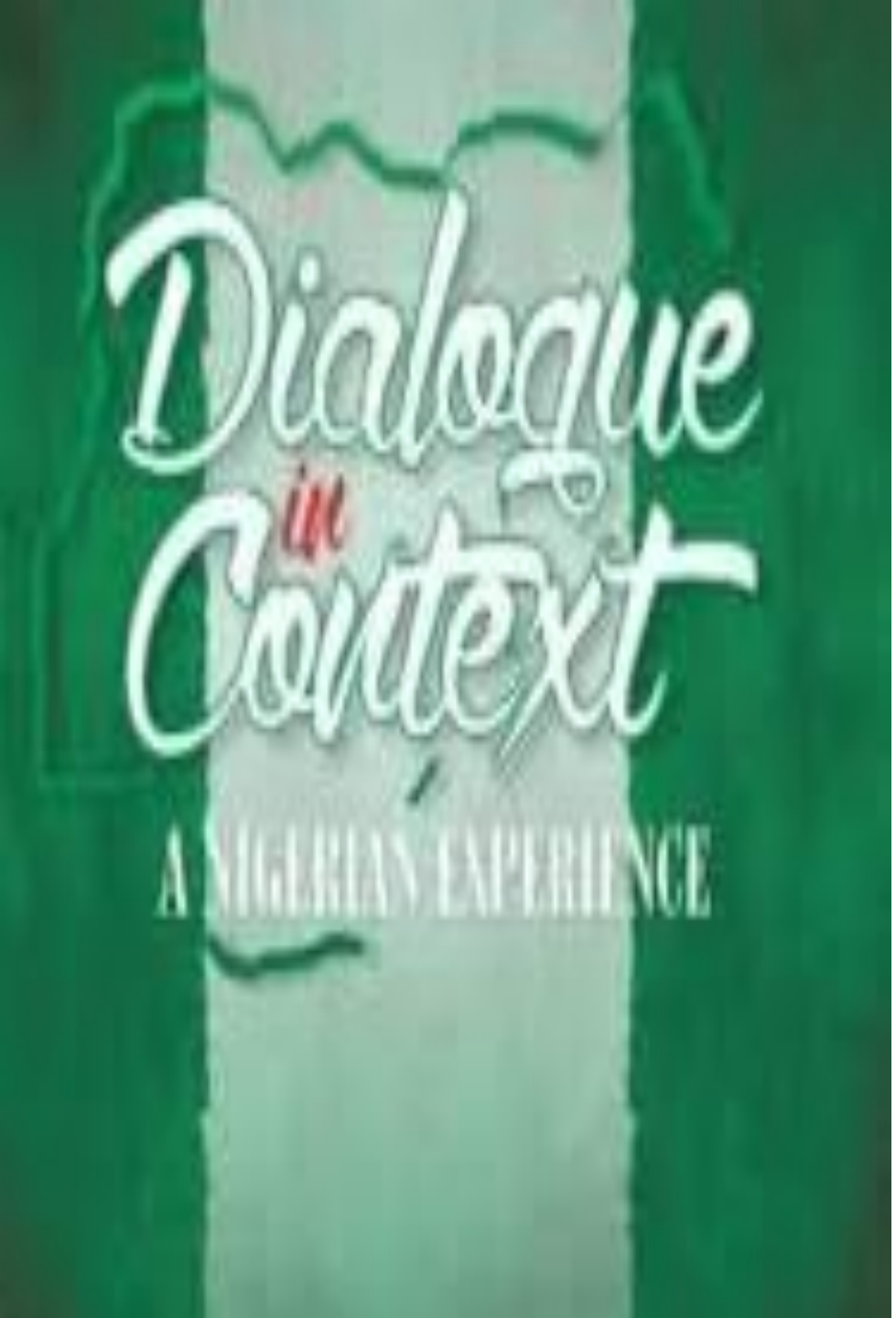

DIALOGUE BETWEEN FAITH AND CULTURE

CORNELIUS AFEBU OMONOKHUA

I HAVE ENCOUNTERED SOME PEOPLE WHO CLAIMED THAT THEY BECAME ATHEISTS BECAUSE RELIGION AND BELIEF IN GOD FOR THEM HAVE CAUSED MORE EVIL THAN GOOD IN THE WORLD. THEY CLAIMED THAT SOME PEOPLE IN THE NAME OF RELIGION HAVE CREATED GOD IN THEIR OWN IMAGE AND LIKENESS AND CONSEQUENTLY IMPOSED LAWS OF THEIR SUBJECTIVE IMAGINATIONS ON BELIEVERS.

FAITH IS BEING SURE OF WHAT WE HOPE FOR AND CERTAIN OF WHAT WE DO NOT SEE (HEBREWS 11, 1).

What is faith in Christianity?

Faith is a theological virtue that enables us to believe without doubting whatever God has revealed. "Faith is man's response to God, who reveals himself and gives himself to man, at the same time, bringing man a super-abundant light as he searches for the ultimate meaning of his life."

Catechism of the Catholic Church, (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), P. 14

Belief applies to a truth that may not have a tangible proof. "Without faith it is impossible to please God. Anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11, 6).

What is faith in Islam ?

Imân is one of the most common words of the Muslim vocabulary. It is often translated as faith, belief, or conviction. At its most basic meaning, imân is belief in God (Allah), His prophets, revealed books, angels, the Hereafter, and Allah's divine decree.

The word “Islam” means “submission to the will of God.” Followers of Islam are called Muslims. Muslims are monotheistic and worship one, all-knowing God, who in Arabic is known as Allah. Followers of Islam aim to live a life of complete submission to Allah.

What is faith in Islam?

Shahadah, profession of faith, is the first pillar of Islam. Muslims bear witness to the oneness of God by reciting the creed

"There is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

This simple yet profound statement expresses a Muslim's complete acceptance of and total commitment to Islam.

What is faith in African Traditional Religions?

- Native African religions believe in the Supreme Being. God is worshiped through intermediaries like ancestors and deities.
- Religious faith is expressed in sacrifices at various festivals like initiations, funerals, marriages .
- The Centre of African religions is the value placed on the community. This is expressed in common wellbeing and common good. For the African, I AM because YOU ARE.

What is Culture?

Culture is perceived in variant ways:

- **The way of life of a people**
- **Values that are fundamentally good for the promotion of human dignity.**
- **Culture is a way of life that people are used to.**

Nearly all the revealed religions are incarnated in the custom of a particular people. Africans already believed in God and worshipped him before the advent of Christianity and Islam that came in contact with the traditional religion that was already prominent in the culture of the people.

What is Culture?

For Christianity and Islam to be incarnated in the life of the African people a form of dialogue between the new faith and the ancient culture is indispensable.

The early missionaries, worked with their limited knowledge of the culture of the people. Some of them had to learn the local languages by living with the people to share in their pains and joys. The theology of inculturation and contextualization will succeed more with dialogue of life and religious experience.

The Faith of our Ancestors

- How did our ancestors relate to God?
- From nature to the transcendence.
- Positive values in traditional heritage
- Practices that hurts humanity.
- Accept values that enhance human dignity.

Conflicts of religious values

- If you live in a place where the values of your religion (Christianity or Islam) is in conflict with traditional practices, what will you do?
- Life is sacred, no one has the right to take human life for sacrifice or for any reason. What will you do if you live in a community that practice child Labour, child marriage, human sacrifice, forbid girls from western education, etc?
- How do you evangelize the culture of a people?

Mary Mitchell Slessor

She was born on December 2, 1848 and died in January 13, 1915. She was a Scottish missionary to Calabar in Nigeria. Mary Slessor lived with the local people especially in Okoyong, learnt more and more about their culture and dialogued with the people about the horrible killing of twins.

Mary Mitchell Slessor
Is killing part of Culture?

At the time she came to Nigeria, witchcraft and tribal customs especially those believed to be directed by the deities like Arochukwu were hard to confront. Some tribes in Calabar and many parts of Eastern Nigeria thought that twins were a curse by an evil spirit. Both babies were brutally murdered and the mother was ostracized from the society. Some think that the killing of twins was decreed by Arochukwu deity.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Mitchell_Slessor)

Mary Mitchell Slessor
Is killing part of Culture?

Mary Slessor confronted the situation with her religious experience by trusting in God. She prayed: “Lord, the task is impossible for me but not for you. Lead the way and I will follow.” Rising, she said, “Why should I fear? I am on a Royal Mission. I am in the service of the King of kings. She rescued many twins and ministered to their mothers. She was continuously fighting against this evil practice, often risking her life to stop the leaders from killing twins. The Lord gave her strength with the tribesmen, and Mary eventually gained the respect unheard of for a woman. When she started the rescue of twins, some people expected that she only had a few days to live.

Mary Mitchell Slessor
Is killing part of Culture?

They expected Arochukwu to defend himself by killing Mary Slessor, the twins and all those who partner with her in the rescue operation. Even the mothers were afraid because they believed that something tragic would happen in the community because of the survival of the twins.

When the native discovered that Mary Slessor was not killed by the deity, a dialogue of life commenced and this paved the way for a complete abolition of the killing of twins. Thereafter, she lived with the people, shared in their pains and endured their suffering.

Mary Mitchell Slessor
Is killing part of Culture?

She picked up the twins that were condemned to death with a Christian faith that the good God who commanded that you must not kill will not allow evil to befall anyone or the community. These methods also saved her from physical attack from the people. At the end of the day, it was clear to the local people that twins are normal human beings that have the right to life. In Nigeria, Mary Slessor is a model of women liberation. She is akin to a patroness of Nurses and midwives. Dialogue between faith and culture goes with respect for the culture of a people.

Mary Mitchell Slessor
Is killing part of Culture?

This creates a space for people to open up their minds to comprehend the evil practices that call for a dynamic change. This respect opens the eyes of the people and the evangelist to identify the good values of the people. Whatever devalues human dignity cannot be describe as faith or culture. Whatever is good in a culture can be seen as religious since God who is the object of religion is perfect and good. Whatever contradicts human dignity even in a religious practice cannot be claimed to come from the God of mercy and compassion.

Joseph
Inter-cultural Dialogue

According to Richard Eliot Friedman, the name Joseph (Hebrew, יוֹסֵף) simply means "May Yahweh adds". In other words, "The LORD shall *add* to me another son," Joseph in Arabic (يوسف, *Yūsuf*), is found in the Qur'an in connection with the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Joseph signifies liberation and healing that is only achieved through dialogue. The final liberation of the Hebrews from Egypt was achieved only through this. Joseph was the eleventh of the twelve sons of Jacob. He was the first born of Rachel. His brothers conspired to kill him out of jealousy. They eventually sold him into slavery but God saved him and he became the second in command to Pharaoh in Egypt.

Joseph
Inter-cultural Dialogue

Joseph was hated by his brothers because of the preferential love he enjoyed from his father Jacob who adorned him with “long coat of many colours”. His brothers were not comfortable with his dreams and so decided to halt his destiny of being superior to them (Genesis 37, 1-35).

Joseph did not actualize his destiny on a platter of gold. He had to contend with the trials and temptations in the house of Potiphar. The integrity of Joseph and his fear of God was proven when he refused to commit adultery with the wife of Potiphar who did everything to seduce him. He was imprisoned innocently (Genesis 39, 1-20).

Joseph
Inter-cultural Dialogue

- **His gift of dreams and the interpretation of dreams led to his release. Pharaoh then released him and put him in charge over "all the land of Egypt" as Vizier. He was renamed Zaphnath-Paaneah. Josephus refers to the name Zaphnath-Paaneah as *Psothom Phanech* meaning "the revealer of secrets." He was given Asenath, the daughter of Potipherah, to be his wife. Josephus refers to Potipherah or Petephres as the priest of Heliopolis.**
- **Joseph used his position to enrich Egypt and his brothers had to go to Egypt for food knowing not that the stone which they rejected would become their corner stone. Genesis Chapter 42 gives a full narrative of the meeting of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt.**

Joseph
Inter-cultural Dialogue

In that chapter, the fruit of this encounter and the beauty of the dialogue are best appreciated but the following incidents call for serious meditation. The dream came true when "The sons of Jacob bow down before Joseph". No one can stop destiny; it can only be delayed. Joseph recognized his brothers but he acted as a stranger to them. He even puts them in prison. Imagine their guilty conscience when they said to one another, "We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore, this distress has come upon us." Joseph forgave his brothers and reunited with his family.

Joseph
Inter-cultural Dialogue

- **Here is the touching statement of Jacob: “Now I can die in peace knowing that Joseph my son is still alive” (Genesis 46, 30).**

- **The paradox of dialogue is that even though forgiveness is difficult, it can become easy if the person who needs forgiveness can remove his or her mask and confront the situation.**
- **Dialogue and forgiveness by proxy cannot work. The penitent must first accept that he or she has sinned, confesses the sin, receive penance, accept to do restoration, receive absolution and then enjoy satisfaction that he or she is at peace with God and humanity.**

Joseph
Inter-cultural Dialogue

If a person who has issues with you refuses to reveal himself or herself to you, there is no way dialogue can take place! If a person refuses to talk to you or respond to your calls either by phone or message through human agents, then the person has made up his mind or her mind never to have anything to do with you. In this conversation, the courageous encounter of Joseph and his brothers brought healing to both sides. The father became happy and fulfilled. This for me reflects how happy God would be if we, his creatures, live in peace and harmony on earth.

Friedman, R.E., The Bible with Sources Revealed, (Harper, Collins 2003), P.80
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_view_of_Joseph
Josephus. *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book II, 6.1.91
Josephus. *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book II, 6.1.91

Global Ethics

Could there have been laws in world history that were natural and common to humanity before the advent of Christianity and Islam? Were the commandments recorded in the scriptures of the different religions dictated by God directly from heaven? What was the medium of communication? What could have been the role of the human instrument in the compilation and interpretation of the divine revelation since the word of God is communicated in human language? What type of ethics guided the world before the revealed religions? Could these laws be seen purely as pagan laws that should be discarded? Can we think of global ethics that could direct humanity to a common good and that is acceptable to people of all religions and school of thought?

Global Ethics

Should it not be the case that since God is eternal, he has always guided human ethics from the beginning of creation? Does this not indicate or point to the fact that on the last day, God will be more concerned with our love and obedience to him through the ways we value and respect human dignity? Is it not true that religious fanaticism whereby some people are treated as second class citizens if they do not practise a particular religion in some part of the world is detested by God?

Perhaps these questions may be imperative in the Nigeria context given that some Christians have accused the Muslims of attempting to impose the Islamic laws on the nation while some Muslims see the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as Western and Christian.

Global Ethics

Is everything European really Christian? Has the time not really come to grow above these prejudices, biases and preconceptions? It is not an act of a great mind to reject a value simply because it has a particular religious label. Rather, we can open our minds to sincerely enquire if the religious ethical principles have anything in common that can serve as a global ethics that may be used as a basis to formulate laws that may govern a secular state. I am not advocating here that there is no need for religious laws. The point is that laws that are peculiar to a particular religion should not be a subject of national and public debate.

In my view, what is common to humanity is a search for what is true, what is good and what is useful.

Global Ethics

The golden rule existed before Christianity and Islam. Five hundred years before Christ, Confucius had said: *Do not do unto others what you do not want others to do unto you.*

Emmanuel Kant stated long time ago: *Act in such a way that you use the humanity, both in your person and in the person of any other, always as an end, and never merely as a means.*

Hippocrates and Dr. Thomas Sydenham who formulated the Golden rule in the 17th century for medical practice said: *No one has been treated by me otherwise that I would want to be treated if I had this illness.*

Global Ethics

This golden rule can be used to interpret both the secular and religious ethics. The world needs an ethical guide to happiness. It seems that of all that God has created everything in nature except human beings obey the natural order put in place by God. This must have been the reason for punishments. But some people have argued that punishment should be only for the purpose of correction and redirecting human life to the ultimate happiness. From the natural laws, it is perhaps possible to derive a global ethics that is acceptable to humanity irrespective of religion since there is only One God. Naturally, human beings should know that life is sacred and that good ought to be done and that evil must be avoided.

Global Ethics

In the context of global ethics: the different religions can dialogue on these basic issues:

What do we have in common as human beings?

- **What are the things in our different religious ethics that unite us?**
- **Are there practises in my religion that contradict human nature?**
- **To what extent does my religion promote peace and reconciliation?**

It is my subjective opinion that what many people detest in some religious ethical norms is not the rules themselves but the punishment attached to them which they consider anachronistic.

Global Ethics

There is therefore need for form, textual and contextual re-evaluation of revelation since life is dynamic. The life of our ancestors two thousand years ago is different from the life of today. This can be substantiated with the various debates on capital punishment and various forms of physical punishments. Some people argue that it is the best way of relieving the society of criminals, while others argue that it serves as a deterrent to potential criminals.

According to Thomas Aquinas, "Grace builds on nature and does not destroy it." It follows then that I can conveniently dialogue with a person who does not believe in the scriptures that I cherish.

Conclusion

The way I talk and the way I act will convince my partner in dialogue that my religion is a total and complete way of life. Global ethics is consequently spiritualized in our attitude towards life and respect for humanity. It will be a contradiction and a total ridicule of my religious ethics if my actions contradict human dignity and the value for life. Let us seek a global re-definition of freedom and human rights that are driving the world crazy. Morality is one even in the context of relativism. Cultural and religious differences are diverse ways of expressing this common value that leads to happiness. Common sense is the instrument of global ethics. It helps people of great minds to rule the world with ideas rather than religious and tribal sentiments.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Golden_Rule
http://www.catholic-church.org/grace/western/lap1.htm