

## RELIGIOUS PLURALITY IN AFRICA: A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

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### ABSTRACT

Christianity has been a privileged religion in South Africa under the white minority government. However, since the inception of a democratically elected government in 1994 and the passing of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, all religions have politically equal status. Major religions in the country such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and African Traditional Religion have to learn to live harmoniously with one another and importantly, to cooperate in projects of sociopolitical nature. This article examines religious plurality in Africa and the implications thereof for South Africa. Three missionary paradigms, viz exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism are analysed after which a theological perspective is offered. The Church has to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ nonetheless, but leave the dispensing of salvation in terms of Christian eschatology to God.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a religiously plural world. That fact, in itself, is not new, nor it is our knowledge of that fact new. Since earliest times, religious people have been aware that elsewhere in the world, other people had beliefs and engaged in religious practices that were quite different from the beliefs and practices of their communities (Lockhead, 1988:5).

To illustrate this statement of Lockhead: Christians have been aware of Judaism since Christianity regarded itself as the fulfilment of Judaism. Christians became aware of the existence of Islam during the seventh century CE when it made its appearance in the Middle East and for centuries they have been aware of the existence of most of the Eastern religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

Geographic locations had been responsible for the lack of physical contact among the world religions. However, gone are the days of such isolation. Modern technology and science have made it possible

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for contacts of all sorts. Travel has become easier and affordable. The media, both print and electronic, have shrunk the world to an extent that today we can talk of the world as a "global village". Major institutions and organisations for example, can be visited on their websites and access to internet makes communication easier.

In other words, as Race (1993:1) puts it, the days of religious and cultural isolation are numbered. Religions jostle with one another in a market-place of possibilities. This reality brings with it an increasing awareness of serious theological issues involved that the Church has to grapple with.

## 2. RELIGIOUS PLURALITY IN AFRICA

The world, especially Third World countries, i.e. South America, Africa and Asia do not only have a plurality of religions but also other pluralities in terms of languages and cultures. Religion cannot be regarded as separate from a people's language and culture. In fact religion and culture of a people should be held in a creative tension, since both mutually influence each other. Indeed, as Mol (1976) rightly contends, when arguing for the central thesis of his book, religion sacralises new thought patterns and behaviour whilst it desacralises outdated ones. Religion has a way of adapting itself in a critical manner to new situations and has the capacity to function under different circumstances.

The nature and function of religion so understood, say a lot about the future of religion in human affairs. Greeley (1969:168-169) concludes thus:

- (a) Religion will not lose its adherents.
- (b) Nor is religion likely to lose its 'influence'.
- (c) The sacred is not being replaced by the secular.

Coming to Africa in particular, the situation looks the same (Mbiti 1991:30-33).

Christianity was first introduced to Africa in Egypt in 42 AD by St Mark. By the beginning of the seventh century, Christianity had penetrated one-third of the continent, covering northern Africa, Morocco, the Nile Valley, Sudan and Ethiopia. Islam came to Arabia

during the seventh century. African Traditional Religion(s) did not have predominance in Ethiopia since Judaism had been predominant in Ethiopia, especially among the Falasha people BCE and since Christianity had been introduced into Ethiopia since the fourth century CE. Hinduism, Sikhism and Jainism had been strong, mainly among Indians in the continent. Bahaism which started in Persia in 1863 by Bahauallah, was introduced to Africa in 1911. Its Africa headquarters is in Kampala, Uganda.

Since the nineteenth century, Christianity had spread across the continent. By 1900, African Religion(s) was still the largest, followed by Islam and Christianity. In 1972, African Religion(s) and Islam were equally spread but then Christians started to increase and exceeded Muslims by far. By 1984, only twelve percent of Africans were adherents of African Religion(s). It is estimated that by the year 2000, only nine percent would be adherents of African Religion(s).

Even though African Religion(s) has become smaller, it still survives in our century and will continue to do so in the future in various forms and shades, both in rural and urban areas, for "As long as there is a trace of African culture, it will also have some of African Religion in it" (Mbiti 1991:192). This reality applies also to Islamic countries in the North as well as Ethiopia and Somalia. Also with regard to Islam: although its spread has slowed down somehow, it is still a serious partner for Christianity in the free market economy for converts.

Added to the abovementioned scenario, it is the issue discussed by Paul John Isaak (1996), a Namibian, viz, that post-colonial Africa saw many countries since 1960, in spite of its Christian predominance, adopting and recognising the existence of other religions, and entrenching freedom of religion in their Constitutions. Universities in those countries followed suit, by renaming their faculties and departments of Theology and calling them, Religious Studies, Study for Religion(s) or Theology and Religion. Isaak indicates that the University of Namibia had to do the same after the country's independence in 1990. In South Africa the pattern is the same after our democratically elected government in 1994. Christianity which hitherto had been privileged under the apartheid dispensation, had to wake up to the fact that the Constitution of the

Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, recognises and entrenches religious plurality. Chapter 2 of the Constitution entitled "Bill of Rights" guarantees us "Freedom of religion, belief and opinion" (section 15), "Freedom of expression" (section 16), and "Freedom of association" (section 18). As a result, faculties and/or departments of theology and/or divinity who benefited from apartheid funding, are not only changing their names but their syllabi as well as their curricula. For example, the University of South Africa, Theology Faculty is renamed, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies and so is the Faculty of Theology at the University of the North. The University of the Western Cape's Theology Faculty has been renamed Faculty of Religion and Theology. Other universities such as Zululand, Fort Hare, Pretoria, and Stellenbosch have no choice but to reflect the new reality entrenched in the Constitution. As Isaak (1996:207) correctly observes,

Today's world is the world of religions and it is only in religions that we really find our own religion.

Having depicted this picture of religious plurality in Africa, we now turn to various approaches or paradigms that were adopted throughout the ages by Christendom in the propagation of Christianity in the continent in order to determine for ourselves today as to which approach or paradigm would be the most appropriate for our African plurality and suitable theologically.

### 3. MISSIONARY PARADIGMS

Three basic paradigms are discernible with regards to the Church's attitude towards other religions viz, exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. These paradigms were employed interchangeably, although with differing emphases, and at different periods of Church History since the inception of the Church at Pentecost and of course by Jesus Christ himself during his earthly ministry. These paradigms were underpinned by the necessity to get into contact with other religions, through some form of conversation or dialogue. All these

efforts were done with the view to make the gospel of Jesus Christ contextual and therefore relevant to those addressed.

### 3.1 Exclusivism

The exclusivist paradigm has been characterised as maintaining that other religions are marked by humankind's fundamental sinfulness and are therefore erroneous, and that Christ (or Christianity) offers the only valid path to salvation ... (D'Costa, 1986:52).

According to D'Costa (1986), Hendrik Kraemer is the most and ardent proponent of this position and within the evangelical tradition, it is still very popular. According to Kraemer, God has revealed the Way, the Life and Truth in Jesus Christ and this needs to be communicated to all humankind. Knowledge and experience of other religions are essential only for evangelisation and dialogue. Jesus Christ is the only judge of all religions, Christianity included.

Kraemer is bent on fulfilling the missionary imperative (cf Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12). This imperative, he argues, cannot simply be understood in terms of social service and mutual enrichment. Religions are human constructions of self-justification. According to Kraemer as paraphrased by D'Costa (1986:58):

Whenever a person does not submit to Christ, however lofty and sincere his or her religion, the fundamental disobedience of humankind is reasserted.

For example, natural theology is a rationalist divinisation of reason. Points of contact and continuity with other religions are irrelevant in the light of Christ's judgment upon all religions. Therefore, general revelation should be understood only in the light of the special revelation in Jesus Christ.

Race (1993:20) in his treatment of this approach, quotes Emil Brunner in "Revelation and Reason" (p 270) as saying,

Jesus Christ is both the Fulfilment of all religion and the Judgement on all religion. As the Fulfiller, He is the Truth which these religions seek in vain. There is no phenomenon in the history of religion that does not point toward Him ... He is also the

Judgement on all religion. Viewed in this light, all religious systems appear untrue, unbelieving and indeed godless.

Race (1993) indicates also that the Roman Catholic Church under Pope Boniface VIII worked within this paradigm under the slogan of *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. The same theme dominated the Protestant International Missionary Conferences in Edinburgh (1910), Jerusalem (1928) and Tambaram (1938). Race further accuses the World Council of Churches of having aligned itself with this position at least until 1966.

Operating in this fashion, the Church concerned itself with doing mission work according to the mission imperative and the Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20). Raimundo Panikkar, in his analysis of the five historical periods of the Church in the transmission of the gospel in Hick & Knitter (1987), would date this attitude as having been predominant until 430. A true Christian was a martyr who had witnessed for Christ. The Church set itself apart from the "pagan" world and was by then an identifiable and sizeable society and a political identity. A change of heart was emphasised in terms of the Church as an alternative society.

Unfortunately, as the Church became intense in its mission of converting other people to Christianity, the crusades marred its image. According to Panikkar, this period lasted from the eighth century until 1571. Under the theology of *militia Christi*, Christians took arms against Muslims in defence of Christendom. All other religions were false and only Christianity was the true religion.

This ideology of hostility as Lochhead (1988) prefers to describe it, regards other religions as "Antichrist". The perception of the threat, real or imagined, may lead to this position. It is regarded as demonic, and the enemy of God. Examples abound, such as the persecution of the Gnostics, Arians and the relations between the Protestants and the Roman Catholics during the Reformation. The World Council of Churches is being accused by the Evangelical movement in premillennialist terms as working for the devil, because it aims at unifying all religions - Protestant, Roman Catholic, Buddhists, Jewish etc. This exercise is considered an apostasy.

Of course, this paradigm was adopted by the Missionary Movements of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries from Europe. Everything of Africa was inferior at best, and false at worst. Our religion was "pagan", and full of superstitions and magic. Our culture was barbaric, primitive, and even savage and had to be redeemed through western culture and "civilisation". The arrogance was incredible as it was overwhelming (Mbiti 1991).

As Lochhead (1988:8) aptly puts it, it was a period that the Church had isolated itself and regarded other religions as living in darkness:

A theology of isolation will present Christians as those who knew the truth and other communities as ignorantly waiting to hear the word of truth.

This rhetoric of hostility can be discerned therefore right across the ideological, cultural and religious spectrum of the world.

The theology of hostility has substantial Biblical support because it hits right at the heart of the First Commandment: You shall have no other gods except Yahweh. One cannot serve two masters, God and Mammon. The Apostolic writings on principalities and powers warn us that other gods out there demand our loyalty.

### 3.2 Inclusivism

This approach has been characterised as one that affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God (D'Costa 1986:80).

D'Costa (1986) regards Karl Rahner as the foremost representative of this position.

Since there is inbuilt into every human being's nature a pre-reflective, pre-apprehension of God, which Rahner calls "transcendental revelation", all of us are predisposed to unlimited communion with God. Anthropology could be regarded as "deficient Christology".

Theologically, salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ.

D'Costa (1986) discusses briefly Rahner's four theses in this regard:

First, Christianity is regarded as the absolute religion which cannot recognise any other religion besides itself as of equal right. But the religions of those who did not come into contact with Christianity, through no fault of their own, are not rendered invalid at the moment of the incarnation.

Second, until the Gospel enters into the historical situation of an individual, the individual's religion is valid for salvation in spite of its depravity. Such a religion does contain elements of God's grace and not merely elements of a natural knowledge of God.

Third, when a Christian meets adherents of other religions, he/she must not think that he/she is meeting people deprived of salvific grace, living in a totally sinful and deprived condition, untouched in any way by God's grace and truth. Rahner refers to such people as "anonymous Christians". But they are still objects of Christian mission in order to make them conscious Christians.

Fourth, although the Church is a definitive social and historical expression of those in Christ, it must not be regarded as an elite community of those who are saved as opposed to the mass of unredeemed non-Christian humanity. The Church must be inclusive as a tangible sign of the faith, hope and love made visible, present and irreversible in Christ.

Race (1993), when also analysing Rahner, points to the importance of the distinction made between "general sacred history" and "special sacred history". The former refers to God's self-revelation to all humans in non-Christian religions and social history as evidenced in the Bible by God's covenant with Noah (Gen 8:20-9:17). The latter refers to God's self-revelation in Christianity and Israel's history through God's covenant with Abraham, reaching fruition in Christ and continuing through the Church in the power of the Holy Spirit. As Race (1993:52) aptly encapsulates this idea,

Special sacred history is related to ordinary sacred history not as truth is to falsehood, but as complete to incomplete, perfect to imperfect, plant to seed.



Race (1993) indicates that this paradigm has also been employed by the Church throughout the ages. Although pre-Vatican II theology had largely been exclusivist, Vatican II documents are clearly inclusivist: the partial revelation granted to other faiths and the presence of the Spirit of God as preparation of other faiths to receive the gospel are stark examples of the Roman Catholic Church's embrace of this approach.

Apologists such as Clement of Alexandria believed that other religions were a preparation of those adherents to accept Jesus Christ. Greek philosophy, for example, was regarded as a teacher educating people to expose them to the Gospel. The *Logos* theology of the second and third centuries moves beyond Judaism to include Hellenistic religions. For Justin Martyr, for example, in line with Stoic philosophy says,

... all men participate in the universal cosmic Reason, the eternal divine *Logos*, which is the principle of coherent rationality permeating the basic reality of the whole universe as a whole, by virtue of the '*logos spermatikos*' dwelling in their own intrinsic rationality (Race 1993:42).

Even though the New Testament is largely exclusivist, Luke-Acts comes out clearly in support of the inclusivist approach to other religions and cultures. The conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10:35), Paul and Barnabas in Lystra where God was said to have not left Godself without a witness in human history and culture (Acts 14:16ff), Paul's speech on the Areopagus about the "unknown God" (Acts 17:22-31) are incidences of such an inclusivist approach. When Luke, unlike Matthew who traces the genealogy of Jesus only as far back as Abraham, traces Jesus' genealogy to include Adam, it clearly indicates the universal religious validity of all religions, cultures and histories of the human race. Resultantly, Jesus is (regarded as) the fulfilment of all God's dealings with humanity, since the beginning of history. God has never been absent from the human stage, but has always been preparing it for the coming of Jesus who, as the Christ, becomes the "centre" of history itself and the clue to its meaning (Race 1993:41).

According to Lochhead (1988), inclusivism is characterised by an ideology of competition. Competing communities acknowledge

similarities and differences among themselves, but differences are accentuated as that which make them superior to others. In other words, those with a superiority complex regard their way as offering the fullness of truth. This competitive attitude is expressed in two ways:

First, it is acknowledged, sometimes grudgingly, sometimes enthusiastically, that other communities are not totally outside the truth. Secondly, it is insisted, with varying degrees of arrogance, that the full truth is to be found only in the beliefs and practices of our own community (Lochhead 1988:18).

This "fullness of truth" mentality was held by the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches against each other, before the Vatican II. Only in areas of common social service was cooperation possible.

But dialogue, in any meaningful sense was not possible. To enter into dialogue would be to give the impression that matters of faith were negotiable. Dialogue was viewed as a form of relativism. Dialogue devalued the question of truth. One would not have dialogue between truth and error ... (Lochhead 1988:19).

### 3.3 Pluralism

The pluralist paradigm has been characterized as one that maintains that other religions are equally salvific paths to the one God, and Christianity's claim that it is the only path (exclusivism), or the fulfilment of other paths (inclusivism), should be rejected for good theological and phenomenological reasons (D'Costa 1986:22).

D'Cosra (1986) regards John Hick as the most thorough and far-reaching representative of this position:

Hick argues that, as it was scientifically incorrect to regard the earth as the centre of the universe, it is theologically equally incorrect to regard Christianity as centre of the religious world. It is scientifically correct that the sun is the centre of the universe and the Copernican theology is theologically correct, to place God in the centre of all religions. Hick's theology is therefore based on the affirmation of the universal will of God.

Hick advises that since it is a tendency among religions to elevate and even divinise their founders, even Christianity, as regards to

Jesus' two natures viz, human and divine, should not be understood literally but mythically, otherwise the whole argument of Jesus being God and human at the same time comes very near to talking nonsense. In fact, Hick emphatically stresses that there is no historical evidence upon which to base a claim for the divinity of Jesus, and such evidence as there is, shows that the historical Jesus did not make for himself the claims which the Church was later to make for him (D'Costa 1986:27) God, according to Hick, is encountered in Jesus just as much as God is encountered in other mythically divine beings such that they become valid paths to salvation.

Race (1993) has made an interesting study of WE Hocking who brings in the notions of tolerance and relativism. These underpins all the pluralist theories in the Christian theology of religions. Hocking quoted from "Rethinking Missions", on page 329, says,

It is clearly not the duty of the Christian missionary to attack other faiths ... The Christian will regard himself as a co-worker with the forces within each religious system which are making for righteousness (Race 1993:72).

According to Race (1993:76), Hocking is of the view that through reconceptualisation we can have one world faith. This world faith notion is particularly strong in Asia from where most of the religions of the world, including Christianity, originated. Stanley Samartha (Hick & Knitter 1987:72) regards this approach as both an existential demand and a theological necessity. Raimundo Panikkar (in Hick & Knitter 1987:92) puts it rather crudely when he says,

Christians are becoming dimly but painfully aware that the claim to universality is an imperialistic remnant of times that should be past, and that most followers of other religions feel this claim as a threat - and insult - to their beliefs.

Following the five historical periods outlined by Panikkar above, many Asian Christians no longer want to conquer, not even to convert; they want to serve and learn (Hick & Knitter 1987:95).

As Lochhead (1988:24) correctly made this observation, pluralism is guided by the ideology of partnership. God is one and universal. Differences are noted but the similarities are accentuated

for more meaningful cooperation. They all agree as Christians that their primary function is to serve the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Tom Driver (in Hick & Knitter 1987:210) summarises this stance very aptly when he says,

... the main differences between them (religions) are not rites and symbols, ... Nor are the differences principally doctrinal or philosophical ... The main differences among religions are historical. A religion, like a person or a nation, is what it has become in history and carries that history within itself, even if many of its devotees knew little about the past.

#### 4. COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL

In my view, all the three paradigms are used to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ, if one could reduce them to a common denominator. It is fashionable nowadays in ecumenical circles, and certainly among exponents of religious pluralism, to talk about dialogue with other faiths and ideologies. Yet a monologue in the real sense of the word is not possible because once conversation has started, there is bound to be a response or even a reaction. Therefore, dialogue is inevitable, where-ever and whenever communication is attempted.

As I have indicated in the introduction, these three approaches are not to be departmentalised because they sometimes overlap or simply, one or the other may be emphasised depending on the situation or circumstances prevailing at the time.

As a Christian, when preaching from the pulpit, I must preach the Law and the Gospel. In other words, I must denounce sin as it manifests itself at self-justification and pronounce justification by faith alone through the historical Jesus, the Christ, who is the Son of God. In this instance I'll be unambiguously exclusivist.

When taking part in an ecumenical discussion, and one is faced with the issue of salvation, one's first response would be first, to acknowledge that God, from the beginning of time, had revealed Godself and still continues to do so in other religions, cultures and histories. In all humility, but without apology, one second response would be to point out that Christianity is the fulfilment of all

religions, including Judaism. It is so easy to become a Christian. God loves us without conditions. God's Son died on our behalf so that we should no longer sweat for our salvation. The works of righteousness i.e. of justice that we do, are no longer aimed at self-justification but they become fruits of our faith. Paul and James, as Luther discovered after thorough research and meditations, are then understood in their proper perspective.

If one finds oneself in the company of exponents of religious pluralism, one should acknowledge that cooperation is possible and can be beneficial to the rest of the human race, as well as the entire creation, including animals and plants. Together with adherents of other religions, as Christians we can struggle for justice and peace. We can struggle for the preservation and conservation of nature. However, we should witness for Jesus Christ by pointing out that, no matter how good and noble their deeds are, they would simply be putting the cart before the horse. Ours would be to market our product in such a way that they would be convinced otherwise.

One important thread that runs through the three paradigms and, in fact, binds them is the sobering realisation that salvation ultimately belongs to God. We have been mandated and commissioned as the Church and individual Christians to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ. The decision to dispense salvation, is the prerogative of God alone. Hence, we are warned never to judge a person, let alone to condemn him or her to hell.

These paradigms are meant as tools to be used when and where one meets peoples of other faiths. It is hoped that the insights emanating from this study may contribute towards the Church's relations with its religious neighbours in South Africa and Africa in general.

## 5. CONCLUSION

However, there is the whole issue of contextualisation, which takes seriously the elements of religion, culture and history in terms of social change and praxis, in trying to make theology relevant to a particular situation and milieu. Due to space constraints,

contextualisation cannot be discussed in full, since it could become another article all by itself. But suffice it to state the following:

Contextual theology can be defined as a way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture in which one is theologizing - and social change in that culture, whether brought about by western technological process or the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice, and liberation (Bevans 1992:1).

Contextualisation has been known by many names, such as indigenisation, incarnation, revision, adaptation, enculturation and acculturation (Bujo 1992:70; Chupungco 1992:13-28; Martey 1996:121-137; Pui-lan 1995; Lee 1996; Waliggo & Crollius *et al* 1986).

A key to making a truly contextual theology for Africa, is African anthropology. Many African theologians have done interesting research in this area (Maimela 1994; Nyamiti 1996; Adogbo 1994; Bujo 1992; Odhiambo 1995; Mbiti 1991).

Contextual theology would therefore include many theologies in Africa such as theology of liberation from colonialism, from neo-colonialism as embodied in the policies of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and multinationals, from religious intolerance especially in Islamic countries, from African dictators and one-party state, women's liberation from African patriarchal society, child and youth abuse, nature, reconstruction and development and even of reconciliation, especially in South Africa.

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