



RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

IN A MULTI-RELIGIOUS STATE

Edited by:

**SULAIMAN M. JAMIU
RAPHAEL A. AKANMIDU**

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CHAPTER FIVE

PLURALISM, FAITH AND FREEDOM IN THE PRACTICE OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA: A CATHOLIC CHRISTIAN APPRAISAL

NWOSU, PATRICK UCHENNA

Introduction

In the theory and practice of religion all over the world, particularly but not exclusively, among the Muslims, Conservative Orthodox Clergy and hard line Pentecostals, the issues of secularism, liberalism and pluralism have become a raging controversy. The pole dangles between condemning and accepting these concepts. With particular reference to Ilorin, Nigeria the controversy has raged within Islamic and Christian groups about what pluralism really stand for and whether it should be opposed or supported. Within the context of the controversy essential concerns have been raised. For instance, whether salvation is meant for only Christians or Muslims; whether other faiths contain truth; whether people outside one's faith tradition would be?

The fierceness of the clash of understanding most times lead some religious leaders to champion motions that make obedience to specific religious laws like Sharia obligatory to certain extent. For example, in Ilorin emirate there exist unwritten by-laws that oblige all people (not only Muslims) to respect certain elements of Sharia, particularly regarding clothing, cultural display gambling and alcohol.

Again, the building of churches in certain areas within the Ilorin emirate for example, is virtually impossible yet over the last five years, Ilorin has witnessed the upsurge of mosques construction in almost every major streets. At the same time, Muslim parents whose children are in Christian schools vehemently demand for the building of mosques in Christian schools for the use of Muslim students. In this regard Edward Hahnenberg noted that, "what needs explanation today is not the absence of religion, but the enormous diversity of world views and fundamental life options that have come to stand alongside traditional religious belief."

In the light of the above, the objective of this paper is to make a critical analysis of pluralism, faith and freedom in the practice of religion in Nigeria. The paper addresses the following questions: what does pluralism mean and what does it not mean? What is the relationship between truth and freedom? What is the place of tradition of acceptance in inter-religious dialogue? The effort to address these questions forms the thrust of this paper.

Theoretical Framework

Today, in the theory and practice of religion especially in Nigeria what stands out is the closing gap between belief and unbelief. The sharp divide of people in believers and unbelievers has faded in front of a multi-religious appreciation of plurality perspective. What has emerged is a more complex picture, namely that of a plural arena of interacting of religious positions. To corroborate this point, Justice S.O. Muhammad, the Kadi of Shar'iah Court of Appeal, Ilorin noted that "the state government of Kwara should be commended for creating religious committee that serves as a framework of enabling religious environment in Ilorin."

Pluralization has become the lens through which one sees and understand the emergence of the postmodern world. For Monika Hellwig:

We seem to be swept into an irreversible trend the mingling of cultures and peoples in Pluralistic societies, in which we can no longer ignore another's beliefs and religious commitments.²

In fact, the word "pluralism" is applied today in a variety of ways that one may conclude that the concept is used for different purposes.

Paul Knitter and John Hick created the opening for this diverse understanding and they are regarded as the fathers of pluralism. Knitter has to his credit the work titled: *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitude Toward the World Religions* while Hick wrote the work: *A Christian Theology of Religion: The Rainbow of Faiths*. Both scholars later edited the work titled: *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religion in 1987*.

Generally, Knitter's concern was the place of Jesus in relation to other religions, likewise John Hick. These scholars make a claim for what they call a pluralistic stance which seems to involve the renunciation of absolute monopoly of truth of none religion.

According to them:

All religions are essentially of the same dignity; all religions are equally true; there is no single true religion; and religions are expressions of the religious dimension of humankind.³

In the light of the above position, Knitter and Hick went further to say that prophets or founders of different world religions "were deeply religious people who were able to express the religious dimension of humankind according to the specific ramifications of their respective cultures"⁴ Following this line of argument one gets the impression that all religions are true, and therefore, none should claim a monopoly of truth. In the context of pluralism there is demand that religions in particular, should abstain from believing that it represent the only true religion. It is occasionally added that truth claims found in religions are responsible for much of the violence carried out by

Analysis and Objections on Pluralism to Knitter and Hick

Some people in the name of God. One of the consequences of this position is that proclamation or evangelization makes no meaning.

The pluralist position of Knitter and Hick was later taken to task by Gavin D'costa in the work he edited titled: *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* and in *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*. In these works the role of Jesus in religions was the central issue. D'costa submitted that:

Salvation in Christ is potentially universal, we do not know ultimate truth and do not know other faith traditions from the inside, but we do know that they are worthy of respect and that we can learn from them, while engaged in a friendly wager concerning the centrality we see for Jesus in history.⁶

He noted that Knitter and Hick represent different forms of pluralism thereby creating problems in the effort to understand the meaning of pluralism. The central problem which the fathers of pluralism created implies an arrogant attitude towards the deepest convictions of some of the religions, especially the monotheistic ones.

Therefore, some objections raised here in the light of Gavin D'costa's works. To say in the name of pluralism that all religions are the same is the same is saying that "different religions are just different expressions of the one religious nature of human kind".⁷ But "when we speak of pluralism with reference to religion, we speak of situation where more than one religious ideology exist and interact with one another."⁸ This means that pluralism is distinct from relativism, pluralistic or plurality. While relativism and plurality are dependent upon the modes of human experience, pluralism means the ability to accept and respect a diversity of world views and religious convictions and be able to live and work together with people despite religious convictions in a given society like Ilorin in Nigeria.

What is presupposed, if one talks about diversity of world views and coexistence, is the existence of common values. Monika Hellwig described it as "convergence of goals and values among the religions."⁹ Thus, real pluralism has "in acknowledging that there are irreconcilable differences between the religions. It is within this context that S.O. Muhammad noted that, "Islam in Ilorin, Nigeria accepts truth in other religions. The real practice of Islam is authentic pluralism."¹⁰ In other words, Muhammad, the Kardi of Sharia Court of Appeal, Ilorin, agrees that pluralism which denies religious truth claims by one religion should rather be called by another name rather than pluralism. Maybe, we call it subjectivism since truth of other religions is said to be valid in relation to their adherents.

Real pluralism is not intolerant; it does not advocate that believers, especially monotheists should get rid of their deepest convictions. Take for example, it is impossible to tell a Muslim in Ilorin or anywhere, in the name of pluralism, that Prophet Muhammad is not the seal of the prophets and that the Holy Qur'an is no he real God's

definitive revelation; likewise Christians cannot be challenged to get rid of the truth that Jesus is "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn. 14:6). The same applies to adherents of African Religion (Afrel) who believe the ancestors are living and not dead. These deep convictions are different in the practice of religions. They cannot be completely reconciled with each other. Thus, the need for respect, acceptance and inter-religious enrichment. As Monika Hellwig, a proponent of secular theology put it more recently:

We need the particular in which we feel at home and in which the symbols convey more than can be spelled out in secular and common language. We need the particular of other people's traditions because our own is often understood better in the juxtaposition. More over, we need the particular of the other traditions because no language or symbol system can capture the whole of reality and the whole of human experience in all historical strands." Any position that is less than what projects real pluralism cannot encourage peace among religions neither can it guarantee authentic human community since "God hates monotony and loves varieties."¹²

Truth and Freedom

As alluded earlier in this paper, real pluralism certainly cannot mean that religions have to get rid of their basic truth claims. Religious pluralism implies nothing about truth claims and is not a treatise about whether there is salvation in the other religions.¹³ The Vatican II Fathers established the answer to this concern in the document titled: "The Church and the Other Religions in Relation to Salvation." In the document Vatican II Council submitted that, "those who follow other religions can certainly be saved, and that not in spite of but through those religions."¹⁴ The council further states that:

This truth of faith does not lessen the sincere respect which the Church has for the Religions of the world, but at the same time, it, rules out, in a radical way, that mentality of indifferentism characterized by a religious subjectivism which leads to the belief that one religion is as good as another.¹⁵

Therefore, pluralism in its authentic application is an attitude and the social reality of accepting the plurality of religious convictions, interpretations and ways of life as something positive and enriching. Having said all these, a genuine positive pluralist attitude would be possible to maintain if people do not absolutism their truth claims. Absolutism leads to fundamentalism. Fundamentalism here implies "the conviction that one has the total truth with absolute certainty and that you can only accept it or be an unbeliever."¹⁶ To buttress this point further within the perspective of a committed Muslim, S.D. Muhammad explained that:

Islam is most liberal in all aspects. Humman imperfections are often the problem. Whatever you know in Islam is little because it is only Allah that knows all."

However, examining the matters of truth closer, a basic question comes to mind, has freedom any connection with truth? Or, to put it within the Christian framework, does

truth set us free? How?

Religious hardliners seldom see freedom as belonging to the essence of faith. Within such stance, uncritical obedience is the core attitude of the believer and freedom is understood as acceptance of the law. But in the Catholic Church, for instance, freedom is recognized as being inseparable from faith. It operates in two directions: freedom as the condition of genuine faith, and freedom as the fruit of faith.¹⁸ This is reflected in Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom. The document states that:

All men should be immuned from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups, and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in associations with others.¹⁹

Religious pluralism, understood within the context of ethics, has no difficulty accepting that believing means acknowledging truth, and acknowledging truth is only possible as a free act. In Nigeria, where freedom of religion is clearly stated in the Constitution, this point would not pose any problem. This is generally agreed upon. But what norin Muslims for example reject is arrogant "Christianization", whereby money and cultural superiority are used to draw people and the less educated into Christianity. S.D. Muhammad was vehement with this point. He said, "Islam would fight if you come to a family house of a Muslim to build church because you have too much money."²⁰

Freedom is, indeed, the fruit of faith. Faith, properly understood, means following what one knows is true and right. Following what is right is an endowed value and it is the substance of freedom to be able to follow what is experienced as valuable. Thus, the deeper the truth one believes in, the freer one becomes. However, an important caveat must be stated immediately that truth only makes one free if only it is embraced in an open and humble way. This is what Magnis-Suseno meant when he said that when we make our religious belief our property which others must accept, we lose our freedom.²¹

In the hearts of people, truth is granted to be if one is ever aware of the fallibility and limitation of human understanding of it. Thus, believing in Christ, for instance, is only true, and right, if the believer knows at the same time that he/she is only at the starting point. In the practice of religion, adherents learn anew the truth of their religion in the comparison and juxtaposition with other perspectives (Atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and others). This means that there are other dimensions and implications of one's faith that are always outside one's horizon. After all, no body owns God or the truth. Therefore, humility and open faith is advocated for peaceful coexistence in a multi-religious society like Ilorin, Nigeria. "Being with Christ, in the church gives one a sound basis and confidence, but knowing that one is only a fragile vessel, never owning the truth, makes one to be open and humble, and free to look in new directions."²²

The Tradition of Acceptance

The tradition of acceptance which seriously takes the love, greatness and care of God is an aspect or component of real pluralism. Such pluralism would be the great contribution to world peace and reconciliation that religions can make. As we noted earlier, the enemy of real pluralistic society is dogmatism or ideological hardening. The consequence of this is the weakening of love and compassion. "Thus, the ideologising of religion is a great danger. It hardens hearts and blocks minds."²³

As already mentioned above, there is the need to understand one another and what religious convictions are. More needs to be done in this regard. It is only then, as noted by Onaiyekan, that "we can respect one another in our differences."²⁴ This goes beyond tolerance since the concept of tolerance is negative. "You tolerate what you do not like but about which you cannot do much."²⁵

However, the hope of mankind for peaceful coexistence in a multi-religious society has a basis. The basis is rooted in the fact that in Muslim hearts, as in the hearts of all people, there is a yearning for real peace and readiness to accept others in their otherness. This gives hope for the tradition of acceptance and Magnis-Suseno added his voice to this tradition thus:

Human beings also have, deep in their hearts and quite often in real life, openness, a sense of fairness, compassion, generosity, the ability to admire greatness, a sense of justice, the capacity for selfless love. We find these deep attitudes everywhere, among people of all kinds of religious or irreligious attitudes, if we only open our eyes, if religions connect themselves to these yearnings, they will also be understood when they encourage respect for religious freedom.²⁶

In other words, Magnis-Suseno is trying to say that despite human inclination to culture of violence and fundamentalism, human hearts are as well capable of openness, compassion and real pluralism.

Conclusion

In this paper it has been argued that there are varying shades of pluralism which makes the concept evident and beyond denial in today's multi-religious world. It has also been highlighted in the paper that the fundamental elements that make religious pluralism real, authentic and enriching are in the project of interreligious friendship. Based on these, we submit that truth has a dynamic link with freedom which is predicated on faith. To this end, the ethical predisposition of human hearts, regardless of religious affiliations, shows concern for practical issue of peaceful coexistence, world justice, and so forth. Therefore, mutual respect acceptance, inter-religious harmony and sincere desire to know more about one another's traditions are advocated for a balanced society.

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