

MISSION AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: CAN THE PROBLEMATIC BE RESOLVED?

Wemimo B. Jaiyesimi

A. The Problematic of Mission and Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is often perceived to have a problematic relationship to Mission as traditionally understood¹. In the minds of many Christians, and especially those of more 'conservative' persuasions², Interfaith dialogue is felt to betray the mandate of the church to proclaim the gospel to non-Christians: the evangelizing mandate of the Church. Stanley Samartha writing from the backdrop of his experience as director of the World Council of Churches sub-unit on Dialogue with Peoples of Living Faiths and Ideologies notes that 'there are some Christians who fear that dialogue with persons of other faiths is a betrayal of mission and disobedience to the command to proclaim the gospel'.³ Although this concern has received perhaps more attention within the Christian tradition and this article focuses on that tradition, there is evidence to suggest that it is not a challenge unique to Christianity. Farid Esack's *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism* is a spirited attempt to [re]interpret the Qur'an in a manner that legitimizes active cooperation of Muslims with non-Muslims. Situated within the context of Apartheid South Africa where, in his view, a certain 'conservative' hermeneutic had provided theological justification for the refusal of some Muslims to engage in activism against the racial injustice suffered by Black South Africans who, in the main, were non-Muslims, Farid Esack's work, whatever one makes of the validity or otherwise of his 'South African qur'anic hermeneutic of religious pluralism for liberation', shows how even within Islam, interreligious dialogue can be perceived as a betrayal of 'true

¹ Although, as would be discussed later, there are variety of practices and understandings which are captured under the term 'mission', the traditional understanding of it has been the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who, for whatever reason, cannot be described as Christians.

² 'Conservative' is not employed here in any pejorative sense but simply as a descriptor for those who adhere to traditional understandings of Christianity, both protestant and Roman catholic.

³ S.J. Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue*, Geneva: World Council of Churches/Eight Day Books, 1981

Islam' or something close to that.⁴ But we may well ask what exactly is it that makes the perception of the relationship between the two to be problematic? Is there something inherently problematic about the relationship between the two? Any attempt to answer this question must involve analysing how the two concepts and activities are made sense of and attention must also be paid to the historical evolution of both concepts.

Although the mention of the word 'mission' in many quarters, particularly in the West, conjures up images of 19th century missionaries in distant lands engaging in the spreading of the Christian gospel (or as some might cynically put it, the spreading of Christianity), David Bosch⁵ has persuasively shown that the referent of the term is dynamic with the meanings attached to it and the manner in which it has been undertaken having undergone immense transformations since the beginning of the Christian era. The traditional understanding of mission as evangelization or the 'reaching of the unreached' (as some Christian groups put it) does not fully capture all that Christians have meant when they have used the term. Bosch notes, for instance, that 'until the sixteenth century the term was used exclusively with reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, that is the sending of the Son by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son'.⁶ This might strike those whose familiarity with the term has been within the modern context as strange, but the dynamism of the term extends even to the present. Mission has been understood as justice; as *Missio Dei* – 'God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world...'; as liberation; as inculturation; as contextualization. These variety of understanding of mission have themselves been reflective of wider changes in society and how Christian theologizing and practice have been affected by these social changes. But while mission has undergone and continues to undergo transformation in how it is understood in the Church, an enduring part of how Christians have understood it has remained – mission as

⁴ Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997.

⁵ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991.

⁶ Bosch, *ibid*, p. 1.

evangelism. It is this aspect of mission – evangelism⁷ – more than others, it would appear, that has been felt to have a problematic relationship. So, when it is said that mission has been felt to have a difficult relationship to interreligious dialogue, it is not merely ‘mission’ in the broadest possible sense but more pointedly to mission as evangelism.⁸

The goal of evangelism (or proclamation), as the Roman Catholic document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, published in 1991, twenty-five years after the watershed *Nostra Aetate* puts it is:

‘the communication of the Gospel message, the mystery of salvation realized by God for all in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. It is an invitation to a commitment of faith in Jesus Christ and to entry through baptism into the community of believers which is the church. This proclamation can be solemn and public, as for instance on the day of Pentecost (cf. Ac 2: 5-41), or a simple private conversation (cf. Ac 8:30-38)’.⁹

Understood thus, Mission as Evangelism is geared toward making converts; it is an explicitly proselyting activity. Interreligious dialogue on the other hand, and in contradistinction to mission as evangelism, is aimed at fostering mutual understanding between the dialoguing religions. The aim of interreligious dialogue is usually to foster peaceful and harmonious coexistence between both the adherents of the different religions as well as between the institutionalized organisations which represent the religions. While there are dimensions to interreligious dialogue that seek to encourage

⁷ ‘Evangelism’ in this sense differs from ‘Evangelization’ as employed in the Roman Catholic sense in which it more comprehensively captures ‘the mission of the church in its totality’ (*Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, published by the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, 1991). The sense captured by ‘evangelism’ in the Roman Catholic understanding is ‘proclamation’.

⁸ Although this is true, and the rest of this article works especially with the model of ‘mission as dialogue’ it should not be taken from this that even the other understandings of mission which entail a concern from man’s existential and practical material needs have not been regarded as difficult with regards to interfaith dialogue. For some, even these understandings build upon a belief in the superiority of Christianity which is felt to be difficult to square with interfaith dialogue.

⁹ Number 10, *“Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”*, published by the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, 1991

interreligious learning¹⁰ and go beyond formal discussions of how to foster peaceful relations, in general, interreligious dialogue does not aim at conversion of persons from their religion. Interreligious dialogue meets with adherents of different religions in their difference and seeks to negotiate how avenues (both theological and pragmatic) may be opened up to enhance peaceful relations between the religions. In other words, even if interreligious dialogue may lead to transformation in how religions make sense of themselves and how they construe their relationship with the other, this transformation is not aimed at fundamentally altering the religious orientation of the other so that he gives up his or her religion for another. So, while mission as evangelism primarily aims at *converting* the other to Christianity, interreligious dialogue aims to *conversing* with the other in his non-Christianity. The challenge of reconciling the two; of properly relating both in a manner that does not compromise Christian theological integrity is precisely what the problematic of interreligious dialogue and mission is about. The problem is accentuated by the history of both practices.

Church historians often term the 19th century as the heyday of Christian missions (and especially protestant Christian missions). Although Christian missionaries from Europe had made forays into Asia, the Americas and Africa long before the flourishing that would eventually happen in the 19th century, it was not until the 1900s that sustained missionary progress was accomplished in many of these lands. In Africa in particular, although there had been an established Christian presence in places like Egypt (with the Coptic church) and Ethiopia (with the Tewahedo church), it was not until the ‘missionary rush’ of the 19th century that Christianity became a more evenly spread presence on the continent. Through the efforts of various mission organisations like the Church Missionary Society of England and the mission arm of various mainline churches like the Methodist, Anglican, Baptist,

¹⁰ See Marianne Moeart and Joris Geldhof, ed., *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, for a fuller illustration of this aspect of interreligious dialogue.

Presbyterian, Lutheran and others, a significant and steady number of 'souls were won for Christ' among the 'heathen'; the Africans.

Although Lamin Sanneh¹¹ has shown that former African slaves from America played an instrumental and often underappreciated role in the evangelization of Africans during the 19th century and Ogbu Kalu¹² has emphasized the immense role local indigenous agents played in the spread, establishment and flourishing of the Christian movement in Africa, the tendency has been to stress how much the growth of Christianity in Africa was due to the work of foreign missionaries. That this period of mission was, for good or bad, accompanied with the onset of the colonialization of large parts of Africa by 'powerful' European nations where these missions originated, has led some to consider the mission of this period (and subsequent missionary activities in fact) as complicit in the subjugation of the peoples.¹³ Mission as evangelism has, therefore, been felt to entail epistemic violence and a belief that one's religious worldview and truth claims are superior to others and hence portending an attitude difficult to square with the goals of interreligious dialogue.

The prominence of contemporary interreligious dialogue, on the other hand, although often traced to the landmark event of the 1893 parliament of world religions which held in Chicago, is due to a number of changes, both theological and socio-cultural which took place in the West especially after the Enlightenment period. Leonard Swindler¹⁴ has surveyed some of the key elements that resulted in this change from 'monologue to dialogue'. At the

¹¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

¹² Kalu Ogbu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹³ John Hick in his "The non-Absoluteness of Christianity" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, edited by John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, 16-36. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1988 has as part of his reasons for considering Christianity non-absolute the fact that belief in the superiority of Christianity has in the past led to colonialism and he notes, even while admitting that there were exceptions to this, the 19th century missionary enterprise as a case-in-point.

¹⁴ Leonard Swindler, "The History of Interreligious Dialogue" in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, First Edition. Edited by Catherine Cornille, p. 3-17. John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2013

theological level, Vatican II (1962-1965) and the protestant ecumenical movement which would eventually coalesce in the forming of the World Council of churches, WCC (in 1948) are noted as being important but these theological developments were themselves, in some sense, influenced by other sociological factors. Swindler attempts to show how such factors as the philosophical hermeneutical tradition of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Bernard Lonergan and Paul Ricoeur which pushed forward an 'interpretative view of truth' and a deconstruction of the absoluteness of text-based truth-claims; the 'perspectival' view of truth and language informed by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein; the sociology of knowledge school of thought led by Max Scheler and the Historicism that held prominence in 19th century German intellectual discourse about the nature of historical truth claims which often saw all history as only intelligible in the light of its historical situatedness, made possible interreligious dialogue. These socio-cultural factors, the increased awareness of religious diversity and the later demographic changes in both Europe and America which saw adherents of different religions often sharing communal spaces all contributed in some way to increasing the need for having religions dialogue with one another. What is of immediate concern to us however is not this history per se but how this history helps us better appreciate the difficulty of the relationship between mission and dialogue.

B. MISSION, DIALOGUE AND THE TYPOLOGY

Since Alan Race's influential *Christians and Religious Pluralism*¹⁵, theological reflection on the relationship between Christianity and other religions with regards to questions of salvation and truth have tended to be categorized as either being exclusivist, inclusivist or pluralist. In this section, an attempt would be made to show that much of the problematic of the relationship between mission and interreligious dialogue owes in large part to the theology of religion subscribed to by both those fear mission to be

¹⁵ Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, Second Edition. London: SCM Press, 1993.

compromised by dialogue and those who feel dialogue to be better suited for relating with the other than mission as evangelism.

Broadly speaking, the problematic of mission and dialogue may be categorized into two. First, there are those from within the Christian churches, spiritual leaders and laymen, who fear that interreligious dialogue is a compromise to the church's primary responsibility to 'win the lost to Christ'. One discerns these voices in both the Roman catholic and the Protestant circles. Kenneth Cranknell, has for instance, surveyed how within the World Council of churches there has been an ambivalent attitude with regards to an articulation of the relationship between Christianity and the world religions (and ideologies). While seeking to affirm the providence of God in other non-Christian religions, it has been difficult to this in a way that is not felt to compromise faithfulness to the Christian tradition.¹⁶ Within the Roman Catholic stream, one finds, for instance in both the classic *Nostra Aetate* and in *Dialogue and Proclamation*, a concern to stress that interreligious dialogue does not mean the end of mission. As is put in *Dialogue and Proclamation* (4, c): 'The practice of dialogue raises problems in the minds of many...[some] are perplexed and ask: if interreligious dialogue has become so important, has the proclamation of the gospel lost its urgency? Has the effort to bring people into the community of the Church become secondary or even superfluous?' and in *Nostra Aetate*, while interreligious dialogue is encouraged, it is yet stressed that 'the Church is in duty bound to proclaim without fail Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, in whom all people find their fulfilment' (NA, 2). It would seem that reflected in these concerns is a subscription either to an exclusivist view of salvation of Truth or as in Roman Catholic theology, an inclusivist understanding of salvation and truth. It is not the concern of this article to assess the merit or otherwise of these standpoints as the literature which critically assesses

¹⁶ Kenneth Cracknell, Ambivalent Theology and Ambivalent Policy: The World Council of Churches and Interfaith Dialogue, 1938-1999., *Studies in Interreligious dialogue* 9 (1999), p. 87-111.

them abounds¹⁷, but it is helpful just to note how the problematic, at least as felt within the Christian Church, is reflective of certain theologies of religion.

On the other hand, there are those, Christians too but not usually speaking in an ecclesiastical capacity, whose problem is that that mission as evangelism is no longer suited for the contemporary period; that Christian relationship with religious others, in the present context and in the light of increased knowledge about the value of these religions, should be one exclusively of dialogue as equal partners rather than evangelism. Paul F. Knitter worries that interreligious dialogue is rendered nearly ineffective when there is still in the minds of those who undertake it the belief that their particular religion is of superior value, either at a moral or theological level¹⁸. For Paul Knitter then, the attitudes which undergird evangelism are problematic if successful interreligious dialogue is to take place. Knitter is not alone in this regard and his concern is really reflective of pluralist hesitations about mission as evangelism.

Although the typology of Race has been strictured for not fully capturing all Christian positions with regard to the question of salvation and truth in other religions and some have even felt his typology to actually misrepresent the positions¹⁹, his framework of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism provides a way of understanding the theological origin of the problematic of mission and dialogue.²⁰

¹⁷ Gavin D'Costa's *Theology and Religious Pluralism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986 is a good critical survey.

¹⁸ Paul Knitter, quoted in Catherine Cornille, *The Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, New York: Crossroad/Herder and Herder, 2008

¹⁹ As for instance Gavin D'Costa's argument that a pluralist theology of religion is impossible in his "The Impossibility of a pluralist View of Religions". *Religious Studies* 32 (1996), 223-232.

²⁰ In closing this section, it should be mentioned that although attention has been placed on how the relationship between mission and dialogue is conceived as problematic within Christianity, there are wider problems with the two practices posed by those outside Christianity. In this regard, one thinks for instance of those who have felt that interreligious dialogue is merely another 'mission as evangelism' strategy by Christians and those who usually alluding to secular reasons think mission as evangelism is nothing other than arrogance.

C. THE PARTICULARIST TURN AND THE PROBLEMATIC

The difficulty of maintaining an attitude of openness to the religious other while being committed to one's own religious persuasion, which is another way of putting the problematic, is indeed a central and perennial problem in interreligious relations. As has already been shown, much of the difficulty owes to the theology of religion held by those who reflect upon the relationship.²¹ We shall now attempt to discern how the turn toward particularism may help provide a rethinking of the problematic and perhaps even provide a possible solution to it.

Although without as long a history as the other frameworks of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, particularism has increasingly become an influential perspective with regard to the question of how Christianity and religions in general make sense of their relationship with others. Informed by the philosophy of language of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) particularism considers language to be akin to games with particular rules for understanding them only available to those initiated in the games. This differs from reference theories of language in which language is almost seen as given, indeterminate and readily understandable by all. In Wittgensteinian philosophy of language, concepts, names and ideas are only coherent within their particular cultural-linguistic context. George Lindbeck's seminal *The Nature of Doctrine*²² was a thoroughgoing application of the insights of this philosophy to the area of religion and Christian theology. Lindbeck forcefully argues that all religions and their particular doctrinal languages are, as Marianne Moeart puts it, 'irreducibly particular'.²³ As he himself puts it:

²¹ Although important, it would be mistaken to think that the difficulty of the problematic can be reduced to the theological only. The difficult histories between many world religions, socio-political influences and even economic factors are equally critical to gaining a full understanding of the *raison d'être* behind hostility between religions.

²² George. A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984.

²³ Marianne Moeart, "Scriptural Reasoning as Inter-Religious Dialogue", in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, First Edition. Edited by Catherine Cornille, p. 66. John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2013

“adherents of different religions do not diversely thematize the same experience, rather they have different experiences. Buddhist compassion, Christian love and . . . French revolutionary fraternité are not diverse modifications of a single human awareness, emotion, attitude, or sentiment, but are radically (i.e., from the root) distinct ways of experiencing and being oriented toward self, neighbor, and cosmos”²⁴

This way of thinking about religions and dogma differs from both exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist approaches to religious language. For instance, when the word ‘salvation’ is used by in traditional exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist theologies of religions, it is usually employed in a sense that universalizes Christian dogma and experience so that non-Christians who do not share the Christian worldview can only be applied the terms ‘saved’ ‘unsaved’ if they have already in some sense been ‘Christianized’. In other words, the word salvation is particularly Christian and when applied outside its original cultural-linguistic context, it may be rendered unintelligible. This is not to suggest that theological language is so specific as to be linguistically meaningless in contexts outside its origin but that these languages only derive their appreciation when understood within the particular originating contexts²⁵.

Marianne Moeart, Catherine Cornille, and to some extent, John Milbank may be cited as examples of those whose thinking about the relationship between interreligious dialogue and mission has been influenced by particularism²⁶. In what ways does the particularist turn help provide an

²⁴ George Lindbeck, *ibid*, p. 40. In Marianne Moeart, *ibid*, p. 66

²⁵ There are critiques of the particularist perspective which consider it to be relativistic and the product of fideism, but we shall not at the moment concern ourselves with these critiques but merely note how the insight generated by this perspective has important insights for moving beyond the impasse of mission and dialogue.

²⁶ Marianne Moeart, “Scriptural Reasoning as Inter-Religious Dialogue”, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, First Edition. Edited by Catherine Cornille. John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2013; Catherine Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, New York: Crossroad/Herder and Herder, 2008; John Milbank, “The End of Dialogue” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, edited by Gavin D’Costa, 174-191. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990

opportunity to move beyond the impasse between openness and commitment; between mission as evangelism and interfaith dialogue? We consider a few ways in what now follows.

First, particularism takes seriously the reality of difference between religions. this appreciation of difference goes beyond pluralist notions of the nominal difference between religions or exclusivist ideas of difference which refuse to grant the possibility of epistemic credibility to other religions. The difference between religions invites the possibility of dialogue. Religions can indeed listen to and learn from the other. They may be challenged to see new ways of looking at the world after learning something of the way that the other looks at the world. This difference, in itself does not entail superiority, but it may well result in it²⁷. For religions may legitimately acknowledge that certain elements in the religion of the other, from one's own perspective, does not adequately deal with the problems which one's own religion deals with. This type of dialogue goes beyond facile models of interreligious dialogue which seek to stress and insist on coming to a forced unity at the expense of the difficult aspects which the different religions almost always have.

The particularist way of thinking about religions allows for the legitimacy of the enterprise of mission as evangelism. As Catherine Cornille notes interreligious dialogue calls for willingness to attest to the truth of one's worldview and may in fact take the form of apologetics²⁸. While recognizing that the religions are different and think about God, life, the after-life, man's destiny and place in the world amongst other such themes catered for by religions, those committed to their respective religions may still believe that, and this without necessarily, being arrogant, their respective religion should be properly understood by those who do not share them. They may feel free

²⁷ The idea that believing a position to be superior is morally objectionable has been argued to be philosophical flawed. See Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism" in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, edited by Thomas D. Senor. 172-192. Cornell University Press, 1995.

²⁸ Catherine Cornille, *ibid*, p. 59.

to also take seriously the claims of the other; to not immediately dismiss it as useless. In fact, there is a sense, in the light of the particularist turn, in which interreligious dialogue²⁹ must always have a missionary dimension.

Christian particularism legitimizes both mission and dialogue. Interfaith dialogue, by its very nature, is dependent and necessitated by the differences between the different religions. Particularism does not paper over these differences. It takes them seriously and in doing so allows more honest room for managing these differences in a way that does not do injustice to the self-understanding of the religions (as critics sometimes charge pluralism to do) and does not foreclose the possibility of virtue in the religious other (as is sometimes exclusivism is sometimes believed to do) and is also not patronizing of the other religions (as inclusivism is sometimes criticized for doing). Particularism also enables mission as evangelism to be carried out without any a priori sense of guilt. Mission seeks to convert and there is no reason to think this evil in and of itself as it almost necessarily follows the taking one's different religious truth claims seriously; not doing injustice to one's self-understanding of what he or she believes his religion to teach.

D. CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to make sense of the challenge of reconciling the Church's felt responsibility to both mission and interreligious dialogue. The nature of the problematic between both practices were explored briefly and an attempt was made situate the problematic within the context of the typological framework first suggested by Alan Race. Having attempted doing this, the paper then sought to explore how a particularist informed theology of religion may provide viable resources toward an attempt at resolving the apparent problematic. While this has been done, it should be mentioned

²⁹ All through this article we have been using interreligious dialogue in the narrow sense of dialogue aimed at negotiating difference bordering on theology, ethics and ritual practice. This narrow sense does not capture other lived forms of dialogue (those termed "dialogue of life") which is equally as important.

that, although not touched upon, there is reason to think that part of the problem of reconciling mission and dialogue is due in part to the modernist orientation of the dominant conception of interreligious dialogue. The particularist turn draws inspiration from post-modernity's cynicism about claims to objectivity and value neutrality. It takes seriously the idea that every truth claim, whether objectively true or not and whether religious or secular, is a form of politics.

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