CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION ON THE NOTION OF MISSION AS RECONCILIATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF CATHOLIC CHURCH’S DIALOGUE WITH AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGION

Dr. Chinwe M. A. Nwoye
Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science and Sociology
The University of Dodoma, Dodoma, Tanzania

This paper takes as its point of reference the insightful contribution by Langmead (2008), read against the background of the current effort by the Catholic Church to promote constructive dialogue and reconciliation between herself and African Indigenous Religion. The terms, African Indigenous Religion, African Traditional Religion and African Religion will be used interchangeably in the paper, to reflect variety of ways of naming that religion as understood in the literature. The discussion is designed to recognize and emphasize not only the continuities and discontinuities implicated in such a development but also by identifying the persisting subversions, obstacles and tensions that appear to threaten such a process.

For example, many critical church historians and other informed observers view the current signs of positive attitude of the high-ranking authorities of the Catholic Church towards the members of African Indigenous Religion, as a dramatic break from history. This should be so when it is remembered that the same Catholic Church, like every other Christian mission group in Africa, in conjunction with many western European scholars, traders and explorers had all along viewed the Indigenous Religion of Africa in a very negative light. Consequently, there is, perhaps, no religion that has been misconceived, misrepresented and misunderstood more than African Indigenous Religion such that even educated Africans, influenced by their European education and missionary activities in the continent, have been known to refer to the Indigenous Religion as animism, paganism, and fetishism, all of which make reconciliation between the two religions difficult. What is argued in this paper is that unless such foundational negative attitude by the
Catholic Church and other agents of the Christian missions are challenged and dismantled, the full value of Longmead’s (2008) innovative contribution cannot be used in favor of promoting reconciliation between religions throughout the world.

As a way of putting the present discussion in its proper perspective, therefore, it would be useful to start with some highlights of some of those earlier discourses of negative and dismissive attitudes to African Indigenous Religion that had prevailed in Western literature.

In line with the above, Mugambi, (1989:36) reports that:

The earliest written accounts about African Religion were by European explorers or travelers and missionaries in the 18th and 19th Centuries. These were mostly based on unreliable and inadequate sources and distorted views much coloured (sic) by the prevailing cultural-racial prejudices. The writers were influenced to a great extent on what and how they wrote by the popular stories and beliefs already circulating in their own home countries about those they derogatorily designated as “primitive” or “savage” races, contrasting them sharply with themselves, that is, the “civilized” races. Africa, South of Sahara, was referred to as the “Dark Continent”. This term emphasized the fact that little was known by European peoples, of this huge continent, especially its interior until late this (last) century. But the term “Dark Continent” also carried another meaning in the minds of Westerners, that is, “darkness” in terms of extreme backwardness and primitivity in all realms of life, including social, economic, cultural and religious.

Indeed according to Mugambi, (1989) a good illustration of these distorted and prejudiced views of African Religion by early Western writers, including Christian missionaries, could be seen in the often-quoted statement by the famous explorer, Sir Samuel Baker. The statement was made by Baker, (1867) in Mugambi, (1989:36) while he was presenting a report to the Ethnological Society of London, on the Nilotes of Southern Sudan where he indicated that:

Without any exception, they (Africans) are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of idolatry, nor is the darkness of their mind enlightened by even a ray of superstition. Their mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms their puny world.

Nyaundi, (2003: 294) corroborating Mugambi’s views set above, states that “when Christian missionaries came to Africa, they saw the Continent as being ‘dark’ because, allegedly, it lacked
Christian ‘light’.” As he put it, “the Presbyterian Mission which settled at Thogoto, in the central province of Kenya, described themselves as the ‘the Church of the Torch,’ meaning the church which possessed ‘the light’ to light up the darkness which Africa was perceived to be.”

Mbiti, (1969:9), similarly, observes that other writers have tried to study or refer to African Indigenous Religion in terms of magic. In his view:

Some consider magic to have evolved before religion, as man’s attempt to manipulate the unseen world. When man failed to control natural objects and phenomena by means of magic, he then resigned himself to forces beyond him, which in turn led to a belief in God as the Source of all power. As such, magic is considered to be the mother of religion.

Against the above, Idowu, (1971: 86) went ahead to distinguish and outline three major stages of Western European misconceptions of the Indigenous Religion as follows: “the stage of ignorance, the stage of doubt and resisted illumination, and the stage of intellectual dilemma.” These three stages, he claims overlap and are still present, though in a less vicious form.

The stage of ignorance, according to Idowu, covers the period when Europeans practically knew nothing about Africa and her people. To them, at that time, Africa was a dark continent filled with savages who had no history, no past, no culture and therefore no religion. Indeed, for Idowu, (1971:86) Nineteenth Century European missionaries looked upon Africa as the very stronghold of Satan. He gave an example of the evangelist Robert Moffat who carried out missionary activities in Southern Africa (among the Hotentots, Bechuanas and the Bushmen) who asserted that, “Satan has erased every trace of religious impression from their minds.” Continuing, the same, Idowu observes that Africa’s so-called spiritual bankruptcy finds further expression in the Christian propagandist popular saying that, “The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone.” (pg 86). Or indeed that savages and primitive people have no intellectual capacity to conceptualize theologically; hence they cannot have any knowledge of God. This is the kind of perverse ignorance which, according to Idowu, (See Smith, 1961: 1)
could be found reflected in the statement attributed to Emil Ludwig, namely, “How can the untutored African conceive of God? Belief in Deity is a philosophical concept of which savages are incapable of framing.”

Idowu, (1971:87) observes that the period of doubt and resisted illumination emerged with the efforts of honest researchers who challenged claims such as that pre-literate people had no concept of God, and came to the conclusion that “there is no society in the world, however primitive, without any knowledge of God.” This corrective position, according to Idowu, could be noted in the book by Andrew Lang entitled, the *Making of Religion*. Idowu, however, laments that this simple home truth was doubted and resisted with such vehemence by other scholars of the time. These dissenting scholars had argued that such religious knowledge among primitive people as mentioned by Lang must certainly have come from somewhere, outside Africa. And Islam and Christianity were invoked to account for the genesis of African religious ideas.

According to Leo Frobenius in Idowu, (1973:87), for instance, he found an Islamic connection even before he set foot in Africa. “Before the introduction of genuine faith … by the Arabs, the natives had no, strictly speaking, Religion.” Ellis (in Idowu, above) also added his voice when he said, “The Supreme Being is really borrowed from Europeans and only thinly disguised.” The doubt and resisted illumination, according to Idowu, also took the form of challenging the credentials of those honest researchers rather than those who made the false claims in the first instance.

The era of intellectual dilemma, according to Idowu, was a direct result of the onslaught of writers in the era of doubt and resisted illumination. According to him, academic and cultural pride would not allow the westerners to do away with preconceived ideas and pet theories, forcing them to use evasive means to escape from their intellectual dilemma of seeing concrete evidence against their position and yet refusing to acquiesce to that evidence. In that way,
spurious and derogatory terminologies were continued to be invented to designate the Indigenous Religion in an obvious attempt by them to fit theory to facts. Such terminologies include the idea of African Indigenous Religion as primitive, animism, paganism, idolatry and so forth, all still staying in the minds of most Africans till today.

It was against this background, according to Qarcoopome, (1987), that Idowu had concluded that it was thus to inform, to educate and to disabuse the minds of Africans and especially Westerners, including members of the Christian missions, that the study of African Indigenous Religion was considered by some emerging African intellectuals as a matter of urgent necessity in the contemporary world if there could be opportunity for promoting reconciliation between the two Religions.

**The Catholic Church’s view of African Traditional Religion as Satanic and Superstitious**

This section is meant, among other things, to show that apart from the above secular accounts of the negative, derogatory and dismissive attitudes of European scholars and missionaries to the idea and dignity of African Indigenous Religion, a close study of the Church of Rome’s attitude to the same Indigenous Religion does present a similar negative attitude and dismissive trend. In this context, three instances can suffice to concretize this trend; and here we would refer to that era in the Catholic Church during the pre-Vatican II period when references to African Indigenous Religion in church documents were not generally positive. What they propagated about the Indigenous Religion at that time corroborated the uncomplimentary notion of the Religion in the Western press.

In this context the first church document to be mentioned is the encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII titled *Catholicæ Ecclessiae* of 1890. The second document is the apostolic letter of Pope Benedict XV *Maximum Illud* of 1919; and the third, the encyclical letter of Pope Pius XI
(Rerum Ecclesiae) of 1926. Isizoh, (2001: 5) points out that, “apart from the fact that these documents came from the highest authority of the Catholic Church on earth, they indicated the theological/pastoral direction that all Christians, especially the missionaries, were meant to follow.” And their impact on the lives of Africans to whom they were directed was grave and long lasting.

Thus, Pope Leo XIII, while urging the missionaries to go beyond protecting slaves to stopping the evil practice of the slave trade expressed his ‘apostolic concern’ for the missionary activities in Africa. And writing about Africans in Catholicae Ecclesiae (see Isizoh, 2001:6), Pope Leo XIII instructed the missionaries to “bathe those inhabitants living in darkness and blind superstition with the light of the divine truth, by which they can become co-heirs with us of the Kingdom of God.” Thus, for Pope Leo XIII, Africans were a people of darkness who require, as explained earlier by the Presbyterian Mission which settled at Thogoto, in the central province of Kenya, would say: the torch of the church must light up the darkness which is Africa.

In much the same negative tone, Pope Benedict XV in his Encyclical, Maximum Illud (see Isizoh, 2001:6), referred to the followers of non-Christian religions as:

The numberless heathen who are still sitting in the shadows of death. According to recent Statistics, their number accounts to a thousand million... These peoples stood in need of the benefits of divine redemption. It was the task of bishops to light the torch for those sitting in the shadows of death, and open the gate of heaven to those who rush to their destruction. Religious superiors and heads of Congregations engaged in missionary work were requested after having successfully accomplished their task and converted some nations from unhallowed superstition to Christian faith and have founded there a church with sufficient prospects, they should transfer them, as Christ’s forlorn hope, to some other nation to snatch it from Satan’s grasp.

In the same dismissive attitude as the above, Pope Pius XI, in his Rerum Ecclesiae (See Isizoh, 2001: 6), considered it a great act of charity on the part of missionaries to withdraw “pagans … from the darkness of superstition” in order to instruct them “in the truth of Christ.” Thus each missionary, as ambassador of Christ, must “bravely face all hardships and difficulties, as long as
he can snatch a soul from the mouth of hell. The same pontiff encouraged vocation to the priesthood especially for “the heathens particularly those who are still savages and barbarians.” (pg. 6) He urged European missionaries to have patience, saying: “if you find extreme slowness of mind in the case of men who live in the very heart of barbarous regions, this is due to the conditions of their lives, for, since the exigencies of their lives are limited, they are not compelled to make great use of their intelligence.” (See Isizoh, 2001:7).

Isizoh, (2001:7), observes that this desire to save the people from the “darkness of superstition” went beyond the need for mere instruction of them “in the true faith of Christ” to an overall cultural advancement and civilization of “uncivilized peoples.” Hence, according to him, the European system of education was introduced and promoted by missionaries who also preached a *theology of discontinuity* – which urged Africans to break with their Indigenous (Traditional) Religion in order to embrace Christianity. However, because African Indigenous Religion is a culturally grounded religion, such a condition for being a Christian in Africa almost added up to Christian conversion at that time requiring a departure not only from the Indigenous Religion but also from the African traditional way of life (Magesa, 2010; Schreiter, 1997, Shorter, 1975).

Thus following the above injunctions and derogatory accounts of the African Indigenous Religion by the Church at the time, the earliest missionaries in some African countries like Gabon took the liberty to equate the Indigenous Religion with fetishism and idol worship. And the goal of the missionary action there, according to Isizoh, (2001:7) was to wipe out “the paganism which was also considered barbaric by the colonizers. And the bitter consequence was the disappearance, in that country today, of the African Indigenous Religion as a religious institution in the public domain; what remains being only aspects of initiation, healing and clairvoyance.”
Similarly among the Igbo and Efik/Ibibio peoples of Nigeria, the early missionaries according to Isizoh, (2001:7) “inserted in the missionary catechism of the Christian faith a list of mortal sins, which literally translated reads: joining the pagans in idol worship, invoking the spirits, sacrifice, keeping amulets and believing in them as God, dealing with charms, celebrating funeral rites in a pagan way, or participating in such rites.”

The above scenarios clearly illustrate evidence of the continuity within the Catholic Church hierarchy for many years, of the prejudice against African Indigenous Religion that was circulating at that time in the Western press, all of which made the need for encouraging reconciliation between Christianity and African Indigenous Religion an irrelevant undertaking. Isizoh, (2001:7) comments that following the earlier negative attitude of the Church to the Indigenous Religion described above, prayers in some African countries were composed, dedicated particularly for the conversion of African peoples “wandering in the vale of darkness where they are destined to be lost forever…” (unless they turned to Christianity). In this way, converts from African Indigenous Religion were encouraged and even urged to abandon almost everything the Indigenous religion and culture had to offer them (Magesa, 1998).

**The Post Vatican II: The Era of Positive Attitude, Dialogue and Reconciliation**

Vatican II inaugurated an era of the Catholic Church’s dramatic change of attitude, from the above negative trends, to a more positive perspective in favor of other faiths, including African Indigenous Religion. Authorities agree that Pope Pius XII could be considered among those who laid the important foundation that triggered such a crucial change in the Catholic Church’s approach to members of other faith traditions. In his Encyclical, *Evangelii Praecones*, Pius XII encouraged a respectful and reconciliatory approach to other religions.
The Second Vatican Council then took up this positive accent and consolidated it. Its departure from the past in this regard can be seen reflected in one of its earliest documents, *Lumen Gentium*, which conceded that salvation is possible for members of other faiths outside the visible Christian fold. In this regard, the document no. 16, (See Isizoh, 2001:9) affirms that:

> The plan of salvation includes those also who acknowledge the Creator …with us; adore the one and merciful God who will judge mankind on the last day. Nor is God far from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God; for He gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour (sic) desires all men to be saved. For those also can attain eternal salvation who without fault on their part do not know the Gospel of Christ and His Church, but seek God with a sincere heart, and under the influence of grace endeavour (sic) to do His will as recognized through the promptings of their conscience.

For those already familiar with Church history, the above pronouncement must sound like an watershed, marking a great change of vision in the Catholic Church’s image of the spiritual status of the members of other faiths. This is because previously the doctrine that had prevailed was the exclusivist idea of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* attributed to St Cyprian of Carthage (+258), which was then misinterpreted to mean: ‘outside the Church there is no salvation’.

According to Onwubiko, (2002:7) such a misinterpretation was popularized by “Fr. Feeney of the Archdiocese of Boston, giving rise to a long lasting negative influence on how some Catholic theologians looked at the nature, culture and religion of non-Christians.” It was that kind of negative influence to the status of other religions in the scheme of divine salvation that the pope’s document was intended to address.

The same positive spirit of the Catholic Church in favor of extending respect and therefore a spirit of reconciliation to members of other faiths was also manifested in another of the Council’s documents called *Gaudium et Spes* in which the Council officially encouraged the development of dialogue among all people (a move reflected or re-echoed in Langmead’s (2008) notion of horizontal reconciliation). In this context, the Council Fathers observed that many of the world
religions, because they have an awareness of God’s hidden power, seek “in their own ways to calm the hearts of men by outlining a program of life covering doctrine, moral precepts and sacred rites.” (*Nostra Aetate*, 2, No.2). Consequently the Council affirms in *Nostra Aetate* 2 no. 2 that:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. With sincere respect she looks on those ways of conduct and life, those precepts and teachings, which, though differing on many points from what she herself holds and teaches, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men (*sic*).

Based on these precepts and declarations the Council then urged all Christians to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other faiths. And while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, “to acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.” (*Nostra Aetate*, 2)

However, it must be noted that when the Council Fathers, in *Nostrae Aetate*, were making these pronouncements, particular mention was only made about relations with Muslims and Jews. Reference was not directly made of the need for dialogue and reconciliation with members of African Indigenous Religion. And crossing such a bridge had to wait until the pontificate of Pope Paul VI to inaugurate its inclusion. This came in his encyclical *Africæ Terrarum* where he extolled various precious elements of African worldview that he affirms the Catholic Church appreciates and respects. He then went further to declare as follows, summarizing the general philosophy and the metaphysical foundations of African Indigenous Religion, supporting the basis for extending respect to that Religion in these words in *Africæ Terrarum* (nn. 7-9):

We think it profitable to dwell on some general ideas that typify ancient religious cultures, because we think their moral and religious values deserves of attentive consideration. The constant and general foundation of African tradition is the spiritual view of life. Here we have more than the so-called animistic concept, in the sense given to this term in the history of religions at the end of last century. We have a deeper, broader and more universal concept which considers all living beings and visible nature itself as linked with the world of the invisible and the spirit. In particular it has never
considered man as mere matter limited to earthly life, but recognizes in him the presence and power of another spiritual element, in virtue of which human life is always related to the after-life. In this spiritual concept, the most important element generally found is the idea of God, as the first or ultimate cause of all things. This concept, perceived rather than analyzed, lived rather than reflected on, is expressed in very different ways from culture to culture, but the fact remains that the presence of God permeates African life, as the presence of a higher being, personal and mysterious. People have recourse to Him at solemn and more critical moments of life, when they consider the intercession of every other intermediary unavailing.…

Apart from his great affirmation and expressed respect for African Indigenous Religion explained above, Paul Paul VI also went down in history as the pope who established the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (Isizoh, 2001), which he charged with the specific task of becoming a means by which to arrive at a sincere and respectful dialogue with those who ‘still believe’ in God and worship Him.

**Implementation Challenges, Guidelines, and Continuing Subversions**

Pope John Paul II stood in line with his predecessor’s vision of improving relations with practitioners of African Indigenous Religion, and so took up the challenge of implementing that vision. He indeed introduced a new dimension towards implementing such a dialogue, encouraging Africanization, Indigenization, and Inculturation of Christianity in Africa. His pontificate in this regard came with the magisterial advice to the Catholic world (in L’Osservatore Romano, English edition, 11 May 1994, n.7.) to the effect that:

> The adherents of African Traditional Religion should … be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language should be avoided. For this purpose, suitable courses in African Traditional Religion should be given in houses of formation of priests and religious.

Thus, Gathogo, (2007:254) was right, in line with the above papal injunction, when he called for “the need to study African Indigenous Religion as a way of making it enter into a form of
dialogue with other religions – as it is by this that Africa will experience genuine shalom that will bring wholeness in the Africa of the twenty-first century.”

Because Pope Paul VI was convinced, like his predecessor, that great benefit would accrue to the Church from a mature and prudent dialogue with followers of African Indigenous Religion, he supported and elevated the status of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, appointing Cardinal Francis Arinze, in 1984, to head that Office. Cardinal Arinze took over the Council with a major instruction from the Pope, namely, to pay close attention to followers of African Indigenous Religion and to the converts from it.

Cardinal Arinze, (1988) in response to this challenge came up, with a very articulate and powerful letter entitled “Pastoral Attention to Followers of African Traditional Religion” which was intended to encourage those who are engaged in dialogue (interreligious dialogue ad extra) with followers of African Indigenous Religion with some clear guidance of what is expected of them. He also set out some guidelines for another aspect of interreligious dialogue, namely interreligious dialogue ad intra, which means dialogue of worldviews, and religious ideas within an individual converted from one religion to another. In this extended concept of the proposed dialogue, Cardinal Arinze called for pastoral attention to new Christians or converts from African Indigenous Religion, with the aim of enabling them to harmonize the two religious worldviews in which they have been inducted, and in this way, to encourage inculturation.

Despite its good intentions and some great efforts at clarifying matters, one difficulty, amounting to a subversion, which a careful re-reading of Cardinal Arinze’s letter does bring to the fore, is its apparent continuity with the past narrow meaning of dialogue with African Indigenous Religion (the type emphasized in the era when the process was understood as a means for improving Christian evangelization of Africa in the form of inculturation). That narrow meaning of the process could be found embedded in the two objectives identified in Cardinal Arinze’s
letter as the basis for the newly proposed ‘mutual exchange of respectful dialogue’ with the Indigenous Religion. These two objectives according to Cardinal Arinze, (1988:102) are that:

First, the better African Traditional Religion is understood by the heralds of the Gospel, the more suitable will be the presentation of Christianity to Africans and second, that in the traditional religion the underlying felt-need of Africans will be identified so that it will become clear how Christianity can meet such needs.

Such calculations as these, it is argued, tend to subvert the earlier implied assumption that the newly proposed dialogue between Christianity and African Indigenous Religion should be a mutually respectful undertaking, promoting the African culture of “live and let live” (in Igbo language, *Egbe belu ugo belu*) between the two Religions in Africa, among whose aims would be to encourage a deeper-self knowledge on the part of the Catholic Church (Onwubiko, 2002) without prejudice to the Church’s need to improve its understanding of the Indigenous Religion. In support of the above, Mortensen, (2001:375) observes that “the strength of the global ethics is its ability to point to an area of claimed overlap among the worlds religions regarding a set of normative statements that they all affirm. To determine if this claim is true, one needs simply to dig deeper, and that can only happen through interreligious dialogue.”

Indeed the two objectives for the dialogue as outlined in Cardinal Arinze’s letter seem to be at variance with the concept of the proper spirit of the dialogue as contained in the same Letter. For example, in that Letter, the Cardinal indicated that the proposed dialogue is the type to be understood as a meeting of people of differing religions, in an atmosphere of freedom and openness, in order to listen to the other, to try to understand that person’s religion, and hopefully to seek possibilities of collaboration. He called this form of protected and mature exchange, *interreligious dialogue ad extra.*

It is argued however, that the same dialogue came to be interpreted in the spirit of its objectives as outlined in his letter, as targeted at promoting effective propagation of the Christian faith in
Africa (dialogue ad intra) rather than as a project aimed at being mutually beneficial to both religions. In that way, some readers can easily charge the so-called proposed project of the Catholic Church’s avowed dialogue with African Indigenous Religion, as essentially a process of exploitation; with the enterprise seen in an ‘I–It’ (Buber, 1965) situation, where the Catholic Church is the ‘I’ (the subject) and the Indigenous Religion, the ‘It’ (the object), whose great values are intended to be appropriated for the enrichment of Catholic Christian practice in Africa. In support of this observation, Magesa, (1998, 2002:16) has this to say:

Dialogue between Christianity and African Religion has never been a real conversation at any of these levels. On the contrary, contact between Christianity and African Religion has historically been predominantly a monologue, bedeviled by assumptions prejudicial against the latter, with Christianity culturally more vocal and ideologically more aggressive. Therefore, what we have heard until now is largely Christianity speaking about African religion, not African Religion speaking for itself.

Indeed the unfortunate thing is that this emphasis on one-dimensional gain to the dialogue as reflected in Cardinal Arinze’s Letter could be seen to have been continued with in the Teaching of the 1994 Special Synod of Bishops of Africa (Metuh, 2001). That Synod highlighted a number of reasons why the Catholic Church must dialogue with adherents of African Indigenous Religion. According to the Synod, among such reasons the following must stand out: (1) dialogue with African Traditional Religion will reveal the many values which are common to both Christianity and African Traditional Religion which can serve as a preparatio Evangelicae, as stepping stones for introducing African adherents of African Traditional Religion into the full acceptance of the Christian faith; and (2) the values common to both religions, to be unveiled through the proposed dialogue with the religion, are indispensable for inculturation. In fact, according to the Synod, (See Metuh, 2001:87):

There can be no serious inculturation without dialogue with African Traditional Religion where our (African Traditional) religious values have their natural habitat. The Christian church itself gains from this, for inculturation helps the African Christians to live an integrated life which is truly Christian and truly African.
It is argued that these new constructions of the targeted benefits of the dialogue appear to contradict some of the earlier notions of the meaning and principles of the dialogue as implied in some of the speeches of the Pope Pius XII and Pope Paul VI who laid the foundation to the dialogue project both earlier cited. The truth value of this conclusion could be seen validated from the fact that even the same Synod as mentioned above, had paradoxically expressed some regrets according to (Metuh, 2001:86) that:

> African Traditional Religion has not been given the recognition it deserves as a valid partner in dialogue, or the attention it should receive at a pastoral level. Rather, it has been seen almost exclusively as a deposit for prospective converts.

Yet the perplexing thing that goes with the Catholic Church’s urge for dialogue with African Indigenous Religion is the apparent inability of the same synod to take a bold initiative to promote a redress to the noted wrong ways of approaching the critical issue of engaging in a more sincere, respectful, creative and protected or balanced dialogue with the followers of the African Indigenous Religion, that is, in such a way that it would not be viewed as a mere ploy for furthering the interests of Christian evangelization of Africa. In this regard, it is painful to note that even with the Second African Synod that took place in 2009, whose agenda focused on “the area of reconciliation, justice and peace” the same complaint expressed above by Metuh, is yet to be addressed or redressed.

No wonder why a number of threshold questions and disabling obstacles that had confronted the actual process of implementing the guidelines for the dialogue as stipulated in Cardinal Arinze’s letter and seconded in the teaching of the 1994 African Synod of Catholic Bishops are still here with us today a year after the last Synod of 2009. And as highlighted by Metuh, (2001: 88) one of such obstacles “is the wall of prejudice which separates the Christian and his proposed African Traditional Religion adherent partner in dialogue.” The reason for this according to (Metuh, 2001:88) is that:
Missionary catechesis for decades has taught the African converts to hold African Traditional Religion in great disdain and its adherents in great contempt… African Christians today still refer to African Traditional Religion as Paganism, Animism, Fetishism, Idolatory, Polytheism, and Heathenism. Its adherents are correspondingly called pagans, animists, heathens, and idol worshippers, and so forth.

The second obstacle according to Metuh, (2001) and Isizoh, (2001) arises from the fact that still today: Christian catechesis in Africa sustains its polemics that it is stupid to be an adherent of African Traditional Religion which is seen as the citadel of Satan, and his ministers, who are disdainfully called Juju priests, fetish priests, witchdoctors and agents of the devil. Yet Pope John Paul II had advised that in this era of dialogue with the Indigenous Religion, the adherents of African Traditional religion ‘should be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language should be avoided.’

For Metuh, (2001: 88) yet another obstacle to the dialogue is that “Christianity in Africa having anchored itself on modern European culture has engendered in its adherents a superiority complex, which sees African Traditional Religion and African cultural values which it upholds as primitive and unprogressive.” However, as we have seen earlier, Pope Pius XII (1994 AAS 36:210), had urged that:

The specific character, the traditions, the customs of each nation must be preserved intact, so long as they are not in contradiction with the divine law. The missionary is an apostle of Jesus Christ. His task is not to propagate European civilization in mission lands…

The next obstacle still according to Metuh, (2001) is that some people entertain the impression that dialoguing with African Indigenous Religion which the Catholic Church had hitherto condemned in very strong terms, would look like now endorsing it; and that it is not easy listening to others with respect, charity, and patience without running the risk of watering down one’s own faith. They also argue that dialogue with African Indigenous Religion is an exercise in futility; since in their view the religion is already dying out.

(a) Inflexibility of the first and second generation African Christians and (b) Fear of disrupting the unity of the Catholic Church. Elaborating on these, Isizoh, (2001:39) first comments that:

Most of the early missionaries in Africa presented African traditional religion and culture in a negative light. This impression was “diligently” handed on to the first generation of African Christians who in turn preached it to those after them. The result is that there are Africans today who still find nothing good in African Traditional religion and culture. There are some of them who, trained in the European systems of thought, continue to consider African Traditional religion and culture from the point of view of its “classical form” in antiquity. They refuse to admit any growth, any assimilation of other influences, in the religion. They reason that no person who has received a European education could be considered an authentic follower of the religion. For them, therefore, the religion is “primitive” and not worthy to be discussed in a gathering of the “civilized world”. Such people do not encourage any meaningful dialogue with followers of the traditional religion, as they are found today.

For Isizoh, the second obstacle against dialogue arises from the fear entertained by Church leaders in Africa that a true dialogue between the Catholic Church and the African Indigenous Religion would contradict two important principles guiding inculturation in Africa: compatibility with the Christian message and communion with the universal church (Ecclesia in Africa, n.62).

In this context, Isizoh, (2001) observes that, many Church leaders in Africa, fearing the possibility of going against these principles, have left untouched many important areas (such as what the Church’s response should be in the face of childless marriages or under the tension of Christian families without any male child in an area where having a male child is an absolute necessity for easy transmission of family property and inheritance from generation to generation. These issues demand pastoral attention in the African context. Here, according to him, the thorny issue is how the Christian Church in Africa can be made to become truly Christian and truly African without condoning some cultural practices acceptable in Africa but which will make the African Church to lose its precious communion with Rome, and endanger the coveted unity of
the One Catholic and Apostolic Church that the Catholic Church in Africa has defended for many years.

All these constitute the outstanding obstacles to reconciliation between Christianity and African Indigenous Religion which the 2009 Synod that incidentally was focused on building bridges of reconciliation, justice and peace has failed to seize the opportunity of the Synod process to review and to redress.

Such trends, as the above omissions indicate, that members of the Catholic Church in Africa are not yet fully ready, for a fair-minded and open dialogue with African Indigenous Religion. The obstacles they had confronted in implementing the process would appear to arise largely because they are not able to take into account the fact that according to Sarpong, (1989:351), African Indigenous Religion has the three principal dimensions of a religion namely “belief, worship and morality.” This idea corroborates the point earlier made by Pope Paul VI in his *Africae Terrarum* that African Indigenous Religion is a Religion blessed with the following properties: a sense of the sacred, respect for life, sense of community, family spirit, a spiritual vision of life, authority as sacred, and symbolism in religious worship. No wonder why the pope went ahead with recommending a dialogue of mutual respect and sincerity between members of the two religions.

**Conclusion: Towards the Future**

In the light of the above discussions what does the future hold for Catholic Church’s dialogue and reconciliation with African Indigenous Religion? And what might the Catholic Church in Africa be offering to African Indigenous Religion in the future?

In response to these questions, predictions are notoriously difficult but what I can do is to try and map out certain trends and possibilities. The first possibility is that African Indigenous Religion will gradually be accepted [in line with Langmead’s (2008) notion of Mission as Reconciliation]
as a legitimate Religion of the people in its own right. The ‘doomsday scenario’ for that Religion is still a possibility but it is obvious that the Religion will always find adherents within the educated and non-educated people in the rural and urban Africa (Nwoye, 2010). In addition, it is expected that with a drop in derogatory language against the African Indigenous Religion as called for by Pope John Paul II, the coercive power of the Church will become less relevant in dissuading people from electing to fall back into it (Magesa, 2010).

At the same time, the above survey does demonstrate that although the Catholic Church currently appears to have come to recognize the presence of truth and value in people of other religions, it (the same Catholic Church) still places emphasis on theology of discontinuity with African Indigenous Religion and on the notion of African Indigenous Religion as a deposit for conversion of people to Christian faith (Magesa, 2010).

The above survey might also reveal that one of the intended aims of the dialogue (Onwubiko, 2002), namely, to promote mutual deeper self-knowledge on the part of the two religions has never been fully pursued or realized. In particular, the Catholic Church in dialogue with African Indigenous Religion is emphatic on its need to learn about African Indigenous Religion and its values and discontents as a means for its successful evangelical work in Africa. But at the same time she (the Catholic Church) speaks nothing of her need to engage in some form of reflexive self understanding, aimed at gaining a better knowledge of herself, through discovering from members of African Indigenous Religion how she is viewed as a religion; including getting to know about her positive and negative attributes, as seen from members of that religion.

The review also shows that the dialogue, as can be judged from the voices of some Church dignitaries on guidelines for implementing the process, is more and more departing from the original spirit of some papal documents that had extolled the African Indigenous Religion and its values, urging African Christians to respect the Indigenous Religion and its adherents and to try
to work in collaboration with them in promoting human progress and world peace (Magesa, 2010; Nwoye, 2010).

**Recommendations**

Based on the above, the following recommendations are made to urge for a return to the initial spirit of promoting of a more constructive dialogue between the two religions for the mutual benefit, development and reconciliation of the two religions, in contemporary Africa (Magesa, 1998, 2002).

- There is need to avoid uncritical assumption of self-purity and the tendency to ‘search for limitations of the self in others’, on the part of the Catholic Church. In that way the Church will recognize the importance of the opportunity of dialogue, to use reflexive methodology to study itself from the point of view of members of African Indigenous Religion. The result is that the Church will come to gain some deeper knowledge of herself in the context of the dialogue and in addition, come to learn any aspects of herself where self-correction and innovation may be required. This means that the dialogue should be promoted in the Catholic Church, and in the wider scale, in all Christian missions, the ethos of self-criticism and the spirit of reconciliation with other religions in Africa. Unless this is done, the Catholic Church and the Christian mission which it represents, will be disabled from reflecting on itself and work effectively in the human world.

- The tendency to claim a mandate to have special legitimate control over African Indigenous Religion, reflected in some of the pronouncements by the 1994, special synod of the Bishops of Africa, an error of commission that was rectified even in the last Synod of 2009, is tantamount to developing a dominant relationship with dialogue partners (Magesa, 1998, 2002). Such a subordination process must be discouraged if it is true that the type of dialogue
intended is the one that will promote the spirit of reconciliation between the two religions and mutual and honest exchange of personal respect among the two of them.

- Similarly, continuing to leave the legitimacy of the African Indigenous Religion indeterminate is unfair to the entire people of Africa judging from the views of popes on its relevance and greatness as a religion, which possesses three principal characteristics of religion as enunciated by Sarpong, (1989), and reiterated by Onah, (2001) endowed with social-cultural and spiritual values that are in synchrony with the canons of the divine law.

- The current emphasis in the dialogue tends to encourage members of the Catholic Church in the dialogue to become experts at gazing outwards, not inwards. In that way, reflexive scrutiny is excluded from the socialization of the members of Catholic Church (including its leadership). Such a trend, if unchecked, will promote a mode of viewing dialogue that encourages both a liberating attention to the details of external reality (African Indigenous Religion) and a blinkered attitude to self-criticism and scrutiny (on the part of the Catholic Church). To forestall this, the Catholic Church’s tendency to an attitude of superiority in dialogue with other faiths, particularly African Indigenous Religion, must be softened. If not, their conservative, anti-pluralistic stance in Church matters will continue to impact those leading dialogue in the Catholic Church and diminish their acknowledging their share in human frailty and limitation in giving adequate attention to their spiritual roles in society.

- In the light of Langmead’s (2008) metaphor of Mission as Reconciliation, more collaboration is encouraged between members of the two religions, who will align themselves with progressive forces from both sides of the fence. This will lead less and less to oppressive and combative expressions of both religions in Africa.

- The tendency to emphasize only the positive aspects of the Catholic Church and by extension all Christian Missions in Africa will militate against Buber’s (1958) notion of mutuality
among genuine dialogue partners. This is a trend to be corrected in this era of dialogue between the Catholic Church and members of other faiths and the notion of mission as reconciliation. Until African people start being provided with a form of religious laws and practices based upon their needs and view of the world, rather than those derived from the white patriarchs of Europe and the United States of America, the danger is that the mystique associated with each religion will simply cross-multiply and the public, as potential consumers, will suffer a double mystification; making the notion of reconciliation between the two religions much more difficult to realize.

- The Catholic Church also holds the duty and the responsibility to use its role as a leaven of the community to purify African Indigenous Religion of any negative practices still prevailing among members of that religion. But, even in this regard, the rule of thumb to remember is that, at all times, good social-cultural and religious values are proposed not imposed! (Arinze, 1988).

In sum then, the overall effect to accrue from the dialogue when all these cautions, principles and procedures are put in place, is that the Catholic Church and by extension all other Christian missions in Africa, will learn to Africanize its practices and ways of life. She will also learn to participate not in proselytizing, but in promoting the attitude of mutuality between herself and the proponents of African Indigenous Religion. In that way, African Indigenous Religion would come to be recognized and respected by Christian Missions throughout the world as an independent religion of the black people of the world wherever they are found; an attitude that will extend the application of the notion of mission as reconciliation as propagated by Langmead (2008). Otherwise, as Hans Kung in Mortensen, (2001:375) has cautioned, “There will be no peace among nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without a dialogue among the religions. There will be no successful dialogue among
religions without the considering of common ethical standards for our globe. There will therefore be no survival of our globe without a global ethics”.

Dr. Chinwe M. A. Nwoye is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Science and Sociology at The University of Dodoma, Dodoma, Tanzania. She obtained her PhD, focusing on Definitional Ceremonies in Igbo Religion, at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya. She holds degrees in both philosophy and theology from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, Rome, Italy and a Master of Arts degree and postgraduate diploma in education, from the University of Jos, Nigeria. Currently she resides with her family in Dodoma, Tanzania, East Africa.

adabjc@yahoo.com
References


Catholic Information Service for Africa (CISA)): http://www.cisanewsafrica.org


Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/roman uria/synod/documents/rcsynoddoc


“Yes Africa matters”: http://sites.google.com/site/yesafrica,atterspre/


**Church Documents**


Pope Leo XIII., (1890). *Catholicae Ecclesiae*


Pope Pius XI., (1926). *Rerum Ecclesia*.


*Nostra Aetate* (NA) 28 October 1965.