Theology, innovation and Society: Towards developing Dialogical Theology for African society

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Abstract

Theology and society are inseparable due to the fact that they are both composed of that which makes for both human and universal well-being. Indeed the two have through the ages inspired each other in the pursuit of a better world. This paper aims to explore three religions; African Indigenous Religion (AIR) Islam and Christianity as practised in developing countries such as Kenya, with the intention of deducing whether or not believers of these religions (can engage) engage in dialogue with each other for the purpose of providing sustainable solutions for community well-being and wholeness. Theology of dialogue is a methodology used by the author, as a means for innovation; towards creating harmony and equilibrium in a plural and multi-religious Kenyan society and Africa in general. Of significance for this timely theological concept in Africa are the dreams that need achievement; the Millennium Development Goals and state visions such as the Kenya 2030 vision. In approaching the subject, the author shall endeavor to outline pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial religious histories in Africa. The author shall use the Midzi-Chenda (written Mijiknda) community of Coastal Kenya as a case study population. This choice is due to their diverse and long-lived inter-cultural and inter-religious experiences, particularly with the Arab, Portuguese and British conquests along the East Coast of Africa. The triple conquest experiences influenced the Midzi-Chenda community negatively and positively in all spheres of their life-system; economic, political and religious, compelling them to embrace foreign culture, religion and politics, all of which gradually shaped their theological parameters. This latter experience and the contemporary post-colonial religious wave significantly situate the theology of dialogue as a benchmark for innovation in African society.

Keywords: Dialogical Theology, Innovation, Society, Exclusivism and Pluralism.

Introduction

Religious uniqueness and absolute truth concepts are increasingly creating social exclusiveness in African communities. This phenomenon is more pronounced in African urban cities where expectations for improving science and technology to better human society ought to be implemented. At one point, for example, when you walk along the streets of the major towns of Coastal Kenya, you will certainly come across diverse religious groups in open air rallies applauding and confronting each other: others referring themselves to as belonging to the religion of the light, others claiming to be belonging to the true religion whose messenger was the last of God's choice. Others don't show off in public but their potentiality is felt when adherents of the two true religions approach them for salvation at personal crises.

This trend has generated a recurring question; as to which religion is 'right' for the community. As a result there have been both internal and external conflicts, sometimes concluding badly, such as the case of Mombasa Mtwapa bombing on 31st March 2012 during a Christian fellowship where two people died and a combination of shooting and bombing in

two Garisa churches that left 17 people dead on 1st July 2012 (Daily Nation 31st March 2012; Daily Nation 1st July 2012).

The scenario of religious conflicts creates restlessness in society. I argue that human response to God's caring should be demonstrated by openness to and concern for each other, with willingness to acknowledge the necessity of valuing each other as we are valued by God. The challenge is for each of us to 'religiously' re-examine our personal attitudes and motivations towards others. Because of religious exclusivism and extremism, many people have lacked a true appreciation of their self-worth, and this is often due to the disregard of others. We can and do damage each other in many ways because humans have become less than God wants them to be. None of us, whatever our faith, has the right to think of others as unworthy of assistance and care when they are in need. Religions in Africa should, therefore, respect each other and enter into a new relationship, by becoming more aware of the universal supremacy (ultimate reality) of God. Samartha writing in a Christian context advises:

> Christians (religions) can no longer talk of God's work in the lives of neighbours of other faiths in purely negative terms. God's self-disclosure in the lives of neighbours of other faiths and in the secular struggles of human life should also be recognised as theologically significant. (Samartha, 1981: 28)

Apparently it has become intricate for those belonging to the same community such as the Midzi-Chenda of Coastal Kenya; they find they cannot religiously discuss contentious contemporary life-issues that affect them all. A religious apartheid exists in African communities. Indeed, a theology of dialogue is imperative due to prevailing social and economic problems that seriously affect Africa and require re-dress, not only from a political perspective but also from the view of religions which are daily lived and practised by individuals and communities, seeking positive solutions for a more habitable earth (Temple, 2002; Chitando, 2007).

Religious Encounter in Africa: the Midzi-Chenda case

The Midzi-Chenda of Coastal Kenya comprises a community of nine (*Chenda*) villages (*Midzi or Makaya*). The Adigo, Aduruma, Arahai, Akambe, Akauma, Adzihana, Achonyi, Agiriama and the Arihe.[*] *Chikwe'hu,* the religion of the Midzi-Chenda has been a significant component in their daily affairs. They have practised their religion consistently since time immemorial, just as other African communities have done. *Chikwe'hu* is the basis of Midzi-Chenda lives, providing answers to all life's troubles and successes. It informs them about everything, from the cultivation of their lands, the keeping of their herds of domestic animals, the care of the environment, to relations with their neighbours. Oduyoye (1982) and Chepkwony (2006) in their studies observe AIR being an intimate part of African culture, used in issues of daily lives such as those of community health and well-being. 'Human experience in the past suggests that religion (AIR) deeply influences society and culture, including the health services of a given society' (Chepkwony, 2006: 9).

The encounter of religions such as *Chikw'ehu* (Midzi-Chenda religion) with Islam and Christianity as expressed by Conn (1978), Pouwels (1978), Baur (1990), Anderson (1977) and Nthamburi (1982) was gradual and extensive. Baur's study (1990) for example shows that Christianity reached Coastal Kenya through Ethiopian monks as early as the fourth century soon after its introduction and establishment into North Africa (especially in the West

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[*] It should be noted that the terms given refer to the villages and not the people. The people are called in the plural noun (Adigo, Aduruma, Akambe, Akauma, Arihe, Adzihana, Achonyi, Agiriama, Arahai).

and East of North Africa). This perception helps to understand why Walls (2002) argues that Christianity should not be misunderstood as being a leftover of colonialism in Africa.

The second face of Christianity in Coastal Kenya was that introduced towards the end of the fifteenth century by Vasco da Gama, a Roman Catholic Portuguese, who also intended to explore the East African coast (Nthamburi, 1982, 1991, 1995). In the course of exploring the coast, the Portuguese introduced Christianity to the people. Those who faced this introduction included Muslim Arabs. Studies of Nthamburi (1982). Hildebrandt (1981) and Isichei (1995) show that this process had been started earlier in other parts of Africa and was seen as one way of stamping out Islam, which had become established in Europe (Portugal and Spain) and in North Africa. Later, Portuguese missionaries, including Francis Xavier and the Augustinian Friars were called to introduce and establish Christianity in Kilwa and Mombasa. Baur writes:

> In 1500, two years after da Gama, a second navigator named Cabral called in at Kilwa on his way to India. On board he had eight Franciscans, eight chaplains and one vicar (a parish priest). He had been given the royal instructions that these priests should first use their spiritual sword before any thought of the secular one. But if the Moors and pagans did not accept the Christian faith and refused the offered peace and commerce, he should wage war against them with fire and sword. (1994: 87)

Mugambi (2002), on the other hand, concentrates on the European establishment of Christianity in East Africa during the nineteenth century. This succeeded the ineffectual efforts of the fifteenth-century Portuguese. Theoretically, if we are to follow Baur's theory, Christianity came earlier than Islam to Coastal Kenya, but if we accept the ideas of Mugambi (2002) and others such as Nthamburi (1982), Anderson (1977), Oliver (1952) and Hildebrandt (1981), Christianity was established later than Islam.

The studies of Martin (1974), Watt (1944) and Pauwels (1978) explain that between the period 900-1300 A D, Islam along East African coast was introduced to indigenous Africans by trading Arab and Persian migrants (Shirazi from Persia and Arabs from Arabia); 'the carriers of the new religion were identified as "Arabs" descendants of those from Southeast Arabia and the Persian Gulf' (Conn, 1978: 75). The world view of Islam was that there is only one true God and Muhammad is God's last prophet. Islam was introduced as the 'only true religion' (Anderson, 1977; Oliver, 1952). Engaged with trade, Islam in the beginning along East African coast flourished and dominated a few trading centres such as Banadir (Somalia), Zanzibar, Pemba and Mombasa.

The Portuguese and Arab period on Coastal Kenya was not peaceful; there were frequent intense struggles with the Arabs over the acquiring of trading stations, as well as over forced conversion to Christianity. The struggle continued for two hundred years (Sundkler and Steed, 2000). Baur writes of a period of martyrdom during which some Christians accepted death rather than Islam; the names given indicate that a few could have been the Zinj (Midzi-Chenda).

The 19th century Christianity among the Midzi-Chenda community began in 1844 when the Church Missionary Society sent out Johann Ludwig Krapf. Later he was joined by Johannes Rebman in 1846 and Erhardt in 1849 (Nthamburi, 1982; Oliver, 1952). The trio had to find a suitable place where they could establish a mission centre. Rabai Mpya (a Midzi-Chenda village, just close to Kaya Rahai) positioned about 10 miles from Mombasa and at a reasonable height of 1000 ft seemed to be a most advantageous location for their beginning.

Later dates, there existed tension between the Arabs and the British due to the global campaigns to abolish slave trade.

The reason behind Johann Ludwig Krapf and his colleagues locating at far distant locations could be in agreement with the study done by the Provincial Unit of Research Church of the Province of Kenya 'PURCPK' (1994: 2) that this decision was arrived at in order to avoid tension with the Muslim Arabs. This would contrast with earlier Portuguese missionary methods in relating with the Muslims (Cole, 1970). From the start, therefore, Islam and Christianity have had a growing tendency of competing for converts and fame in Kenya and Africa in general, a phenomenon that has persisted and created suspiciousness to the indigenous population.

For the foreign religions to have permanent space in African religious world view, schools were established; madras for Muslims and mission schools for Christians, teaching religious doctrines as well as denouncing the religious other. Arguably, this trend is still on, albeit with slight changes after independence. Post-colonial religious education (Christian and Islam alike) scheme in African countries such as Kenya continues to indoctrinate children into strictly following the acknowledged religions whilst ignoring others. John Hull argues that; 'Powerful religions tend to marginalise and exclude less powerful ones, and to minimanalise their ontological status, just as the powerful world of able bodied people tend to minimalise the small, disabled worlds.' (2009: 30).

Presently, Africa comprises of diverse cultures and religious communities, consequent upon major global developments that have enforced the movements of people all over. The massive increase of population and growing levels of higher religious knowledge places Africa on a question; whether Africa shall remain religiously biased on religious grounds or will seek for an alternative theology that amalgamates society.

On the other hand, religious encounter in Africa has enriched societies to live positively with each other, enabling children and students from different backgrounds of religion and culture to attend the same schools, colleges, universities and places of social recreation. On the surface, it is indeed the case that differences of culture and religion may not be so noticeable, due to the fact that people engage themselves routinely in activities without considering their religious differences. When a crisis arises, it is notable that religious traditions can still divide society.

Towards a Dialogical Theology

Dialogue as discussed in this study is focused on inter-religious community dialogue – particularly between Christianity, AIR and Islam. In this study, dialogue is not an engagement in debate for assessing which religion is good, or better than the other, nor for converting from one to the other. 'Debate between followers of various religions, no matter how friendly, is not inter-religious dialogue. In dialogue encounters, one is not trying to prove oneself right and the other believer wrong' (Arinze, 1997: 9). Instead it is to be an honest and practical way of discussion that can educate each party in order to reach a mutual understanding of each world-view, resulting in the development of respect, appreciation, tolerance and cooperation towards corporately working on issues affecting every individual (Temple, 2002).

According to Hick (1980), interfaith-dialogue is to understand each other's religious values, to accept them and see the possibilities of applying them to daily human salvation/liberation from the constraints of life. Hicks other view is to agree to work together as a community,

while respecting each other's faith for the purpose of developing the relevant society. In agreement with Hick, this study also endorses the inter-religious dialogue approach, related to the study and practical observation made by Amoah (1998). The method examines the grass root community, and engages in meaningful discussions towards addressing common issues that affect the society, particularly those of health and wellness while living in extreme poverty.

Dialogue essentially demands duality: discussion and the sharing of ideas is taken seriously without either participant degrading the other (Shorter, 1975). It therefore implies that dialogue is an intimacy of personal and communal relationships, enjoyment of each other and the sharing of knowledge, experience, problems, suffering and resources (Selvanayagam, 1995). Moltmann (1980) suggests that when dialogue is conducted in a spirit that respects the interests of people's lives, it becomes a tool and a hope for liberation.

Ariarajah (1999) not only considers inter-religious dialogue as discussion or conversation between parties pursuing an end, but also perceives it as a public health programme fostering the building up of a healthy community. He suggests a community of heart and mind that is willing to understand and accept others in their otherness. With this in view Ariarajah considers inter-religious dialogue to be a tool enabling communities to search for the religious, social, political, and economic issues which divide people with the aim of developing harmony. Dialogue, therefore, is an instrument of healing that a multi-religious community could employ to solve contentious issues. Ariarajah further expresses his ideas by envisaging dialogue as not only a public health programme 'instrument', but also as a ministry for society. The reason Ariarajah considers ministry as a public service is that it can promote and intensify life in the building up of community (Ariarajah, 1999: 83-84). It is using this perception of dialogue as 'community service' that the study will follow as it investigates whether or not the three religions lived and practised by the Midzi-Chenda of Coastal Kenya have attempted to satisfy their urgent needs by co-operating. It is by cooperating and participating as a community that it becomes possible to solve common concerns through the process of dialogue.

Samartha (1981), on the other hand, considers dialogue as part of a 'living relationship' amongst people sharing community life. His observation of dialogue goes beyond the dimension of ministry or service and focuses on efforts seeking a true community. Though Samartha does not specify what this 'true' community is, his work shows that it is people seeking together to live in wholeness despite cultural and religious differences. He asserts;

> Dialogue is not a concept; it is a relationship. Community is not a concept; it is people, men and women, sharing the meaning and mystery of human existence, struggling together in suffering, hope and joy. Intellectual reflection is obviously necessary. No one should underestimate this vital function. But it should be done in the context of living relationships. (Samartha, 1977: 10)

Samartha (1981: VII) has emphasised that Christians need to seek relationships with those of other religions. His ideas derive from WCC assemblies which have been concerned with an ongoing debate about the same issue since the original foundation of a 'separate and distinct subunit…for relations with neighbours of other faiths'. Samartha having been a director of the office on inter-religious relations (IRRD) has involved himself in promoting dialogue between Christianity and other religions. He was probably not only been influenced by the WCC concerning the relations between religions in India but also by the works of Martin Buber. The Roman Catholic Church, which prompted awareness of the need for Christianity

to relate to those of other living faiths, could have influenced him too. The emphasis in his writings encourages Christians living in a religiously plural world community to seek community with those of other religions in order to handle the common 'issues of life'.

Reflecting on Africa in general, from a religious perspective it is un-African for anyone to address issues of life effectively in isolation. Unity (*umoja*) in Africa is a culture that builds communitarian life and is considered to be an essential life-value and theology for society; something which some African communities such as the Midzi-Chenda belonging to African Indigenous Religion recognise and practise. When life crises arise, *umoja* always provides a major theological impetus for them to call for communal meetings engage in dialogue enabling a search for durable answers and solutions for persistent problems to be made. Agreeing together and working practically on agreed solutions is what it means to be human and for those who disregard such unity and its praxis are considered to be less than human and even as outcasts.

The understanding is that African world-view does not separate dialogue from community living. The concept of community and personhood also referred to as 'ubuntu or I-thou', is explained by Amoah (1998), Mbiti (1965) and Dube (2006) referring to 'what it means to be human in Africa' and is evidence that Africans cannot live without one another. Amoah, using a case study of the Akan people of Ghana, explains how indigenous religion helps them work together harmoniously for their total well-being. The indigenous religion of the Akan emphasises respect for human life, environment and guides society to seek out how the complex problems of suffering and of evil relate to the meaning of life.

I argue that the notion of *ubuntu/undugu* is of significance to Africans, as well as to more recent immigrants who need to accept each other wholeheartedly, together with all the changes that are becoming permanent features of the continent. Indeed, it has become essential for all African people, regardless of religious or other differences, to accept handling issues such as those of health, and well-being in unity rather than diversity (Appia-Kubi, 1981). Unity (*Umoja*) cultivates a collective relationship by rebuilding and revitalising the essence of communitarian culture, which has been diminished by the presence of new religions in Africa, presented in an exclusive form. The Kiswahili phrase 'unity is power and disunity is weakness' (*umoja ni nguvu na kutengana ni udhaifu*) is an illustration of this consciousness. The point made here is that any good future for religious communities feeling dehumanised by circumstances relies upon their networking ties.

It is also the understanding of Africans that religion becomes *religion* when its theology puts first the consideration of humanity's well-being and also that of the whole of nature. Communities need to understand faith as a force touching the totality of the people and all the problems they encounter (Ēla1989).
When the theology of any religion misses this mark as its central role, it ceases in its vitality for the community, engaging instead in selfish activities such as competing with other religions; asserting itself to be the only true religion amongst all others. Eventually, this creates social exclusion amongst members of the same community. A religion's theology that causes the disintegration of communities becomes a hindrance to any progress in community innovation and development. It confines and makes its members selfish. They lack a vision of uniting and developing humanity, replacing it with the 'non-policy' of exclusion which often leads to the de-humanization of others.

Theology and Factors Necessitating Community Dialogue

In some African communities (particularly those belonging to AIR) such as the Midzi-Chenda, the theology they express which causes them to unite and call for dialogue is based on the belief of belonging to the same creator who has the responsibility for caring and providing for the creation. Following this (theocentric) theological understanding, the Midzi-Chenda practice has been to try to approach God in a united way through religious specialists when life crises arise.

The Midzi-Chenda, try to discover in a theological way the real sources of the problems that from time to time afflict them. They particularly question what their religion directs them to do and ponder how the community is supposed to do so 'divinely'. The greatest values found in their theocentric theology (*Mulungu mumwenga*) are unity, salvation and community liberation. Members have expressed that there is true salvation in their religion (*Chik'wehu chinativya*), which is why they enthusiastically unite and engage in dialogue: it is in order to seek salvation for both individuals and their community.

To maintain a healthy community the Midzi-Chenda usually give priority to matters of well-being so that they receive immediate attention. In solidarity, the community encourages everyone to call on each other for a God-talk. No attempt is made to deny or cancel out problems; rather it is the custom for earnest efforts to be devoted through dialogue *kudzigidzya* to finding ways by which problems can be controlled and dealt with. Hastings observes:

> Faced with illness of one sort and another, human beings need both something practical to do and a wider philosophy of explanation which renders ill-health, bereavement and every form of misfortune somehow tolerable by establishing it within a wider frame of reference (Hastings, 1976: 60)

Theocentric[†] theology is an approach identified in this study that can cultivate and build up the spirit of a theology for inter-religious dialogue (theology of dialogue) among multi-religious Africans, and help focus on the prevailing problems, which require solidarity. A primary argument by African communities elucidating the 'need' of each other is based on the belief of belonging to the 'same' creator. The concept of the 'same' God is essential, for it helps in the discovery of God's revelation to mankind [sic], also the potential values and roles which different religions can play in their society. This suggests a requirement of commitment from Christianity, Muslim and AIR adherents to engage in creating awareness of God's love as being revealed through other religions.

It is foreseen that when theology of dialogue is fully embraced, it might hopefully bring forth three main fruits. Firstly, it is considered that theology of dialogue, in spite of the community's religious differences, will create a sense of belonging rather than that of individualism. This will harvest a desire for meeting together, talking and working as a team in order to address and overcome crucial problems of community well-being. Theology of dialogue is an innovation, one of a uniting movement, motivating members to work towards development and a healthy community. It can be an initiative that is wholly community driven, actively alleviating poverty, insecurity and bringing about positive developments in community health.

[†]Theocentric in this context refers to God identifying with other religions' cultures and traditions rather than to a specific religion and race.

Secondly, theology of dialogue encourages liberation for an oppressed community. The view is that the concept of liberation when understood from an inter-religious dialogue context becomes a responsible theology in its relevance to society. Ideas, presented by Rosino Gibellin (1987), are that liberation movements inevitably arise from those who are oppressed, exploited, despised and marginalized. This is due to the innate need of people to seek for a fair society and their concern for the basics of life. Dean William (1986) elaborates further that liberation can be achieved when community members or individuals become conscious of, and understand, their history and identity, despite religious differences; they can learn from what they have been passing through and realise what might happen in future if they fail to take responsibility for their own destiny.

It is the author's view that inter-religious community needs seriously to embark on working for its liberation by participating together in the struggle against local, government and international oppression, and by tackling all the problems that lead to poverty, disease, infrastructure failure and environmental damage. Pursuing alternatives for a just community needs a determined movement; with a vision of transforming the life of human beings and indeed the whole of nature itself. Effective, united faiths in any community need to point out, frankly, things which are Godly and those which are not, thus restoring God's place in people's lives.

Thirdly, theology of dialogue becomes a catalyst in building up a healing community. This is noticeable, for example, in the African attitudinal 'love of life'. Oduyoye's study (1983) shows how Africans perceive issues of life holistically. Africans always treat life as sacred. The works of Bujo (1990, 1978), Stinton (2002), and Pobee (1986) also concede 'life' to be central to the Africans' world-view. A healing community is that which not only looks at the well-being of humanity, but also at that of both domestic and wild animals, and the eco-system.

In view of the above thoughts, it can be argued that a theology of inter-religious dialogue (dialogical theology) in Africa enlightens the possibility of a Theo-democratic society one that should be initiated by the people, and driven by the people, for the people. Sincere and honest inter-religious dialogue is that which can encourage communities to team up in their struggles to improve life. It concentrates on what is happening in society and seeks to find solutions for unjust and life-denying situations.

In respect of these new ideas and dynamic change, not only within Kenyan society but also in other parts of Africa, a need now exists for a common inter-religious education syllabus for schools. Selcuk (2009) referring from Grimmitt argues that Religious Education is; 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion' as opposed to 'learning into religion'. (Miedema 2009: 56). The suggestion for initiating the inter-religious education programme in schools and the local community is to encourage religious cooperation at the grassroots level, fostering this for present and future generations. A multi-religious community that is formed from childhood, collectively, can create lasting positive effects in society.

The aim of the inter-religious education programme is to gradually create a dialogical community by seeking to use each other's faith to promote and build a whole and healing community; fostering a healthier and more just African society than exists now (Amoah, 1992). This is an inclusive spirituality where the presence of God should be allowed to work in all life situations, engaging society in understanding that life should be lived harmoniously. The proposal for inter-religious education will presumably undergo solemn debate, doubts and much opposition from both laity and religious leaders. For this reason, it would be risky

to claim that inter-religious education will immediately take root in Kenya and Africa in general.

CONCLUSION

The concluding argument is that; sincere and honest inter-religious dialogue is that which can encourage communities to team up in their struggles to improve life. It concentrates on what is happening in society and seeks to find solutions for unjust and life-denying situations

At this period when Africa is struggling to achieve the millennium development goals and Kenya for the 2030 vision, there exists a local and international challenge ; on terrorism, drug trafficking, Brain draining, HIV and AIDs, and Child abuse and prostitution. Indeed, these are the impediments that jeopardise the resources as also obliterating the MDGs and nation's vision. Due to the fact that Africans are unquestionably religious, a new religious approach has to be employed to amicably address the problem.

> 'Why is Africa experiencing poverty, conflicts, disease (HIV/AIDS, Malaria etc) indebtedness, bad and unjust governance, declining economies etc? What is God saying to us concerning our conditions through our religions? (Temple, 2002: 53)

There is a great existing need for the joining of hands (*umoja ni nguvu*) with people of other spiritualities in order to bring about a healthy and just community, with the aim of making it possible for Africans to live better lives today and after. (Amoah, 1992; Selvanayagam, 1995: X).

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