

THE NEED FOR ECUMENICAL UNITY TO ACHIEVE GENUINE INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Virgilius Kawama

Faculty of Theology

Catholic University of Eastern Africa

Nairobi, Kenya

virgokaw@yahoo.com / Virgilius.kawama@mafr.org

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.33587.09768

Abstract

Religion lies at the centre of the lives of humanity. Christianity and Islam as religions are widely scattered family of denominations. This reality of having divisions within the same religion calls for unity before venturing into interreligious dialogue. Once Christians and Muslims are united within their religions, they will enjoy working cooperation and more understanding among themselves, they will experience a harmonious cohabitation and a chance to peacefully live together. This article, “The need for Ecumenical Unity in order to achieve Genuine Interreligious Dialogue” explains how people of different faiths can be brought together and live together peacefully, despite threats and risks posed by religious instability. The author, a Zambian, who has worked with the Muslims in Nigeria for ten years, believes that if people are to enjoy a righteousness of life, they are to respect the mission and importance of interreligious dialogue, and be ready to serve God through humanity. For without genuine interreligious dialogue that leads to a change of heart and subsequently leading to co-existence, our communities will remain in upheavals and underdeveloped. Using a narrative approach the study finding reveal that ecumenical unity and interreligious dialogue must be genuine and practical to bring forth the fruits of togetherness.

Keywords: Christians, Muslims, Dialogue, Ecumenism, Interreligious, and Unity.

Introduction

Mainly, the Catholic Churches are situated in the environment where protestant churches and mosques are available. This co-existence creates fertile land for ecumenism and

interreligious dialogue. Through working for ecumenical unity and genuine interreligious dialogue, a person can discover that he does not possess the truth in a perfect and total way but can walk together with others towards that goal. Christians and Muslims together “make up about one half of the inhabitants of the world. It is obvious that relations between these two groups will be important not only for them but also for the rest of the world”³⁵. Nevertheless, Christians and Muslims within their religions need to be united first before approaching each other for proper interfaith exchange. Christians are to work for Christian unity first so that they can face the Muslims as united and not divided body of Christ. United we stand, divided we fall. Mutual affirmation, reciprocal correction and fraternal exchange experienced in ecumenical unity encounter and genuine interreligious dialogue can lead the partners into interpersonal communion. Religious experience and outlooks can be purified and enriched in this process of encounter. The different perceptions that people have towards other denominations can be verified. People can work and pray together even though they may disagree on some issues.

Developmental Understanding of Christian Unity

Once the development of Christian unity is well apprehended, the Christians will be more united and speak with the same voice before people of different faith beliefs and practices. The call for Christian unity is found in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Church Teaching.

In the Old Testament there is an emphasis on universalistic idea of God’s reign. The book of Ezekiel reports, “Now, son of man, take a single stick, and write on it: Judah and those Israelites who are associated with him. Then take another stick and write on it: Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with him. Then join the two sticks together, so that they form one stick in your hand” (Ezekiel 37: 16-17). Bringing two sticks into one, two nations into one, or two people into one, entails desired unity. Thus Otuibe writes, “in the symbolic action with two sticks, he envisions that in the sovereign purpose of God, the divided and scattered people are destined to return to Israel. It is in the land that they will once more become a single people, a body, a community to be ruled by one king”³⁶. Ezekiel continued that, “I will make them one nation upon the land, in the mountains of Israel and there shall be one prince for them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms” (Ezekiel 37: 22). The image of Prophet Ezekiel referring to the situation of God's people at that time, and

³⁵Machael L. Fitzgerald and John Borelli. *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View*, 86.

³⁶Otuibe, Chris-Angelo, *The Body of Christ: The Old Testament Background*, in Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, 45.

using the simple sign of two broken sticks which are first divided and then joined together, expressed the divine will to gather from all sides, the members of his scattered people.

The New Testament bring out very clearly the fact that for Jesus, religion and faith, were not the exclusive privilege of the Jews. Jesus' teaching on unity is also very motivating, "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10:30). This implies that the person who breaks the unity and promote religious exclusivity in the world is acting against Christ's mission. We hear again that, "Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God" (Jn. 11:51-52). The Letter to the Ephesians explains, Jesus "made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh, abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims, that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body" (Eph. 2:14-16).

The Vatican Council noted with concern that division amongst Christians "openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the gospel to every creature"³⁷. The Good news Christ handed over to the first disciples was meant for all humankind and not to specific group of people. The people of God should have ecumenical hearts and minds. They are to work for communion. Despite the difficulties and uncertainties, even the lack of belief, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue is the way of the Catholic Church. It is the responsibility of the Catholic Church to work for and look for the unity of all God's flock.

Working for Christian Unity

Every Christian, regardless of whichever denomination one belongs to, bears the responsibility of working for the authentic restoration of Christian unity both spiritually and physically. It is true that Christian unity "has not been a great success and the mushrooming of independent churches makes the task even more difficult"³⁸. However, if we are to involve ourselves into interfaith encounters, we ought to understand ourselves better as Christians before we start learning about other religions.

Jesus prayed that, "they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us" (Jn. 17:21). Jesus' prayer for unity does not only encompass all human beings but also God. He wants humankind to be incorporated in the unity that exists between God the Father and God the Son. I can share what is mine, so also the other, just as God the Father and God the Son does, in sharing their lives they become united. By

³⁷Vatican II. Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1.

³⁸ Richard Nnyombi. *Islam-Christian Relations in Kenya*, 162.

sharing the experiences, I may be touched, but also touch the partner in the manner that what differentiates us becomes the source of unity between us. Once we experience mutual enrichment, we shall appreciate the values of ecumenical unity.

The negative experiences when working for Christian unity usually become the source of discouragements. They portray the image that Christianity is a “divided family with conflicting beliefs, standard of beliefs and introversions in character”³⁹. They trigger fear and distrust among the partners, thereby creating gaps among themselves that other religions take advantage of. The problem is that some followers of different denominations are so much attached to their churches’ beliefs that affect the ecumenical atmosphere, their relationships, and the extent to which they can go on discussing some matters of faith. Sometimes, there are tensions, confusions, and competitions as they try to protect their self-claimed absolute truths.

Some partners in ecumenism lack the spirit of openness. Their intentions are not known. The divisions of the past “have caused hurt, resentment and suspicion between one group of Christians and another”⁴⁰. Where there is no openness but distrust only, the people cannot work together. People live in fear with each other thus affecting the efforts for Christian unity. This fear, lack of openness and trust within the religion generates openings that facilitates ease entrance by other religions and capitalize on these weak points for their own benefits.

Positive Impact of Ecumenical Unity

Ecumenism is a necessity in today’s world. Ecumenism can bring people together regardless of their faith rootedness. It can make the partners in encounter ready to learn about other faith beliefs and challenge themselves to deepen their own beliefs. It can be a source of strength of their faith in God that leads to personal experience of inner liberation. The partners can easily discover the importance of knowing each other and to see one another as brother and sister. Once they are convinced of brotherhood, people can approach each other in times of joy and sorrow. In this way, they are making the Gospel values more credible in the eyes of those who are searching for God through witness and ministries. In the words of Wambutda, “The purpose of Christian unity is to manifest to

³⁹ Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, 18.

⁴⁰ Russell, William, *Call and Response: The Call to Christian Unity*, 25.

the world that it is God who sent Jesus Christ to redeem the world. The bond of that unity is love by which the world would identify us”⁴¹.

Due to ecumenical unity, people involved in the process are able to discover tremendous things that help them experience personal conversion. They start seeing things differently and possibly more affirming than they thought it could be. They are able to understand that ecumenism is simply an exchange of views, beliefs, and opinions between two equals with trust, confidence and openness. Ecumenism is not an outpouring of one’s own position, opinion or an intellectual argument in which one tries to refute the position of the other and thereby stating that, only what I hold is true and the other is false, and all the fullness of truth and redemption is in my church, and other partner has to accept my church’s faith and beliefs in order to be saved. The partners will realize that they are true sons and daughters of the same Father. They will be able to eat from the same table in love and respect. They will confirm that Christian unity is the will of Christ, the founder of Christianity.

Christians will stop thinking that their church beliefs are superior to other churches’ beliefs. They will stop judging other churches based on the values and standards of their own churches, assuming rejection of differences and a belief in the superiority of a dominant church or supporting and advocating for a single church. They will believe in “the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in forging unity and solidarity among the different churches”⁴². People will understand that it is not a good practice of maintaining a single church and suppressing other churches in a place. They will develop the spirit of acceptance, appreciation, utilization, and celebration of similarities and differences that make different churches mingle freely, peacefully, equitably, and encourage co-existence. They will “begin to listen to each other and to read one another’s books”⁴³. This will promote the spirit of collaboration and support dialogue with one another without having to sacrifice individual particular identities. They will be more concerned about the common good within their locality, geographical and physical proximity among the churches that facilitate dialogue and exchanges. Christians will realize that we need each other because “the tasks of the Body of Christ for the world are too serious and too large for even the largest Christian community to meet alone”⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Wambutda, D.N., Insight in the New Testament concerning Unity in the Body of Christ, in Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, 61.

⁴² Mozia, Michael Ifeanyi, The Roman Catholic Perspective, in Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, 46.

⁴³ J.M Gaudeul. *Encounters & Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History*, 183.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Gros, Eamon McManus, and Ann Rigs, *Introduction to Ecumenism*, 110.

Necessity of Ecumenical Unity for Genuine Interreligious Dialogue

Religious diversity is a visible reality in the world today. Ecumenical unity is a necessity for genuine interreligious dialogue. Christianity and Islam, “whose doctrines and teachings transcend racial, ethnic and cultural boundaries are challenged to counteract those forces aiming at dividing people on those lines. The two communities of faith are called to work hand in hand to bring peace and unity among different ethnic and cultural groups”⁴⁵. For both “Christians and Muslims interreligious dialogue is not an option but a duty demanded by the necessity of peaceful co-existence”⁴⁶. However, this peaceful co-existence to be realised, the Christians are to be at peace and united within their religion as well as the Muslims. This is because you cannot give what you do not have. If we are to dialogue with other religions genuinely, we ought to commence within our Christian religion so as to have a common voice before we approach those unique faith beliefs and expressions. There is wisdom in the saying that “If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go with others”. Genuine interreligious dialogue for effective living and working demands our united common approach as Christians. The Catholics alone cannot do much.

Christianity and Islam “are not only religions with numerous followers; both religions also have a universalist outlook, and have spread worldwide”⁴⁷. People of different faith beliefs should come together to bring the hearts closer to one another. Each one of us has to approach ecumenism and interreligious dialogue with an open mentality, an enlarged heart, a frank and sincere concern for the other. Emphasising on the necessity of ecumenism, Oshitelu states that, “It is not only denominational barrier and bigotry that is supposed to be overcome in the Church, but any other barrier that does not put Christ’s teaching on unity of the human race into practice whether economic, social, political, religious, or ethnic”⁴⁸. The first purpose of our involvement in ecumenism and interreligious dialogue should not be to convert the other, not to refute the other or merely to know the other and his point of view, but to have a genuine brotherly social and spiritual interaction that promotes the economical, political and humankind general growth. Once we have a genuine love for one another, we will find it easy to involve ourselves in interreligious dialogue. When we are united within the Christian circle, we shall be able to be united with people of other religions for the common good. We shall be able to establish the basic values of tolerance, pluralism and dialogue.

⁴⁵ Richard Nnyombi. *Islam-Christian Relations in Kenya*, 162.

⁴⁶ Mathew Thomas Thazhathukunnel. *Interreligious Dialogue at Grassroot Level*, 100.

⁴⁷ Machael L. Fitzgerald and John Borelli. *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View*, 86.

⁴⁸ Oshitelu, G.A., *The Ecumenical Movement: A Historical and Theological Perspective*, in Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, 77.

We can grow only when we are open to the other, listen to the other and to be fraternally corrected by the other, for we are neither self-sufficient nor individuals who are having the autonomy. In the letter to the Philippians, St Paul prays that, “complete my Joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing” (Phil. 2: 2). St Paul’s desire is to be one in Mind and Heart, to be one in fellowship, to be one in the breaking of the bread and to be one in prayer as moved by the same love of God. We are to become “living witnesses to Christ, fully committed to his Church and to the restoration of unity among all his followers. We will grow in our own faith, and we will help to break down the barriers that have kept Christians divided from each other in the past”⁴⁹.

The children of God should always put Jesus Christ on the centre, for He is a central ground that unifies them regardless of who they are. This will make it possible for all of them from different churches to move forward to Christ and meet others in Him rather than bringing them to a specific faith belief. The believers will know that “being in Christ is all that matters in Christians’ corporation existence and where party Spirit exists, this should be turned into partnership and not rivalry”⁵⁰. When the partners in encounter put Christ on the centre, they will automatically be motivated towards Him, and the closer they come to Christ, the closer they come to one another. And the more they come to discover that each partner has both material and spiritual gifts to offer the other. They help one another discover these gifts and promote their growth for the benefit of all humankind so that each one may grow better in the life of faith. This same strategy should be applied in the encounters between Christians and other religions for the peaceful conversation.

We are invited to partner with other sister churches and with other religions so that we can promote unity among believers, understand and appreciate others better, remove mistrust which often leads to division, provide services to people more effectively, convince the world about the unity of the children of God, and fight sinful structures together that hinder full human growth. In order to do this we must be ready to work for ecumenical unity and interreligious dialogue, and to face the changes taking place. This calls for a willingness to change, to give up old categories, to search for new expressions and to accept new insights. To enter the new field of the religious encounter is a challenge and a risk. The religious person is required to enter this arena without prejudices and preconceived solutions, knowing well he may in fact have to lose a particular belief for

⁴⁹ Russell, William, *Eighty Principles of Ecumenism*, 79.

⁵⁰ Wambutda, D.N., *Insight in the New Testament concerning Unity in the Body of Christ*, in Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, 60.

what God intends. He enters into encounter ready to be transformed and to deepen his faith.

In genuine interreligious dialogue, it is God, who speaks through the partners, challenges them, shatters their securities, and calls them to conversion and commitment. In interreligious dialogue the partners are expected to prepare themselves to have the deep awareness of God and be influenced by Him alone with His unconditional love for humanity. Because those engaged in interreligious dialogue are equal, they are open to critics from the other faith belief. This situation leads the partners to a purification of their own beliefs as well as to a reinterpretation or rejection of all the oppressive aspects of their faith heritage. One who is a member of the particular religion may not easily understand the negative aspects or his religion imperfections unless he has the openness to the critique of faith. No religion or no individual can claim to have monopoly of the Truth.

For interreligious dialogue to be fruitful the partners have to accept each other as equals. There should not be any feeling of superiority or conviction that others have only to receive from us and accept all our views. This lays emphasis on the fact that we are all persons created in the excellent image of God and hence equal, and that we have to learn from others and draw closer to the Truth. We should “feel love and respect for our fellow Christians in other churches so strongly that to be separated from them should arouse in us a sense of pain and loss”⁵¹. This same strong love for our fellow Christians should be extended to our brethren in other religions because they too are the image of God. Acceptance of the equality of partners promotes transparency, mutual understanding and enrichment, communion and collaboration.

Conclusion

In this article, an attempt is made to explain the need for ecumenical unity in order to achieve genuine interreligious dialogue. In order to achieve genuine interreligious dialogue, firstly, Christians need to go through a process of personal conversion to the notion that all people and all faiths seek truth and have valuable insights. Secondly, there should be an abandonment of the widespread presumption that one’s own personal faith or that of the denomination to which one adheres is of absolute value and excludes other responses. Thirdly, there should be an approach to other religions that is unconditional, open and sincere. Fourthly, Christians should challenge themselves to work seriously on factors that militate against openness to other embodiments of faith such as ambiguity and lack of conviction about one’s own stance, being so attached to one’s traditional beliefs and practices that any change or new thinking or openness to new expressions of faith

⁵¹ Yarnold, Edward, *In Search of Unity: Ecumenical Principles and Prospects*, 37.

becomes impossible. In agreement with Edward, “We cannot be true Catholics, we cannot be true Christians, without being dedicated to the search for the full, visible and corporate expression of unity of Christ’s followers”⁵². This unity for Catholics should go beyond the walls of Christianity to people of other religions like Islam.

Bibliography

- Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.). *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*. Lagos: Sceptre Prints Limited, 2000.
- Christian Community Bible: Catholic Pastoral Edition. Quezon: Claretian Publications, 1997.
- Fitzgerald, Michael L. and John Borelli. *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View*. New York: Orbis Books, 2006.
- Flannery, Austin (ed.). *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. Mumbai: St Pauls, 2007.
- Gaudeul, J.M. *Encounters & Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History*. Roma: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d’Islamastica (P.I.S.A.I), 2000.
- Jeffrey Gros, Eamon McManus, and Ann Rigs. *Introduction to Ecumenism*. New York: Paulist Press, 1998.
- Mozia, Michael Ifeanyi. “The Roman Catholic Perspective”, in Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*. Lagos: Sceptre Prints Limited, 2000.
- Nnyombi, Richard. *Islam-Christian Relations in Kenya*. Roma: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabie d’Islamastica (P.I.S.A.I), 1997.
- Oshitelu, G.A. “The Ecumenical Movement: A Historical and Theological Perspective” in Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*. Lagos: Sceptre Prints Limited, 2000.
- Otuibe, Chris-Angelo. “The Body of Christ: The Old Testament Background”, in Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*. Lagos: Sceptre Prints Limited, 2000.
- Russell, William, *Call and Response: The Call to Christian Unity*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005.
- , *Eighty Principles of Ecumenism*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005.
- Thazhathukunnel, Mathew Thomas. *Interreligious Dialogue at Grassroots Level*. Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2013.
- The African Bible. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008.
- Wambutda, D.N. “Insight in the New Testament concerning Unity in the Body of Christ”, in Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*. Lagos: Sceptre Prints Limited, 2000.
- Yarnold, Edward. *In Search of Unity: Ecumenical Principles and Prospects*. England: St Paul Publications, 1989.

⁵² Yarnold, Edward, *In Search of Unity: Ecumenical Principles and Prospects*, 33.