

The Need for and Importance of Dialogue of Life in Community Building: The Case of Selected West African Nations

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Abstract

This paper discusses dialogue of life under five main thematic areas. After a definition of dialogue of life the paper goes on to discuss dialogue of life in general, the need for dialogue of life, the effects of dialogue of life, and the importance of dialogue of life in community and nation building, with particular emphasis on selected West African and Nations.¹

Introduction

There has been a revolution in the presence of religion in many local African communities and nations as a whole in the last one hundred years or so. Within the period, various religions have come to live in closer proximity with one another than they had during the previous century. African towns and cities now collaborate with churches and mosques and to a lesser extent traditional/primal religious activities. Subsequently, at the present time, people of different faiths encounter one another more often in both structured and unstructured ways. For example, in many homes across Ghana and the Gambia, it is common to find followers of African indigenous religions, Christianity, and Islam with all the different groups of Christianity and Islam living together. By extension such relations are carried to the larger village or town community. During child-naming, funeral celebration and weddings for example, religious people of these varied faiths attend these ceremonies of one another without the question of religious affiliation. The main consideration is to share in the joy of either a neighbor's childbirth or weeding or to share in the pain of the loss of a relative or a loved one. People of different faiths are also found together in such places as government establishments, educational institutions, business agencies, and at sporting activities. In these countries jobs and other public roles are open to all qualified persons irrespective of religious affiliation. It is common, for instance, to find a Catholic heading a Protestant institution and vice versa. In the same way Muslims head Christian institutions and vice-versa. The Ghana national sporting teams have Muslims and Christians in them and reports have it that, when they pray together and on the field, one can hardly tell who is a Muslim and who is not. The same scenario applies to the Gambia and other West African countries.

If religious people must find a way to live together in the same homes, small villages, or town communities and work or study together in other structured and unstructured ways, then dialogue of life is inevitably necessary in order to bring about total social cohesion for community and nation building. Community should be understood in this paper to stand for two things: Christian communities and Muslim communities (*umma*) as separate bodies and the local community, which comprises all the religious communities together.

In what follows I hope to show how Christians and Muslims have practically demonstrated the reality of dialogue of life in Ghana and the Gambia. Additionally the paper hopes to show how the failure of Niger and Nigeria to adopt similar positions has negatively affected the two nations and plunged them into constant communal violence. The paper looks at the need for dialogue of life across West Africa, the effects of dialogue of life (particularly in Ghana and the Gambia), and the importance of dialogue of life in nation or community building.

Defining Dialogue of Life

Dialogue of life in simple terms entails coexisting peacefully with "the other" in spite of obvious religious differences. It also means being patient. In dialogue of life, people from different religious traditions live and interact in their everyday lives. Dialogue of life is a direct challenge to religious people, non-religious individuals, towns, and communities to accept one another no matter their differences in beliefs or practices. It differs from inter-religious dialogue, which often involves listening to one another about the content of each other's faiths. Dialogue of life instead entails faith communities and individuals "sharing with openness" what God is doing in the life of his people (Sam, 2009, 25). Dialogue of life, by virtue of primarily basing relations on blood or social ties, can lead to the dispelling of prejudice and engender mutual understanding. Dialogue of life is a means to challenge adherents of living faiths—such as Buddhists, Christians and Muslims—to rise up and in witness to each other about what they believe and also to help each other to gain their dignity without oppression. This mutual enrichment is vital for

¹ In April 2010, I had the opportunity to address thirty-five priests of six Dioceses of the Catholic Church meeting to mark the occasion of the year of the priest at Offoase Kokoben in the Obuasi Diocese of the Church. This paper contains slight additions to the original paper delivered on the occasion. The original paper was limited to the situation in Ghana.

community development and peaceful co-existence. Douglas Sturm suggests that inter-religious dialogue is primarily concerned with answering the question, “How do we live our lives together?” (Sturm, 1993, 2) Whereas formal dialogue consultations range from perspectives and attempts at answering the above question to assumptions that finding bridges between religious differences will facilitate answers, dialogue of life is ‘the already negotiated answer.’

Unlike inter-religious dialogue which seeks, among other things to build understanding on similarities between the different faiths, dialogue of life does not necessarily look for similarities but seeks to bring peace even amidst acknowledged differences. The process thereby generates peaceful co-existence and enables people to promote spiritual and cultural values, which are found in the distinct outlooks of followers of the other religions. Peaceful co-existence leads to a growth in relationship through a process of mutuality that generates greater understanding and mutual enrichment. The end result is better relations between religions within the same community.

Dialogue of life is a form of “mission”. It is not “evangelism” or *da’wa* (call to Islam). Evangelism and *da’wa* intend to bring outsiders to the faith of Christianity or of Islam. Dialogue of life creates an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence. This is not because of any desire to do away with the Christian and Islamic responsibility to call outsiders to their faiths but for them to explore other ways to make plain the intentions of Christian and Muslim witness and service. These approaches have worked remarkably well in Ghana and the Gambia, and the results are that the two countries have not had any serious cases of religious conflicts.

The Need for Dialogue of Life

Given the definition of dialogue of life, it is clear that followers of different religious traditions are exposed to the practical daily living of their religious counterparts within the same community. They experience one another as real people and learn more about their neighbors. This humanization fosters mutual respect. In fact, in a dialogue of life context, religious relations are not planned or formal; rather, they are a natural outgrowth of the daily encounter with the other. In the home, small village, or town communities where dialogue of life is practiced, people relate first as blood relatives and not as religious communities. Religion takes a less important position.

Dialogue of life does not necessitate dilution of beliefs into some vague, universal whole. Through dialogue of life, religious people reflect on how they can be communities and witnesses of service to themselves, to one another, and to the wider community without compromising their commitments to God. In this pluralistic environment, religious practitioners find themselves confronted by three main challenges of intellectual, moral, and theological character that create the need for dialogue of life. Before discussing the need for dialogue, let me briefly discuss these challenges.

Firstly, at the intellectual level, religious pluralism poses a great challenge to the human mind (Dickson, 2001, 13). Do the religious presuppositions of one religion explain all religions? Or should the mind be challenged by the variety of religions to try to make sense of the multiplicity of religious phenomena? Dickson asserts that it is only “the lazy mind that makes facile judgments, concluding that religions other than one’s own have nothing to teach humankind” (Dickson, 2001, 13). There are always new things to learn from other religious paradigms, and they can be learned through constructive daily interactions and open-minded relationships with the other. For example, there is much to be learned from the Muslim practice of prayer and the indigenous African religionist’s pacifism.

Secondly, there is a moral challenge. Perhaps more than any other time in history, the world has a strong desire for peace and cohesion. At the international level, the United Nations and its agencies are working hard towards the realization of such socioeconomic and political conditions as would make the world a happier and more equitable place. Regional and sub-regional economic and political groupings serve the same purpose. Given this yearning for peace and attempts to dismantle all unwanted barriers, there is the need to ensure that religious pluralism does not prevent the development of loyalties across frontiers. Religion should instead facilitate such loyalties through dialogue of life. People of faith living harmoniously together without holding back their common human struggles can lead to openness, which can break down mental and social barriers. In the case of homogenous populations the people should already be bound by their commonality of origin or ancestry.

Thirdly, there is the theological challenge. It used to be argued (and still is in some circles) on theological grounds that those who do not belong to one’s religion are doomed. Years ago the Swiss theologian Hans Kung took issue with those who held the view that ‘outside the church there is no salvation.’ Kung wondered whether those born before Christ were doomed through no fault of their own. Although dialogue of life does not entirely eliminate exclusivist religious tendencies, it reduces them through long-term interaction and engagements of the religious people in dealing with life’s daily challenges. There are many religious, social, political,

and economic challenges that confront humanity today that call for the collaborative efforts of every person and group, which must be confronted collectively.

Added to the above challenges, we may say that there are several reasons for the need for dialogue of life, particularly in the West African context. Such reasons can be placed in both historical and contemporary contexts. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1979, 716-727) referred to our era as one of Christian self-understanding. Coming after Vatican II Council, this statement implies two things. The first is that the Church, having come to acknowledge the importance of 'mutual understanding' between it and other faiths, suddenly has arrived at a position of self-understanding. The second is that Christianity should understand that it is no longer the only religion. It has competitors and in some cases collaborators across the globe, so it must learn to cooperate and collaborate. David Krieger provides a clue to the locus of this process when he writes about "internal interreligious dialogue and external internal interreligious dialogue" (1993, 331-353). Krieger does not, however, give details as to how this rather speculative approach can lead to the desired need for peace and peaceful cohabitation.

Among other things, the most significant conclusions of Vatican II were: its recognition of the *ecclesia particularis* or local church; the movement towards conciliation with the Eastern Church; the incorporation of vernacular into the liturgical life; the declaration on religious freedom, respecting the dignity of other religious beliefs; and the affirmation of other religions (Dadosky 2010, 10). The council is unsurpassed in invoking "the language of mutuality in terms of the church's outward (ad extra) relations" (Dadosky 2010, 10). Other pertinent documents from the council include the decree on Ecumenism and the declaration on non-Christian religions (Nostra Aetate). Dadosky details how the church can enrich the individual and society and how on the other hand the church is enriched by the other.

The Nostra Aetate repeats the Church's call for "mutual understanding" and respect in the dialogue between religions. It goes on to say, "A renewal of the Church's consciousness of itself and of its mission could not help but lead to a reevaluation of its relationship with those who do not profess faith in Jesus" (Trouvé 1999, 389). In expounding on this understanding, the Church holds that men expect from various religions answers to the unresolved riddles of human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men. Pope Paul VI wrote in support of this position saying, "wherever men are trying to understand themselves, and the world, we can communicate with them" (Trouvé 1999, 390). Summarizing the document and its demands on the Church the Catholic Archbishop of Tamale states that the document exhorts the church to undertake activities that would promote dialogue for peace, justice, development, and reconciliation (Kpiebaya 1999, 12).

According to the World Council of Churches in this age of worldwide struggle of humankind for survival and liberation, religions and ideologies have their important contributions to make, which can only be worked out in mutual dialogue (WCC 1979, 1). It is the responsibility of "Christians to foster such dialogue in a spirit of reconciliation and hope granted by Jesus Christ."

In West Africa, as in all parts of the world, humans are born into relationships with other people. Immediately they have to relate with members of their families, but quickly as they grow up they have to explore wider relationships as they attend school or go to work. This often takes place within the complexity of relationships in a village community or the modern urban centers of the sub-region, which keep attracting immigrant populations. People experience still wider associations within the nation, the ethnic group, and at the same time they may belong to different religions, which condition their outlooks. With globalization comes easy access to local and foreign newspapers, radio and television programs, and the Internet. All these together give people an awareness of the multitude of ways in which the lives they live are influenced and at the same time challenged to depend on people from worlds other than their own.

Again West Africa stands out as a sub region with many challenges and opportunities. The region faces the challenge of pluralism. Different ethnic groups were organized as loose modern nation states of previously self-governing kingdoms, states, and religious traditions. Some of these ethnic groups only came together under one and the same authority either during the colonial period or at independence. The heterogenous nature of the sub region forces it to confront the challenge of struggling to bring all the diverse groups to one whole community within the respective countries. For example, it is estimated that Nigeria has 250 different ethnic groups and a total population of 149,229,090 (www.infoplease.com/pa/A0107847/html and www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-worldfactbook/geos/ni.html). Date of retrieval 24/4/10).

The religious breakdown according to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) webpage is made up of 50% Muslims, 40% Christians and 10% indigenous religions. Nigeria's failure to exploit its ethnic and religious diversity for national cohesion has for a long time resulted in occasional communal violence. Dialogue of life in the sense as discussed in this paper does not seem possible in many Nigerian communities. Instead of using the gifts and graces of diverse ethnic and religious groups in the country for unity and development, people of Nigeria rather emphasize their ethnic and religious particularities.

Ghana, a country covering an area of 238,500 square kilometers, has an estimated population of 22 million, drawn from more than 100 ethnic groups—each with its own unique language. Similar stories could be told of all the nation states of the sub region. The sub region therefore has the great challenge of arriving at the full unity of the people, hence the prevalence of inter-ethnic conflicts that sometimes implicate religion. The complex situation in Northern Nigeria is a prime example, where even though many conflicts are based in ethnic or politico-economic issues, they easily take on religious dimensions. Our intention here is not to contest the accuracy of the figures but to portray the need for and likely positive effects of dialogue of life among these varied groups of people.

Another challenge that confronts West Africa, which reinforces the need for dialogue of life, is within communities and among ethnic groups. These conflicts are caused by a complex combination of poverty, deprivation, deliberate politics of marginalization, political manipulations, and lack of development for many local communities. In Ghana, the perennial case of Bawku stands out for its political failure in solving communal violence. The same can be said of Northern Nigeria and the Niger Delta region, where a complex mixture of religion, ethnocentrism, economic dominance, political undercurrents, and economic exploitation have caused long-term communal violence. The conflicts of Liberia and Sierra Leone of the 1990s are all challenges of unrest that require collaborative efforts to tackle.

A news release 10/53 on the International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC) webpage of April 6, 2010 painted a very grim picture on the refugee and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) situation in Niger and Mali. The ICRC then reported that it needed emergency relief "to assist over 100,000 persons affected by adverse weather conditions and violence." A Report by Zaid Abu Laban and Saadatou M. Barmou to the International Committee of the Red Cross went further to state that,

"Although fighting between government forces and armed opposition groups in northern Niger and Mali subsided last year (2009), areas such as Ansongo in Mali and Tillabéry in Niger experienced an upturn in communal violence, forcing thousands of people to temporarily leave their homes. 'We will not only help internally displaced people who lost all their belongings but also vulnerable residents and returnees, since they too have been hard hit by the crisis'"

(www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/mali-niger-news-06041).

One may be right in suggesting that because people of local African communities are drifting away from the traditional African communal life to pseudo-religious communal systems, the spirit of harmony is gradually being lost.

From the above information, we may deduce that dialogue of life is needed for four reasons. Firstly, the church as the body of Christ as we noted above has, since Vatican II Council come to the point of self realization on the need to acknowledge the importance of 'mutual understanding' between it and other faiths, thus calling on Christians to foster such dialogue in a spirit of reconciliation and hope granted by Jesus Christ.

Secondly, is the fact that even non-religious international and sub regional bodies like the United Nations and their agencies are working toward bridging barriers and seeking peace and unity. In this sense religious people cannot afford to be indifferent to such a worldwide paradigm shift.

Thirdly, in this era of religious pluralism any exclusivist religious tendencies would seem unacceptable and tantamount to enmity with human communities' drive for physical and economic cooperation and development, particularly in the West African situation where people are born and raised in pluralistic contexts.

Fourthly, people can only talk peace and see peace as an essential part of life if during stable times they learn to live at peace and coexist with one another. In that case a simmering or imminent conflict will be seen as new thing to be prevented or stopped. Dialogue of life can enhance peace and peaceful coexistence. The same route of dialogue can be pursued in the event of communal violence of any degree.

The Effects of Dialogue of Life

The effects of dialogue of life are many and diverse. Firstly, any community that practices dialogue of life is in a position to tolerate one another and coexist peacefully. Believers of the different religious communities find living together and accepting one another as natural and habitual. They practice their religion freely and with open minds.

Secondly, in the event of a conflict or violence of any nature, members of the communities are able to detect the signals and most times settle it before it escalates to uncontrollable proportions. York wrote that in the midst of the conflict in Liberia a collaborative alliance between the Liberian Christian Council and the National Muslim Council of Liberia was formed for mediation and transformation of the conflict, which became known in the 1990s as

the Inter Faith Mediation Committee (IFMC) (York 2009, 236). Though faced with many challenges, the IFMC was successful in leading in the management of the conflict until elections were held in 1997. Christians and Muslims have since continued to collaborate in the search for a lasting peace, reconciliation, and healing in that country. Even though the conflict in Liberia had gone beyond proportion to nationwide dimension, the leadership of the two religions worked together and got the people to accept that the conflict was first and foremost not a religious conflict. First, the religious leaders held joint meetings among themselves to dissociate themselves from the conflict. Second, they made joint public statements to the effect that the conflict was political and not religious. The Leaders then moved to Ghana to meet the then Chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), President Rawlings of Ghana, seeking regional intervention.

Since 1978 a Forum of Religious Bodies comprising the Leadership of the Christian Council of Ghana, the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission in Ghana and the Ghana Muslims' Representative Council had collaborated in so many ways until the 1990s, when a new form of Muslim fanaticism emerged in Ghana. This led to the outbreak of religious violence in many parts of Ghana, including Tamale, Wa, Sekondi-Takoradi, Accra, and Kumasi. Because the leadership was in dialogue with one another for many years it was easy for them to issue joint statements calling the feuding factions to order. In places like the 1995 case of Sekondi-Takoradi, where the misunderstandings turned violent, the leaders were able to move to those places to meet the warring factions to foster peace (Samwini 2006, 219-222). Earlier in 1994 the same group was successful in intervening in inter ethnic conflict involving Dagombas, Nanumba, and Konkomba. Although the conflict was non-religious, religion was implicated by the murder of a Presbyterian Pastor. All these interventions became possible and were successful because the adherents of the two religious traditions within those communities under normal circumstances interacted daily.

Many religious conflicts, the fuel for many wars, are easily eliminated when an atmosphere is created for dialogue of life and constructive engagements among religious people. Dialogue of life results in understanding and tolerance, both of which make peaceful coexistence possible.

In another example we consider the case of the Gambia, a little country off the western coast of West Africa. The country with a population of a little over two million people exemplifies dialogue of life. A good dialogue of life is practiced on daily basis in the Gambia. Muslims and Christians in this country share the same streets and same offices. They also participate in each other's funerals, weddings, and name-giving ceremonies. Christian-Muslim intermarriage is a common feature in the Gambia. Such marriage ceremonies are officiated in the church by priests without any inhibition. Following such intermarriages many adherents of the two religions are related.

In daily life Muslims and Christians in the Gambia like their counterparts across West Africa share the ups and downs of life. The Gambia is a country where the Muslim producer of Christian radio programs has no qualms in filling the remaining minutes of the Christian program "call to worship" with an advertisement for the hajj, followed by the song "Onward Christian soldiers." No one seems to take offense. Similarly, in Ghana, it is common for a Muslim to enjoy Christian gospel music and even request it on the radio to be played for a friend. Not only do Christian radio producers dedicate the entire program period for best wishes to "our Muslim brothers and sisters" on the occasion of the *'id al fitr* (festival of thanksgiving) or *'id al adha* (festival of sacrifice), but Christian listeners do phone in to request songs for their Muslim neighbors and wish them *id Mubarak* (festival full of blessing).

Dialogue of Life in Community Building

Religious activities are often of paramount importance to the lives of many West African communities. In this sense both the sacred and the secular aspects of life should be of concern to individuals and communities if they are to attain total development.

When people tolerate one another and coexist in peace, the local community can develop physically. The community can come together and speak with one voice, and policy makers will listen. It can also lead to development of the various religious communities. Religious people can go about their religious life freely, thereby giving an example of what God is doing in their lives. It is a generally known fact that development comes at the heels of peace and stability. These two come to the community when the different people that comprise the community learn to live tolerantly with one another. The catchword here is "learn." Toleration does not come automatically. Individual human beings have inherent differences between them. Religious differences further complicate the natural differences among human beings. Religious and ethnic communities have many things that naturally divide them. Language, culture, theology, and ethical values are some of the issues that divide religious and ethnic communities. Communities, whether religious or social communities, can live in harmony and develop if all these differences are seen as opportunities and are harnessed for the common good. Diversity is not evil in itself, because nature itself created diversity. What human beings do with diversity is

what concerns this paper. With a greater emphasis on dialogue of life, the diverse communities in West Africa can forge ahead for development.

Conclusion

Religion plays a key role in making people good. The effective result of making people good is reflected in the value of the community in which the religious people find themselves. This is an emotional as well as value schema. In the situation of dialogue of life, religious people come to know the other religion based on daily observation and interaction, while the comprehensive understanding of their own faith is as a result of the teaching they receive. My thesis here is simply that the West African sub region is a pluralistic community. It needs religious people to interact more purposefully on a daily basis in order to develop. For where there is peace and toleration among the adherents of different religious traditions, as with the cases of the Gambia and to a lesser extent Ghana, optimum development is possible.

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