

# **Interreligious Dialogue in Traditional Contexts: The Relevance of Detraditionalization**

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## **Abstract**

It is frustrating doing interreligious dialogue in traditional societies. Ironically, in such societies religion is relevant and thereby fuels different forms of crisis. Why should it be difficult to undertake this valuable exercise in such a context, where it is indispensable? I propose that interreligious dialogue (a form of retraditionalization) was occasioned by detraditionalization in the Western religious tradition. There, the struggle between Christianity and Secular Humanism led to the process where Christianity was marginalised and disengaged from the society. This trend, coupled with the discovery of other religious traditions, initiated the need for cooperation not only with secularism but also with other religions. In traditional societies like Northern Nigeria, detraditionalization is yet to take place. Islam and Christianity are married to politics and economics and the adherents of these two religions consider them important in bargaining for their place in the politico-economic space. Such a situation occasions competition and not cooperation, which interreligious dialogue requires. It is only detraditionalization that will occasion a reverse in the current trend and free the context for interreligious dialogue.

## **1. Introduction**

There is a great deal of frustration with interreligious dialogue in traditional societies like Northern Nigeria where Islam and Christianity, the two dominant religions, are akin to ideologies that define and give direction to their adherents in their everyday life. So much effort has gone into the exercise but it seems not to

be yielding sufficient dividends. Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama expresses one of the customary manners in which this challenging activity is sometimes dismissed: "In Nigeria what is sometimes regarded as interreligious dialogue is a gathering of mere convenience where some privileged Muslims and Christians get together to interact and exchange pleasantries and take photographs. The impression is given that all is well" (Kaigama, 2006, p. 9). Often times, when Christians analyse the failure of interreligious dialogue, they blame Muslims for not being sincere in their engagement. They believe that the latter are engaged simply to allow them buy enough time in order to eventually deal decisively with them in the region. Muslims will, no doubt, have their own explanations for the collapse of the process and will equally hold Christians culpable. Both parties have sufficient reasons for their assertions.

It is my opinion that the process of detraditionalization, which allows for the emergence of the authority of the individual over tradition, is necessary for the blossoming of interreligious dialogue. This hypothesis is explored by examining the concept and aims of interreligious dialogue, the concept of detraditionalization, the emergence of interreligious dialogue and the difficulty of implementing non-threatening methods of dialogue in Northern Nigeria.

## **2. The Concept and Aims of Interreligious Dialogue**

The concept of dialogue was first adopted into theological circles in the mid 1960s from the field of philosophy, where it was used as a method. Its theological use is not fairly fixed. Some theologians refer to it as a method, while others refer to it as a conversation, the first step in building a relationship between the different religious traditions. Broadly speaking, dialogue could refer to an attitude. In this case, it is flexible and ongoing and could be used even with reference to missionary activities, which exclude conversion (Lochhead, 1988, p.46). Dialogue is an encounter between two or more people. It involves listening and speaking, without these constituent elements, it will relapse into a monologue or what the French refer to as the dialogue of the

deaf. That is why it is commonly referred to as a conversation and narrowly associated with the dialogue of discourse (which takes place among professional theologians). There are other forms of dialogue: dialogue of life, which takes place in everyday life and involves actions and mutual witnessing; dialogue of religious experience, which usually takes place among monks and mystics. The flexibility in the use of the term “dialogue” is apparent from these distinctions and subtleties. Notwithstanding these disparate perspectives, people enter into dialogue because they are convinced that there is something of value in other religious traditions.

Consequently, three reasons may necessitate interreligious dialogue. People could engage in dialogue in order to have a non-hostile view of others for the purpose of peaceful co-existence in a shared space. In this case, their distorted perception of each other creates obstacles. They, therefore, need a fresh account of each other given by each other. Those who wish to deepen their understanding of their religious tradition could also engage in dialogue. This goal acknowledges that the transcendent reality, which religion deals with, is beyond our historical and cultural categories. Yet we can only express this reality within this our finite framework; hence the analogous nature of religious language. In offering explanation to their partners in dialogue, participants are bound to reflect critically on their beliefs and present them intelligibly. And in listening to their partners, they are able to discover analogical and complementary expressions of their beliefs in the other religious tradition. Finally the aim of dialogue is to provide a common ground for life and action for people of different religious traditions. This common ground can only be established when the parties have come to appreciate each other's worldview facilitating a mutual renewal of their own perspectives (Hellwig, 1990, pp. 46-47).

The concept and aims of dialogue presupposes the important fact that those involved are aware that they do not possess the fullness of truth. This is in line with Plato's understanding of the truth, which perceives it to be potentially present in those involved in dialogue and only becomes realised in the process or Martin Buber's understanding, which sees the truth as

transcending all the participants who eventually discover it mutually (Lochhead, 1988, pp. 46-51). The Decalogue of dialogue by Leonard Swidler captures the expectations of interreligious dialogue. It is meant to bring about change and growth, acknowledging the imperfection in one's tradition. In fact, he maintains that those who come into dialogue:

...must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious or ideological traditions. A lack of such self-criticism implies that one's own tradition already has all the correct answers. Such an attitude makes dialogue not only unnecessary, but even impossible, since we enter into dialogue primarily so we can learn - which obviously is impossible if our tradition has never made a misstep, if it has all the right answers (Swidler, n.d.)

Interreligious dialogue requires detraditionalization to become genuine and even possible in the first place. Those who believe that their religious traditions suffice and are resourceful enough to answer their life problems and situations cannot enter into dialogue. Let us now turn our attention to the implication of detraditionalization and how it enhanced interreligious dialogue in the Western religious tradition.

### **3. The Concept of Detraditionalization**

The importation of dialogue from Philosophy as a method in theology was engineered by the process of detraditionalization. The concept refers to the gradual erosion of the tradition and its influences in society thus creating a vacuum. The context which it creates:

... involves a shift of authority from 'without' to 'within'. It entails the decline of the belief in pre-given or natural order of things. Individual subjects are themselves called upon to exercise authority in the face of the disorder and contingency which is thereby generated. 'Voice' is displaced from established sources, coming to rest with the self (Heelas, 1999, p. 2).

To understand the process, one needs to explore the concept of

tradition. Generally speaking, tradition has four faces: hermeneutic, normative, legitimation and identity. Hermeneutic consists of the day-to-day taken for granted assumptions that are transmitted from one generation to another. It is a frame of understanding the world as a tool for interpreting life experiences. Normatively, it means the assumptions, forms of beliefs and practices that are handed down from previous generations but which continue to guide present life experiences in a non-reflective and routine manner. This is also manifested when certain actions are justified simply on the basis of tradition. By way of legitimacy, tradition serves to ground the exercise of power and authority. Here the person exercising authority is obeyed because his or her actions are bound by tradition, thereby securing obedience to his or her commands. It is in this sense that tradition can become ideological. Finally, it relates to identity formation, which may be individual or collective. Here tradition provides a basis for the formation of identity. The values, beliefs and forms of behavior, transmitted from the past form the sense of self of oneself and the sense of belonging to a group. Identity formation depends on a pre-existing set of symbolic materials, which tradition readily provides (Thompson, 1999, pp. 91-93).

Traditional societies manifest these aspects in varying degrees. Such societies, according to Paul Heelas (1999, p. 4), are highly authoritative and cannot be questioned, existing over and above the individual. They are not subject to revision or modification at the discretion or benefit of the individual. The destiny of the individual is shaped by the voices of authority residing in the tradition:

Living the good life, solving problems, seeking advancement or obtaining salvation are matters of obeying over-and-above the self, loci of duty, obligation obedience and entitlement. Constituted as the person is by position in the order of things, there is little (or no) scope and incentive to exercise autonomy or freedom of expression. (Heelas, 1999, p. 4),

The all encompassing nature of tradition renders it exclusive of those outside its frame. Those considered 'outsiders' are treated as aberrations. The message is succinct: "Our way is the right

way; you are excluded, rendered inferior, because you do not follow our immemorial path" (Heelas, 1999, p. 4).

What occasioned the shift from the Church determining people's lives to people determining their own lives in the West? In a nutshell, what occasioned detraditionalization? The process was initiated by secularisation. This phenomenon initiated by scientific progress called into question the taken-for-granted assumptions of traditional Christianity. Three constituent elements are imbued in the process: scientific study of the Bible, historical contingency and deism. The scientific study of the Bible in historical context created a situation whereby doubt was cast on the process of creation and the authorship of the Bible. The case with tradition is that once one aspect is questioned, a crack is created that threatens the entire edifice. It was, therefore, only a matter of time for the dogmas of the Church to be called into question and a bitter conflict between scientists and Church authorities to come into play (Kutz, 1995, pp. 152-153).

Ultimately, the Enlightenment, which resulted in the eighteenth century, wedged science against religion. The scientific study of the Bible, otherwise referred to as historical criticism, initiated the issue of historical contingency. The thesis that religious truths are not infallible and permanent products of divine revelation, but evolved over time precipitated the issue of historical contingency. Scientists were at pain to show that religious traditions each have a history and in fact mutated over time. If religious traditions were the products of infallible human beings and not immutable entities from God, then they lose the authority the once wielded (Kutz, 1995, p. 154). The situation was further compounded by the awareness of other religious traditions apart from Christianity. Explorers observed common threads in all the world's religions, thereby discounting the uniqueness of Christianity. This motivated Lord Herbert of Cherbury to claim, in his *De Veritate*, that all human beings have a natural religion. The doctrine came to be known as deism and though not anti-Christian, it challenged the concept of Christian uniqueness, encouraging tolerance of non-Christian religions (Kutz, 1995, p. 153). Deism, therefore, opened the window for pluralism in the West and subsequently, interreligious dialogue in the mid-1960s.

Interreligious dialogue, therefore, emerged from the long-drawn out battle between Christianity and Secularism. Since none of the two traditions could emerge as a victor, they had to move from apology to dialogue (Krieger, 1991, p. 10). If Christianity could dialogue with secularism, as we see in the emergence of disciplines like Philosophy of Religion and Problems of Philosophy, it was not out of place to dialogue with other religious traditions in order to remain relevant. David Kreiger maintains this perspective:

The sacred, therefore, criticizes itself by means of its own plurality and diversity. Radical pluralism itself, on account of the internal tensions arising from conflicting claims to absolute truth, gives rise to a dynamic historical process in which the various religions mutually criticize and correct each other. Or, as Karl Marx rightly saw, "criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism." What he did not realize, however, is that the critique of religion is in fact the religion of critique. This is a critique "of" religion in the sense that it is religion itself, in the form of the theology of religions which performs the critique and not an allegedly neutral and objective science (Krieger, 1991, p. 43).

This situation was made possible as a result of detraditionalization of Christianity, initiated by historical criticism, historical contingency and deism. The scientific method offered people the ability to critically reflect on their tradition and to even lose faith in otherwise taken-for-granted assumptions and to find their own voice. In Europe, the setting of this cultural shift, authoritative Christianity was undermined as the cultural metanarrative (Heelas, 1999, p. 4). This crisis of legitimacy for Christianity, occasioned by the shift in the Western Religious Tradition, led to Tillich's submission:

A Theologian who accepts the subject, "The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian," and takes this subject seriously, has already made, explicit or implicit, two basic decisions. On the one hand he has separated himself from a theology which rejects all religions other than that of which he is a theologian. On the other hand if one accepts the subject affirmatively and seriously,

he has rejected the paradox of a religion of non-religion, or a theology without theos, also called a theology of the secular (Krieger, 1991, p. 38).

It is difficult to imagine the emergence of interreligious dialogue without the process of detraditionalization. It created a paradigm shift in Western civilisation in the post-Enlightenment era, in relation to the concept of truth. In the traditional paradigm, truth was conceived as absolute, static and exclusive. It was revolutionised in the new paradigm and understood to be dialogical and relational. As we have seen above, with historization, it was perceived as shaped by persons and events in history. To compound this realisation, the sociology of knowledge revealed that it is subject to geography, culture, social status and also to the limits of language (with the nature of human language insufficient to express reality). Hermeneutically, it was realised that truth is always interpreted and subject to the interpreter (Swidler, 1987, p. 7). With this realisation firmly in place Christianity was detraditionalized in the West and necessitated the accommodation of secularism and other religious traditions. Suffice it to mention that interreligious dialogue is only one response alongside syncretism (expressed in the New Age Movement) and retraditionalization (expressed in Fundamentalism). These responses are, however, beyond the scope of this article.

#### **4. The Northern Nigerian Context**

Reflecting on early seventeenth century Britain, Christopher Hills states that the Church: "...guided all the movements of men from baptism to the burial service, the Church controlled men's feelings and told them what to believe; this is why men took notes at sermons'. Our times are clearly very different" (Heelas, 1999, p. 1). The times are not different in Northern Nigeria where Islam and Christianity constitute religious traditions that define the existence of people in the region. Without fear of exaggeration, the two religions provide two mutually exclusive civilisations in the region. For many people in the region, religion defines their cultural affiliation.

The same is true of political affiliation. Prior to the current democratic dispensation, during the military regime, the Christian Association of Nigeria and the Council of Ulama acted like political parties, contesting issues for Christians and Muslims respectively. With the dawn of democracy, one was hoping that the religious line will blur politically. Unfortunately, as we saw recently in the 2011 elections, in some Northern states like Kaduna voting was largely done along religious lines. Muslims voted Congress for Democratic Change (CPC), while Christians voted the People's Democratic Party (PDP). It is interesting to note that religion still confers legitimacy on political leaders in the region. The efforts of political aspirants to be associated with influential religious leaders during the campaign period lend credence to this assertion. Due to the flight of the state from the lives of the people and the continued apathy of government with regard to their welfare, Islam and Christianity fill the vacuum. Churches and Mosques have evolved charitable and developmental outfits to cater for their adherents. To cope with the social upheaval, a culture of revivalism has emerged preached along religious lines. It is in this context that one can understand the popularity of the Shari'a when it first emerged and of the prosperity gospel among Christians. People take seriously the teachings of their religious leaders whom they revere greatly and the more conservative his approach, the more attractive a leader is to his followers.

The level of religiosity in Northern Nigeria makes it a fertile ground for interreligious conflicts. The issues contested may not be religious in nature, as they often boil down to people feeling aggrieved in the sharing of political power or economic resources. Unfortunately, because their religious traditions offer them the platform to protest in the first place, these issues are often contested along religious lines. So whichever way the conflict may be considered, it is often laden with religion. It is because of this, therefore, that interreligious dialogue is relevant to this region. Muslims and Christians need to evolve a universal metanarrative that transcends the local metanarratives offered to them by their different religions if they have to share the socio-political space they inhabit. Ironically, because these religions are tantamount to ideologies, it is difficult for detraditionalization,

which is necessary to the process, to take place. Those of us interested in interreligious dialogue need to take Heelas (1999, p. 4) seriously:

Detraditionalization cannot occur when people think of themselves as belonging to the whole. For detraditionalization entails that people have acquired the opportunity to stand back from, critically reflect upon, and lose their faith in what the traditional has to offer. They have to arrive at a position where they can have their own say. But why should this shift of authority take place? Without going too deeply into this complicated matter, an important set of considerations has to do with processes which undermine the authoritative or 'sacred' properties of cultural metanarratives.

Does that mean we should not engage in interreligious dialogue in traditional societies like Northern Nigeria? It would be ridiculous to maintain such a position. Moreover, many people are already committed to the exercise. It only means that these well meaning people should not expect to reap immediate fruit. They need to lower their goals and expectations to avoid frustration. In so far as Muslims and Christians believe that their traditions are sufficient enough to provide them with the resources they need to cope with life's questions, interreligious dialogue will not be a popular item on their agenda. Like Christianity in the West, these two traditions need to experience a crisis of legitimacy engineered by detraditionalization for genuine dialogue to evolve. In the light of this assumption, let us examine the prospects for interreligious dialogue in the region.

## **5. Testing Benign Forms of Interreligious Dialogue**

While treating the concept and aims of interreligious dialogue we explored, in passing, its different methods. Whenever I conduct workshops on the subject, my participants often favour the liberation method of dialogue and dialogue of life as the most likely methods to succeed in Northern Nigeria. The reason for their distaste for the discursive method is that interreligious theological discussions could precipitate a crisis. The other method, dialogue of religious experience, usually involves

monks and mystics and it is, therefore, not common place. The reservation for the discursive method is expressed by McGarvey (2009,p. 271) in the following set of thought provoking questions:

Certainly the question of religion and religious identity cannot be ignored, but we must ask whether theology enters the equation at all. Is it necessary to discuss theological questions in the search for coexistence, peace and social well-being? Must theology be a part of interreligious dialogue in the region? And in so far as it must, is it questions about God and how these relate to the central truths of the other religions that must be discussed? Is it concern for the universality or particularity of these central truths that will bring people to dialogue with one another? Is the question of how both the truth of Christ and truth of the Qur'an can be retained and respected a relevant question? Is the quest for a theology of religions to which so many theologians consecrate their lives and energies today of any relevance whatsoever in this concrete situation of suffering?

She undertook this reflection after years of researching interreligious dialogue in the Northern Nigerian context. The difficulty of mutually exploring theological issues in interreligious context is obvious. Certain concepts are considered so sacred that they become off limits for discussion. Issues relating to Muhammad, for example, generate so much controversy that it is safer to leave them out of discussions. The same could be said of other theological issues on which Muslims and Christians differ. In the face of the assumption that we leave theology out of dialogue, it is pertinent to ask: How feasible are the liberation method of dialogue and the dialogue of life which are being proposed?

The dialogue of life has been paraded on numerous occasions as the most effective means of doing interreligious dialogue in traditional societies like Northern Nigeria. It is believed that people in the region could emphasise their involvement in common activities and celebrations to enhance interreligious interactions. One of the proponents of this method of dialogue is Kaigama. He got involved in interreligious dialogue in the wake of the 2004 crisis in Yelwa/Shendam. He was able to reach out to

the different traditional and religious leaders, involving them in common activities. The crisis in Jos is not yet over but his initiative has scored a lot of points. He is convinced of this method and he emphasised:

The dialogue of life among Muslims and Christians is an imperative and it must start from the grassroots with both the old and the young. It is a pity that some parents and teachers indoctrinate children to think and behave negatively towards people of other religions. There are many activities which can bring Christians and Muslims close together in daily life. Nigerians love celebrations. In the course of one week many celebrations are held with pomp and pageantry. These are opportunities for interaction and demonstration of genuine friendship. At weddings, marriages, festive periods such as Sallah and Christmas, school graduation, naming ceremonies, etc., deliberate effort should be made to broaden them to include neighbours or friends of other religions (Kaigama, 2006, p. 9).

His assertion is correct and since Muslims and Christians share the same socio-cultural space there are always avenue of interactions, by choice or default.

But this method is not without its challenges. Kaigama (2006, p. 9) notes that: "...some parents and teachers indoctrinate children to think and behave negatively towards people of other religions..." This indoctrination, coupled with negative experiences which interreligious riots facilitate, have brought about polarisation between Muslim and Christian settlements in major cities in Northern Nigeria, even where this was previously not the case. It is true that Kaduna town is witnessing a demographic shift, with Christians migrating to the South and Muslims remaining in the North of the town. They do business in different locations but ensure that they return to their comfort zones before dusk. With every crisis, Christians destroy the mosques located in their locality and drive out the Muslims, and vice versa. This ghettoisation is fast reducing the shared space necessary for interaction. No doubt, common reasons for celebrations still abound. Nigeria needs to win a football tournament to reveal our capacity to jointly celebrate across

religious boundaries. But such mutual celebrations are spontaneous and are only skin deep, lacking the capacity to cover the cracks created by interreligious conflicts.

The liberation method of interreligious dialogue is one that is full of hope for the region, defined as the most poverty stricken in the country and laden with issues of injustice. This method is a transplanting of liberation theology into the realm of interreligious dialogue. Its proponents believe that dialogue should be a second step, resulting from the participants working together on issues of poverty, injustice and ecological devastation. Dialogue will move from theological discussion to be contextualised in shared action. But this method has a goal:

...when religious people share in a common struggle as religious people, they will, eventually and necessarily, have to speak about religion. They will have to share what it is that animates and guides them in their determination to heal the suffering of others and of the Earth... religious persons who share a common struggle for justice will want not only to 'share...perspectives of faith,' but they will also 'seek convergence at the level of faith. This will be particularly possible and even advisable when we are speaking together not as faith meeting faith in their individuality, but faiths committing themselves together to promote justice. (Knitter, 1995, p. 139).

It is no doubt an attractive method because it deals with the reality on the ground and circumvents the concentration on theories, which attend a lot of academic engagements. Moreover, everyone pays at least lip service to the eradication of poverty and the institution of justice. The question worth asking is: When the participants move to the stage where they need to challenge their religious traditions can they adequately do so in a context where detraditionalization has not taken place?

Another draw-back to this method is that Muslims and Christians claim to possess two mutually exclusive coping mechanisms for socio-economic ills, which the liberation method is fashioned to address, as we have seen previously. The agitation for and the implementation of the Shari'a in some states of Northern Nigeria, could be viewed from this perspective. Many

Muslims are optimistic that the full implementation of the Islamic programme will ensure the eradication of poverty and the institution of social justice. For Christians the social upheavals have occasioned a great level of religious revivalism in the region. Many Christians believe that being born again will ensure a way out of the situation of poverty and injustice, bringing about an improvement in their state of life. To get Muslims and Christians to see the benefits of each other's programmes is difficult, since they all present their different programmes as self-sufficient. This makes a common commitment to the situation difficult and forecloses the possibility of interreligious dialogue.

## **6. Conclusion**

It is a rule of thumb that where interreligious dialogue is difficult, it is not only necessary but indispensable. Yet the process is largely dependent on sociological dynamics, albeit it's theological foundations. It is obvious that interreligious dialogue involves the capacity for and the willingness of participants to be critical of their religious traditions. This is impossible without the process of detraditionalization, which shifts the authority from tradition to the individual. That is one of the reasons why, I believe, Swidler (n.d.) insists that interreligious dialogue takes place between people and not between religious traditions. It is also important to emphasise that this participation is restricted. Only those who are able to ask hard questions of their religious traditions and are also willing to give a critical account of their religious beliefs and practices can comfortably partake in the exercise. Is this possible in a traditional society, where the identity of the individual is shaped by a particular religious tradition?

From our presentation, so far, interreligious dialogue is challenging in such a context but it is worth exploring with patience, courage and diligence. We can draw strength from the strange Tsunami that is occurring around the world, sweeping traditional structures in its wake. This is not restricted to the Arab world. The recent crisis exhibited this tendency among the common people in Northern Nigeria. Though negatively

expressed, the attack on the properties of traditional leaders is an indication of the dissatisfaction with tradition that is gradually brewing in the region, which could lead to detraditionalization. We might well be experiencing the emergence of spring time for interreligious dialogue.

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