers.

Types of dialogue in view of African Traditional Religion

Looking more closely at the recommendations of the African Synod one notes that as a special activity, dialogue can actually be expressed in two main ways: the dialogue of life and deeds and the dialogue of specialists.

Dialogue of Life and Deeds

As noted above, dialogue is not limited to abstract theological discussions and debates of experts. Ordinary adherents of different religions can actually engage in very useful sharing of experiences and collaborations in life. The Synod suggests that in view of the situation in which the Church finds herself in Africa, this type of dialogue is particularly important and necessary because the Church in Africa is only 13% of the total population and members of the Church are literally surrounded by others among whom they must live, witness to and work for the kingdom of God (Ikenga-Metuh, 2012).

In most African States, it is an undeniable fact that religious pluralism cuts across national, tribal and at times even family ties. Be it in rural areas or in the same block of flats in town, people of different faiths live together, and they actually meet at family meetings, funerals, weddings and some even work together in the same offices, factories and so on. In situations such as these, the necessity of dialogue sort of imposes itself on the people. Such a kind of dialogue is sometimes characterised by some scholars as *dialogue ad extra* meaning 'ordinary inter-religious relations.' Paul F. Knitter, for example, defines *dialogue ad extra* as "the interaction of mutual presence [...] speaking and listening [...] witnessing the commitments, the values, and the rituals of others" (Knitter, 2012). In this kind of dialogue, believers live out what their religions would have taught them about good neighbourliness, about honesty, dedication to duty, service to neighbour, duties in the family, community development and so on.

One big danger, however, is that such a dialogue may result in conflict and discord if it is not carried out in a genuine spirit of dialogue by all concerned parties. Equally posing as a danger to such a dialogue by convenience is the possibility of people reaching compromises that go against their faith though at times without intending to do so. More often than not, one finds members who are not well instructed or committed to their faiths and these become so vulnerable. While their immediate aim of coming up with workable compromises for coexistence and cooperation would be positive, some often end up losing their faith.

One can also talk of *dialogue ad intra* or in other words, a dialogue of worldviews. Such a form of dialogue usually takes place within an individual who, although s/he has inherited much from ATR, now belongs to another religion and wants to integrate the values from the two religions. To illustrate a bit on this kind of dialogue, it is often the case that when a Christian believer runs into trouble, he/she first consults his/her priest or pastor. When the pastor, however, proves to be of no help either because he is too intellectualistic or simply because he has no time to listen to pagan stories, the next step that person takes, because he/she has no choice, is to seek help from ATR. When everything is well again, he/she returns to Church. Such a shuttle between Christianity and ATR as observed by Chidi Denis Isizoh is a form of internal dialogue which is going on in some converts to Christianity. It is basically non-verbal, and its primary goal is to integrate the two worldviews so as to give the African Christian an integrated religious personality (Isizoh, 2011). As one can see, it sometimes takes the form of inculturation of some religious values.

Dialogue of Specialists

On the second level of dialogue we have that of specialists and experts. The African Synod made it a point that dialogue with ATR should not be left to chance or mere interest, rather adequate and effective structures and programmes should be designed to promote it in a systematic way. The African Synod further recommended that such projects of dialogue should involve research and publication by experts assigned to the task and that Higher Catholic Theological Institutes like Universities and Seminaries should actually continue to do research in dialogue with ATR and inculturation and make proposals to the bishops. It does not take effort to note that it is on this second level of dialogue that this chapter is to be situated. The opinion, however, of the ordinary adher-

ents of ATR need to be tapped also since wisdom is not the preserve of the educated only.

Looking back, however, into the history of the Church in Africa, one can be able to notice that this second level of dialogue has actually been a black spot on the page of this history. Quite a number of individuals who, in the past, have organised or shared religious experiences with adherents of ATR were labelled backsliders or syncretists, hence ended up being summoned to Rome for inquisition and at times being excommunicated. While such has been the case, accredited Church authorities have up to now not worked out how Christians could take part in some rites which may involve Christians and ATR adherents. Many thorny issues remain unaddressed or have been given a veneer kind of touch. We have such issues like: How could a Christian who becomes the chief or head of the family perform traditional cultural duties attached to his/her office? How could a Christian be conferred with a well merited traditional title? Or as the case with one of the burning issues in Zimbabwean Catholicism: How can the Shona/Ndebele Christians honour their dead and remain feeling at home both in their traditional practises and in the Church?

Dialogue at this level, as recommended also by the African Synod, involves entering into dialogue with the ATR community at the highest levels to work out a formula of rites that would respect the religious beliefs of both parties. Millions of African Christians today want their hierarchy which is now almost completely African, to have that pastoral zeal so that they can give them that much required leadership. Following the example of Pope John Paul II, African Church leaders should gather courage to dialogue with leaders of ATR, not only to promote social and cultural values but also to share common religious experiences like prayer. How revolutionary yet remarkably sound the words of Ikenga-Metuh when he says,

> Church leaders should work out modalities that would permit Catholics to participate in some traditional cultural activities which may have religious overtones like title-taking, the cultural roles of the chief and family heads, initiation rites, some traditional marriage rites, oath and covenant making and some traditional festivals. Failure to participate in these traditional activities that cut across the religious affiliation of Africans leaves the Christians marginalized in their various communities (Ikenga-Metuh, 2000).

Conclusion

To round off the discussion, a polarised state is one of those most less desired situations a person would want to experience. This has been and continues to be the state in which most African Christians find themselves. This chapter has noted that something needs to be done to help the situation and that has been the rationale for advocating inter-religious dialogue which runs through the lines of this chapter. Unless leaders from the Christian community are prepared to bury their pride and meet their fellow brothers and sisters from the African Traditional Religion, then there cannot be any end to the current onslaught of Christianity on traditional religion. Living in a pluralistic world, there is need on the part of the Christian community to keep in touch with the winds of change and leave behind the age-old negative perception of other religious traditions.

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