Effective Interreligious Dialogue: the non-negotiable Need for Attention to Context

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the non-negotiable need for Attention to Context

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Introduction

In a post-Vatican II world, we are obligated to approach our call to mission and evangelization and our entire Catholic theology from the prism of the spirit of Vatican II. We are already experiencing remarkable changes in both our encounter with other religions and the way we interpret them theologically. Vatican II gave us not just Nostra Aetate but also Gaudium et Spes and Dignitatis Humanae. Dignitatis Humanae not only mirrors the Universal Bill of Rights but it is also an official endorsement of the thoughts of John XXIII in Pacem in Terris where the pope argues for the protection of the religious rights of every person as well as the equality of all people both in the eyes of civil law and God. Of course, we know that Vatican II officially moved the Catholic Church from its exclusive theological stance to an inclusive religious and theological outlook in relation to other religions. Vatican II calls for a new sense of how to be a church in the society. One of the theological and practical ways to reflect a post-Vatican II Church is the growing emphasis and significance of interreligious dialogue. IRD’s importance is rooted not just in its significance to the globalized and pluralistic world but also to the church which finds herself in this new world order. Fast forward to today, Pope Francis in his Evangelii Gaudium calls all Christians to a new approach of ensuring the spread of the joy of the good news of Christ. In his appeal to all Christians he said, “I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church’s journey in years to come . . . It is
not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’” (Evang. Gaudium, 2013, Nos. 1 and 15).

**IRD Calls for a new Sense of How to be a Church in Today’s Society**

Fifty plus years after Vatican II, it is critically important that you as the premier agents of the church in her work of mission and evangelization re-assess where you are and how best to both be effective evangelizers and mission agents today. I am proposing in this presentation that you give some thought and consideration to the theology of inclusive religious pluralism as an appropriate worldview necessary in this age for the spread of the Gospel and for more and better harmonious relationships with people of other faith traditions.

Despite the upswing of nationalism in Britain, the United States, India, and different parts of Europe, etc., today’s age does not patiently accommodate people who think themselves superior to others. Nor does it favor or accommodate isolationism. The world today is called a global village, not only because of the development of communication and technology that have shrunk the gap of geographical distance, but also because previous boundaries and silos of race, religion, ethnicity, class, and culture have been shattered significantly or at least punctured. Therefore, in this world of extended neighbors, we need to work intentionally for better human harmony and co-existence. Today, in the religious circle of our world, working on interreligious relations is a norm, hence the appreciation of IRD as an indispensable need for all religions of our world.

As mission agents, the words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:16 have far greater relevance and implication for you all. According to Paul, “For if I preach the gospel, I have no reason to boast, because I am compelled to preach—and woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” A Common English Bible translation of this scripture text reads, “If I preach the gospel, I have no reason to brag, since I’m obligated to do it. I’m in trouble if I don’t preach the gospel.” IRD is itself a healthy and acceptable way of proclaiming the good news, therefore an asset to all who like you must preach the gospel. It is your opportunity to share what is precious and amazing about Christianity and the reasons you are a devotee of Christ. Peter, the Apostle, admonishes Christians, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,” (1 Peter 3:15).

Looking at our world since the fifth century the political establishment of Christianity and the spread of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula, it is obvious that the issue of interreligious relations or dialogue poses more challenges to Christians and Muslims than others for the following reasons:

- their obsessive global mission of converting everyone to each of their faiths;
- the appeal and easy tendency toward theological exclusivism;
- their history of antagonism and even violence toward people of other religions;
- the fact that they are the two largest religions of the world.
Consequently, the focus of my address in this forum is how we, as Catholic Christians, are to promote better relationships with Muslims and forge effective IRD activities and programs with Muslims in our different communities or regions.

**Crucial Documents of the Church Necessary for IRD**

Standing where we are today historically, we are privileged that we have ample resources from the church to support and promote any efforts toward IRD. In the past centuries and decades, several Christians like Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, St. Francis of Assisi, Bartolomé de las Casas, Bartholomeo de Olmeido, Nicholas of Cusa, some of your own confrères etc. had no official support in their struggle against the dominant exclusive theology of Christianity that paid little or no respect to other religions.

We are better equipped today to engage freely in IRD because of the following documents of the church:

- *Ecclesiam Suam*, Encyclical on the Church, Pope Paul VI, 1964;
- *Nostra Aetate, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, Vatican II 1965;

To some degree, we can also appreciate the interest of *Laudato Si’* in IRD. Pope Francis in this Apostolic Exhortation seeks for collaboration with people of all religious faith traditions to address the environmental and ecological challenges of our world.

I recommend these resources to you as foundational and empowering resources, but not as exclusive resources. These documents serve as inspiration for us to evolve and explore other healthy ways to promote and advance IRD. Therefore, my proposal for the theological framework of inclusive religious pluralism is a theological *modus operandi* toward effective IRD. It is the theological underpinning that has extensively corroborated the standard doctrine of the Catholic Church about Christ as God, universal salvation, and the origin of religions in God.

**Why Context is Critically Important in IRD**

While it is necessary to consult with the resources provided by the church and insights of theologians as tools for effective IRD, these are often tools waiting to be implemented. The context in which the tools are implemented is of critical importance. Consequently, I urge you to use the days of this forum to explore how best in your different locations IRD can be achieved. Please bear in mind that an IRD approach that is outstanding in Pakistan may not
yield the same results in the Central African Republic, or an approach that may be fruitful in Algeria may not be effective in the United States.

As well as context, the history, culture, politics, social order, and religions of any context are also important. Consideration and review of these factors are of significant importance in IRD because what is excellently practicable in one context with its peculiar history, culture, religions, social order, and politics may be an abysmal failure in a different context with different experiences of the same factors. Not to stretch our imagination too far we can easily use examples in East Africa where we are located for this forum. The history, culture, social order, politics, religion, and context of Tanzania call for its unique approach to IRD (between Christians and Muslims) different from the IRD (between Christians and Muslims) in Belgium, Northern Nigeria, Central African Republic, Mauritius, Pakistan, Ethiopia, or France. Adapting IRD to context is so critical for the success of IRD that even within the same country, especially in less homogenous countries or regions, an approach that might be successful in one part will not be as successful in another. There are very good examples of such places in Africa, namely Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, the Central African Republic, and the Republic of Sudan, to name a few.

Theology of Inclusive Religious Pluralism

In the sub-discipline of the theology of religions, there are typically three different worldviews: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The recommendation of this study is for Christians to adopt a worldview of inclusive pluralism as the most effective worldview for promoting and advancing interreligious dialogue. Inclusive pluralism seeks a blend of the best of inclusivism and pluralism. It is recommended because it honors and highlights the commonalities of religions as well as appreciates their differences. Adopting inclusive pluralism as a religious worldview puts Christians in the best position to harness the benefits of both inclusivism and pluralism, hence minimizing the reasons people reject either of the two standing alone as separate worldviews. Typically, inclusivism is criticized for being imperialistic and condescending toward the other, while pluralism is often rejected because it is likely to promote relativism.

The question of whether religious pluralism should be considered only as a de facto (a fact of life) or also as a de jure (in principle) reality has been central to the debate on religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue. Many pluralist theologians like Jacques Dupuis, Peter Phan, Raimon Panikkar, Leonard Swidler, Hans Küng, Diana Eck, and Gerald O’Collins have strongly weighed in on the question of de jure religious pluralism. Being a theologically charged question, Dupuis responds to it with a thorough theological focus and insight. According to Dupuis (2001), the primary theological point that argues in favor of de jure religious pluralism is: “it is not human beings who have first set out in search of God through their history; rather God has set out first to approach them and to trace for them the ‘ways’ over which they may find him.” A scriptural support for his argument comes from the text of the letter to the Hebrews: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and varied ways”
(Heb. 1:1). Using this text Dupuis argues that the covenant in Jesus Christ is not the only means God has used to communicate with his people. He affirms what is a common truth in theological history, namely “God has made various covenants with humankind in history, before making a ‘new covenant’ with them in Jesus Christ.”

It is theologically consistent to argue that non-Christian religions are gifts of God to the peoples of the world, as it was God who initiated those covenants in the first place. Since these religions are products of God’s covenant with people in different cultures and at various times, the proper way to respond to the reality of religious pluralism in the world is to receive multiple religions “gratefully as a positive factor that at the same time attests to the sovereign generosity with which God has manifested himself in many ways to humankind and to the manifold response that human beings have made to God’s self-revelation in different cultures.”

We know that the church does not exhaust the Kingdom of God, since the Kingdom of God encompasses all and is open to all humanity, including those outside the boundaries of Christianity. O’Collins reminds us that in the New Testament scripture, “the incarnate, exalted, and omnipresent Christ was more or less equated with the Kingdom of God,” suggesting therefore, that Christ is as all-encompassing as the Kingdom of God. Our standard Christological theology holds that Christ and his Spirit are intrinsically part of the lives of all people of faith, even if we cannot empirically substantiate it.

For any Christian who has come to appreciate the theological significance of de jure religious pluralism, it becomes theologically in sync to contextualize the role of Christ and his divinity in the life and salvation of non-Christians. According to the Johannine account, Jesus said, “No one gets to the Father but through me” (John 14:6). How then is Christ to be conceived as being part of the religious fulfillment or eternal salvation of peoples of non-Christian faith traditions? It is normative in the Christian theological concept of mainline Christianity that Christ is the savior of all humankind, not only of Christians. The Second Vatican Council by its inclusive soteriology has already addressed and affirmed that people of non-Christian faith traditions do and will make it to heaven if they live godly lives, hence are beneficiaries of the same salvation Christians benefit by their faith orientation.

Inclusive religious pluralistic theology requires that Christians approach de jure religious pluralism with the mindset of inclusivity. O’Collins points out that “innumerable people are drawn to God through Jesus, even though they may remain unaware of this role of Jesus.” Further on, he alludes to the impact of Christ and the Spirit in the lives of people of other faith traditions when he wrote of “the personal presence and power of Jesus and the Spirit, a presence and power that shapes the lives of millions of people who may never in their lifetime become aware of this invisible influence.” At this juncture it is sufficient to say, that Dupuis and O’Collins hinge their concept of inclusive religious pluralism primarily on the person and mystery of Christ. Their inclusive approach comes from their Christological theology, which understands the Christic event as universally applicable, of cosmic dimensions, and absolutely divine. These thoughts resonate with the “Cosmic Christ” of Pierre Teilhard de
Chardin and the “Universal Christophany” of Ramundo Panikkar. According to Panikkar (2004), “Christophany stands for a manifestation of Christ to human consciousness and includes both an experience of Christ and a critical reflection on that experience.”

The Christian understanding and theology of inclusive religious pluralism is not meant to demean or minimize the importance of other faith traditions. Rather it is a Christian way of affirming and validating the religious traditions of the other. It is similar to an African indigenous religious person’s appreciation of the one Christian God by relating it to their understanding of the Creator God. African indigenous religious people who reverence the importance of other faith traditions’ revered personalities convince themselves of the significance of such personalities by associating them with parallel ideas and personalities in their faith traditions. Therefore, inclusive religious pluralism for a Christian is a self-prescribed medication for validating the importance and significance of the living traditions of people of other faith traditions using a model or a parallel totally comprehensible to a Christian and drawn from a Christological theology. For the most part, inclusive pluralist theologians from the Christian tradition are not stating their position as an arrogant or smug attitude against people of other faith traditions but an honest demonstration of their appreciation and recognition of the value of people of other faith traditions.

**Inclusive Religious Pluralism in the Bible**

There are a number of texts in the Bible that suggest an appreciation or recognition of either religious pluralism or inclusive religious pluralism. Many of the biblical texts that allude to universal salvation can be understood theologically as inferring either religious pluralism or inclusive religious pluralism.

For a constructive appreciation of biblical texts with either religious pluralism or inclusive religious pluralism, it is critical and imperative to begin by referencing the same text used by Peter, as reported by Luke, to authenticate the experience of the apostles on the morning of the birth of Christianity, namely, Joel 2:28-29. According to that text, “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.” When Peter referenced that text as a scriptural support for the unique experience and expression of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the apostles who had emerged from the Upper Room that morning, he was validating and authenticating the glossolalia experienced and witnessed to by all who were gathered that morning in Jerusalem. People who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Shavuot, came from different parts of the world of the time. The crowd consisted of people of diverse religious faith traditions, including Jews, proselytes to Judaism, Cretans, and Arabs. Peter was inferring that it is the same Spirit of God known to and appreciated by Judaism that was at work and impacting all present, both the audience and the apostles, regardless of people’s religious, cultural, or ethnic differences.
This scriptural reference from Joel, while pointing toward the restoration coming from
God in the messianic age, also hints at the generosity of God pouring out God’s Spirit on all
people, hence alluding to the inclusiveness of the same Spirit evident in the lives of all people
regardless of their race, nationality, religion, and culture. Therefore, by extension, this text
also reflects the Spirit’s presence in the religions of all people. Peter was not using the text
with an understanding that his new community of faith supersedes or replaces the old or ex-
isting order of faith. It is rather an invitation to the Jews and non-Jews listening to be open
to the fact that God is capable of richly and meaningfully impacting the lives of all people
even against the expectations of men and women who hold the older order as normative and
exclusive.

Prior to Peter’s speech on the morning of the birth of Christianity, Acts 2:1-13 gives an ac-
count of the beginning of Christianity through the experience of the outpouring of the Holy
Spirit on the apostles at the Upper Room in Jerusalem. In an earlier publication, I argued,

One of the highlights of that event based on age-old theological interpretation
is its twist of typology with the Tower of Babel. In this case, the New Testament
Pentecost is the event of the Tower of Babel coming full circle by a theological
contrast. For while God multiplied human language in Genesis 11, the same
God united human language in Acts 2. This time the unity or oneness is not
expressed in human words, but as directed by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is
not about producing one language for all people, but enabling speakers of all
languages to understand simultaneously the one language of God through the
Holy Spirit . . . The spirit simply demonstrated an inclusive pluralism, where all
available human languages are honored and united in the Holy Spirit who ad-
dressed all people gathered through the apostles. The spirit becomes the agent
of inclusive harmony in a pluralist forum.12

In the light of the manifest presence of the Spirit in Acts of Apostles as narrated by Luke,
there are several other accounts of not only the pivotal role of the Spirit in the communities
of Ephesus, Samaria, and Caesarea but also in the lives of non-Jewish and non-Christian indi-
viduals. Two such cases stand out, namely the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch, Acts 8:26-40,
and the conversion of Cornelius and his household, Acts 10:1-11.

In the case of the Ethiopian Eunuch, O’Collins reminds us that this individual is “some-
one who is most probably a Gentile . . . and is more likely ‘a leap to the extreme . . .”13 which
is to suggest, as he reasons, being “an African and a eunuch, the Ethiopian is doubly an out-
sider.”14 The Ethiopian Eunuch does not fit into the mold of people considered as beneficia-
ries of such a rich encounter with God. Whatever became of the Ethiopian Eunuch after his
encounter with Philip is a substantial topic for speculation, but it is quite instructive that the
Lord found the devotion of this man acceptable and worthy of recognition, which necessi-
tates the Lord sending an angel to instruct Philip about the man.15 The same Spirit or Lord
who has been responsible for stirring and directing the ministry of the apostolic church validated the spiritual quest of the Ethiopian Eunuch. The inclusive operation of the Spirit in the lives of all God’s people is significantly highlighted in the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch. The use of Philip (a Jew) by the Spirit to minister to the Ethiopian Eunuch’s spiritual needs further demonstrates the spiritual relationship of all God’s people, regardless of cultural, ethnic, and religious differences.

The event of the conversion of Cornelius and his household, Acts 10:1-48, significantly propelled the mission of the apostolic church to the Gentiles. We are once again presented with the activities of the angel of God and the Spirit concurrently in the lives of both a supposedly bona fide Jew, Peter and some Gentiles, the centurion (Cornelius) and his household. The same God who encountered Peter through a vision also interacted with the centurion. Therefore, the meeting of Peter with Cornelius and his household was scheduled and made possible by the same God and God’s Spirit. Peter was so bamboozled by the whole experience that he made one of his most inspiring statements: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). This statement of itself is one of the clearest expressions of religious pluralism. It is a recognition that the same God indeed is at work in the lives of all men and women regardless of their different ethnicities, cultures, and religions.

A significant passage in Acts of Apostles that points toward inclusive religious pluralism is Paul’s address at the Areopagus in Athens, Acts 17:22-31. Here Paul had a unique opportunity to address some of the respected scholars of the time. In his address Paul shared his appreciation for the religious fervor of the people of the city, but especially lauded the similarity of religious beliefs or religious orientation, which he shares with the people of Athens in these words: “as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23). While not dwelling on analyzing the rhetoric of Paul, which smacks of some arrogance and condescension, it is valid to appreciate the inclusiveness of Paul’s appreciation of Athenian religious devotion to the “unknown god.” Alan Race also alludes to Paul’s positive evaluation of the Athenians as an inclusive appreciation that both the Athenians and Christians are worshipping the same God.16

One of the texts of the gospels, which Christians down the centuries have used to justify an absolutely exclusive privilege toward salvation for Christians is John 14:6, which reads: “Jesus said to him (Thomas), ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” As I argued in an earlier publication, A different but profound theological exegesis of the apparent totalizing and exclusivist text of [John 14:6] is given by John Cobb, highlighting its inclusivist pluralist assumption. Cobb’s approach to this text is based on the Johannine prologue and the divine logos status of Christ. Cobb correlates this logos to the content of the text of Psalm 119:105 (“Your word is a lamp to my
feet and a light to my path”). Based on his argument he diffuses the seeming tension presented in [John 14:6], “No one comes to the Father except through me.” He argues, if we understand that the ‘me’ in question is the word of which we read in the prologue, we need not see this assertion as denying access to God to all who do not relate primarily to the historical Jesus. Since nothing came into being except through the word, and since the word is the light of understanding in all people, it is not surprising that we cannot come to God apart from that word.17

This exegetical analysis by Cobb appropriately reflects an inclusivist pluralist assumption because God’s Word is available to all God’s people and it is through God’s Word expressed in different ways and languages through different religions that God both interacts and shapes the lives of all people.

It is appropriate to conclude this theological analysis of selected biblical references to inclusive religious pluralism by highlighting the very poignant and relevant words of Jesus in the priestly prayer found in John’s Gospel. According to John 17: 9-11 Jesus prayed, “All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name all that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” This prayer of Jesus for his apostles and all followers of God specifically requests “that they may be one as I and the Father are one” (v. 11). Oneness here can be understood to imply the inclusiveness Jesus recommends for all followers of God.

Inclusive Religious Pluralism as an Asset in Pluralistic Contexts

Since context is of critical importance in the application of IRD, it is relevant to stress that inclusive religious pluralism is an ideal theological mindset for non-homogenous contexts. Many of you here today come from parts of the world where Catholicism or Christianity is not the only religion. In fact, some of you come from parts of the world where Christianity is a minority religion among other religions. For you, inclusive religious pluralism is an ideal mindset to have in your interaction and relationship with people of other faith traditions. Even if you come from countries like Portugal, Spain, Italy, the Philippines, or countries of South America, you know that wishing that your communities would not accommodate other religious tradition is a mirage. It is not only that that we may never recover that world of
Christendom, but that we are going to further experience that people’s choice of faith will continue to get more complex and even more diversified. Many of you might already know that the number of Catholics or Christians with multiple religious identities is on the rise (that is definitely true here in Africa). In addition, the number of religions practiced today continues to increase.

Most of Africa has three dominant religions: Christianity, Islam, and Indigenous religions. For effective dialogue between Christians and people of different faith traditions to occur in Africa, it is imperative that Christians adopt an appropriate theological worldview that will accommodate and promote dialogue with these religions. Regardless of arguments to the contrary (which we may find in parts of the Middle East, Iran, Japan, China), societies today are normatively pluralistic—consisting of cultural, ideological, racial, and religious pluralisms.

It follows that we will simply be talking to ourselves if the opening line or the strong argument of our evangelization is to convince people that only baptized Christians are smart, live longer, go to heaven, live a happy or fulfilled life, or are wealthier. People are no longer easily convinced that only Christians are the so-called new “chosen people” of God. Or even to repeat the old worn refrain which claims that “only Christianity teaches you about the one true God.” Vatican II has already debunked all those claims. The question then is how do we appropriately relate with other religions in such a way that we do not act or speak condescendingly or arrogantly to or about them? This question is what inclusive religious pluralism substantively addresses.

Application of the Four Forms of Dialogue in Different Mission Contexts

Dialogue and Mission from the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions introduced the four different forms of dialogue, while Dialogue and Proclamation of 1991 further endorsed it. These documents remind us that IRD is not just about people coming together in a round table discussion about religious differences and commonalities. Interreligious dialogue entails more human activities and interactions. The four different forms of dialogue are:

- Dialogue of Life
- Dialogue of Action
- Dialogue of Theological Exchange
- Dialogue of Religious Experience

In your different contexts, it is important to not only recognize the viability and value of these forms but also to identify which ones are more successful. I will like to highlight the first two, dialogue of life and dialogue of action.

These two are powerful tools for integration because they bring people to bond more naturally and sustainably. The dialogue of life needs to be actively promoted and encouraged in every religiously diverse society and community. As we speak, there are parts of the world
where this is a major deal breaker and its absence makes peaceful co-existence for people of diverse religions difficult to achieve. I think of the situation in parts of France, Belgium, Northern Nigeria, Bosnia, Sarajevo, the Central African Republic, and the Republic of Sudan. Many communities in these different parts of the world need a significant measure of dialogue of life to heal and become more accommodating of religious and cultural differences.

If you explore the possibilities of the dialogue of action between a Catholic Church and an Islamic organization in the Gambia for instance, there is a high possibility of success given the history of Christian-Muslim relations in that country. I recommend that the Church can begin to explore how to work with Muslims to address a number of social needs, like running a co-op, running schools or health clinics, soup kitchens, shelter, etc. The first thing to do is to identify some of the common good needs of the community you have in mind, identify one that you think will attract the support of both Catholics and Muslims in the area and one you can collaborate effectively to serve the community’s needs. If it is a farming community, you can consider a co-op that provides agricultural services or materials to the community and have both a Catholic parish and a Muslim community collaborate to sponsor and run the coop. This will involve pooling both financial and human resources from both communities. The human resources can include both volunteers and paid officers from both communities.

**Conclusion**

Today, dialogue is not only an imperative for peaceful coexistence of the multiple religions that inhabit most cosmopolitan cities, it also provides the most creative way for mission success. Through the four forms of dialogue, the fundamental requirements for dialogue can be achieved, namely an honest and clear articulation of one’s faith and faith claims; respect for the faith claims of the other; genuine openness to differences of faiths; an embrace of commonalities and collaboration to promote a common vision and shared goals. These fundamentals of dialogue require that a Christian state her or his claims of faith and values of Christianity; the core ingredients in the proclamation of the Christian message. The message of Christianity will definitely highlight what St. Paul identifies as the gifts of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22). Therefore, through dialogue the core message of Christianity can be healthily preserved and passed on. However, in the spirit of dialogue, a Christian not only freely shares his cherished good news of faith, he is also amenable to receiving the messages from the faith-filled lives of people of other faith traditions he is in dialogue with. Every interlocutor engaged in interreligious dialogue knows that one of the ends of dialogue is the openness of interlocutors to be converted to God, albeit dialogue is not actively designed for that end. 18

The assumption in dialogue for people to seek to be converted to God recognizes that any conversion should be a voluntary and conscientious act from the individuals concerned as directed by the spirit of God. Therefore, a dialogue-driven mission of Christianity today should not only promote the most healthy, conscientious, and progressive conversion to Christianity,
but also enable the values and teachings of Christianity to have a more extensive reach and impact in the lives of people beyond those who nominally identify as Christians.

In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul states: “I was not called to baptize, I was called to preach the good news.” Paul is not denouncing the practice of baptism, but as you all fully recognize, he was clearly stating that the primary duty he has is to preach the good news. Therefore, our pre-occupation should be more about how faithful we are at spreading the good news and the impact of the good news on the lives of those who receive it than simply how many people sign up as members of our church.

Today, mission presupposes that the old political principles based on colonial, imperial, and neo-colonial control that superfluously privileged a Western cultured Christianity to spread across the world has crumbled, thanks to the more global influence of democracy, egalitarianism, dignity and the authenticity of all cultures and religions. In this new world order, the language of hate, demagoguery, supersessionism, demonizing of non-Christian religions, and fear should not only be unacceptable but also obsolete. People do not have to convert to a Christian church anymore because it is the only guaranteed access to Western education, provision of healthcare, improved quality of life, and job guarantee. Today responsible governments and civil organizations, including other religious agencies, and NGOs, should adequately and effectively provide those services and support. It should indeed be one of the goals of the church today to ensure that the government organizations that receive funds from the public for such services are truly held accountable to the people or the cause they serve. Therefore, enticing people to convert to Christianity needs to be much more refined and spiritual. Above all, Christian mission should no longer be exclusively measured by the mere numerical growth of Christians, but more importantly how widely the message and values of Christianity impact society and the people in society.

Many of you here can attest to what I am alluding to and calling for in your own mission situations. Let me demonstrate what I mean by using the example of the Gambia, where Christians are only about 4% of the total population of the country and Muslims constitute about ninety-five percent of the population. However, because of the impact of Christian education and other charitable mission activities, most Muslims in the Gambia have not only embraced many of the Christian ideals but also respected and appreciated their Christian neighbors. That was clearly manifested when the people of the Gambia voted Yahya Jammeh out of office after his attempt to declare the country an Islamic state.

If Christian values become globally observed, you as agents of mission and evangelization would have succeeded in setting up a global society guided by the norms and values of the Kingdom of God, where people will be guided by the same moral obligations stemming from the gospel as laid out in Matthew 25:35-40: “I was hungry, you fed me. I was thirsty, you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, you welcomed me. I was naked, you clothed me. I was sick, you took care of me. I was in prison, you visited me. As long as you did this to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me. Come you that are blessed by my father, share in the inheritance of the kingdom prepared for you before time began.”
Let me end with the words of Pope Francis in his first apostolic exhortation:

God’s word is unpredictable in its power. The Gospel speaks of a seed which, once sown, grows by itself, even as the farmer sleeps (Mark 4:26-29). The Church has to accept this unruly freedom of the word, which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking.20
Endnotes

1. For more details about the three worldviews, see Marinus Iwuchukwu (2009), Media Ecology and Religious Pluralism, 83-86.

2. For more information about inclusive pluralism, see Marinus Iwuchukwu (2013). Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Postcolonial Northern Nigeria, 161-166.


4. Ibid.

5. In addition to Jacques Dupuis' significant advocacy for inclusive religious pluralism, Marinus Iwuchukwu, in his seminal work focuses extensively on advancing this theological assumption and argues strongly for Christians to adopt inclusive pluralist mentality in dialogic encounters with non-Christian religions. See Iwuchukwu (2010), Media Ecology and Religious Pluralism.

6. O'Collins, Salvation for All, 259.

7. LG, 16.

8. O'Collins, Salvation for All, 259

9. Ibid.


11. O'Collins appropriately argues that the positive appreciation of people of other religions received in biblical history are despite such people belonging to religions that were either unidentified or different from Judeo-Christian religions. See O'Collins, Salvation for All – God’s Other People, 54-58.


14. Ibid., 149.

15. The point in citing this episode by O'Collins and in this article is not to theologically extrapolate the content of the scripture text he was reading or even that he was reading a Hebrew scripture. The point is to underscore God’s recognition and appreciation of the spiritual efforts of this religious outsider.


17. See Iwuchukwu, Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Postcolonial Northern Nigeria, 161-162. However, for more about religiously diverse interpretation of some Christian scriptural texts see John B. Cobb and Ward M. McAfee (eds), The Dialogue Comes of Age, 14ff. I profoundly apologize to my readers that in that previous publication there is a typographical error that repeatedly quotes John 14:16 instead of John 14:6.

18. Scholars like Peter Phan, Michael Fitzgerald, and Jacques Dupuis all refer to the conversion to God as the ultimate goal of interreligious dialogue. See Fitzgerald, Interfaith Dialogue; Phan, The Joy of Religious Pluralism, Dupuis, Christianity and the Religions; pp. 234f.
19. This paper is not calling for an end to all the great common good deeds Christian Churches have provided to different economically deprived or indigent communities. No, it is only asking that Christians refrain from using those as baits for conversion to Christianity or the catch for why people should convert to Christianity.


**References**


