

# **Shaping the Content for Interreligious Engagement: A Case for Interreligious Hospitality in Nigeria's Religiously Pluralistic Societies**

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## *Abstract*

In the Nigerian context, religious violence is gradually becoming the reality faced by millions of people who are fed hateful messages aimed at instigating violence against those perceived to be different culturally and religiously. To address this situation, a dialogical model has to be appropriated that has bearing both on the cultural and religious worldviews of the people. Hospitality can serve as a viable way of fostering healthy encounters among religions and people of faith in the context of religious pluralism.

This paper will explore the viability of interreligious hospitality as a means of engagement from a Christian perspective. The content of discourse extends to all religions present in Nigeria. Concrete ways of engagement using hospitality as its model will be explored.

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## *Introduction*

In the Nigerian context, religious violence is gradually becoming the reality faced by millions of people who are fed hateful messages aimed at instigating violence against those perceived to be different culturally and religiously. To address this situation, a dialogical model has to be appropriated that has bearing both on the cultural and religious worldviews of the people. Hospitality can serve as a viable way of fostering healthy encounters among religions and people of faith in the context of religious pluralism.

This paper will explore the viability of interreligious hospitality as a means of engagement from a Christian perspective. The content of discourse extends to all religions present in Nigeria. Concrete ways of engagement using hospitality as its model will be explored.

## *Conditions for the Practice of Interreligious Hospitality as a Dialogical Model*

In contemporary usage of hospitality, there is a sense of paternalistic generosity on the part of the host toward the guest. Hospitality has come to reflect a sense of abundance from which the generous host can extend the goods needed by the needy guest. In this sense, the boundaries and content of hospitality are always defined by the host. However, there is the need to go beyond this view of hospitality and reclaim a rich hermeneutics that strips paternalism from hospitality as well as freeing it from the manipulative control of the host. In the context of religion, hospitality does not arise from the abundant goodness of one religion, which leads to a benevolent charitable gesture

toward another religion. Such a notion only reveals a subtle sense of self-love and a narcissistic understanding of God's relational encounter with the said religion. Authentic hospitality begins with the guest and not the host. The other, as a guest or, in this context, as a religion, shapes the initial invitation to engage by invoking in the host the obligation to engage appropriately. As Pierre-François de B ethune reminds us, “one begins to appreciate the depth of hospitality only when one has experienced the poverty of being a stranger.”<sup>1</sup> Many instances abound in human history of those who have had transformative conversions as a result of such experiences; especially when they were rescued by the very persons whom they previously abhorred. Again, de B ethune reminds us of the transformation that occurred in the life of Charles de Foucauld, who had gone to Algeria with a paternalistic attitude toward the Tuareg Muslims, but when he experienced the poverty of being stranger and was shown hospitality by the Tuareg Muslims, it became a moment for deep reflection for him and an awakening into the dawn of new perspectives toward his Muslim neighbors. He came to realize that true hospitality always begins with the neighbor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.<sup>2</sup> The Judeo-Christian Scriptures affirms this view when it presents God’s command to Israel to always remember how they were once aliens in Egypt and they in turn must show hospitality toward sojourners in their land (Deut. 10:19).<sup>3</sup> The life of Abraham, the patriarch linked to three world religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – reflects this view of

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre-Fran ois de B ethune. *Interreligious Hospitality: The Fulfillment of Dialogue* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), p. 122. See also Ian Lantham, "Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916): Silent Witness for Jesus 'in the face of Islam'" in Anthony O'Mahony and Peter Bowe (editors), *Catholics in Interreligious Dialogue: Monasticism, theology and Spirituality* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2006), p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre-Fran ois de B ethune. *Interreligious Hospitality: The Fulfillment of Dialogue*, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> All biblical citations are taken from *The New American Bible* (Wichita, Kansas: Fireside Bible Publishers, 1987).

hospitality.<sup>4</sup> To realize the promise made to him by God, Abraham, at the age of seventy-five, had to move from the comfort of his home in Haran and all that he knew to an unknown land, journeying with his entire family. He had to live as an alien in foreign lands and relying on the generosity of the people he came across while journeying to the land God promised to make his and that of his descendants. Having experienced the delicate life of a sojourner, he in turn became a good host. His generosity toward God's angelic messengers led to the blessing of the gift of a child (Gen. 18:1-15). Again, as Bethune reminds us, the Judeo-Christian Scriptures is laden with many examples of hospitality being shown toward others by widows, adulterers, and the marginalized.<sup>5</sup>

On a different note, the descriptive approach to hospitality as a philosophical tool worthy to be used in constructing transformative dialogical engagement is very much in line with the philosophical projects embarked upon by Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas highlights the ethical and religious significance of hospitality in his philosophical discourse on the relevance of recapturing the alterity of the other as the way forward for contemporary Western philosophical discourse.<sup>6</sup>

Hospitality, as relationality, is not alien to the human condition. Nor is it alien to religions. One can argue that most religions, if not all, advocate a sense of true hospitality either among the members of the religions or with those outside the boundaries. Both Buber and Levinas argue for the recognition of relationality as a part of the constitutive elements of collective humanity.<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that every human being lives

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 172.

<sup>7</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity & Transcendence*. Translated by Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 101. See also Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 4

constantly in the graced-moment of authentic relationality. However, they argue that to live truly, human relational encounters must be conditioned by openness, trust, and a willingness to be vulnerable.

In the context of interreligious dialogue, I want to opine that hospitality involves the willingness to engage another religion even when the other religion has fundamental differences from one's own. By engaging in relational encounters with the other religion, there is the fundamental belief that God invites all religions to engage each other. The aim of such engagements is not to make converts of the members of the other religions but to engage because it is God's will that authentic religious expressions involve engagement. The vulnerability of such engagement involves letting go of centuries-old intellectual biases and embracing the engagement as a moment of grace.

Emmanuel Levinas gives relationality a central place in the philosophical discourse of the West. The collapse of the relevance of religion in the West hinges on the attempt by Christendom to define the world from its own point of view and denying the originality of the non-Christian world. Levinas argues, as does Buber, that God is a God of alterity whose otherness transcends the usurpation embarked upon by narcissistic religious traditions.<sup>8</sup> The other invites the subject to a relationship that makes her vulnerable; one that entails trust; care for the other; being in the moment; and constitutive of the human reality.

Hospitality, shaped along the philosophy of relationality articulated by Buber and Levinas, involves openness, trust, and vulnerability.<sup>9</sup> The relational openness among

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<sup>8</sup> See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, pp. 115 – 116.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*. Translated by Nidra Poller (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 67; Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, (New York: the Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 170.

religions in their dialogical encounters ought to include all aspects of their theological and doctrinal traditions. For Christians, it should involve a strong commitment to the mission of the Holy Spirit who calls them to engage the ever self-revealing God who has visited humanity in other religions as well. To be open to the Spirit of the Trinity is to be open also to humanity and other religions. In the encounter with other religions, such openness should involve the willingness to encounter, and trusting that in the encounter, God will continue to reveal himself to the faith community.<sup>10</sup>

Openness, as a constitutive part of hospitality, is fundamental in shaping the structure of the encounter as fulfilling and grounded in faithful witness to the respective religious traditions involved in the encounter. Christianity, Islam, and the many indigenous religions in Nigeria have within them the belief in the workings and presence of God in human society. God's alterity is preserved and encountered through the encounter with the holy or sinful other who serves as the face of the divine. As noted by Cardinal Francis Arinze, most religions, including African Traditional Religions have teachings that promote love of the other even when the other is perceived as an enemy.<sup>11</sup>

Openness also involves having the conviction that the religious other is a legitimate partner in the dialogical encounter. It involves taking the other seriously and believing that the other has something relevant to contribute to the encounter. It involves

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<sup>10</sup> For those who may argue otherwise and base their argument to reject other religions except theirs either from the Christian Bible or from the Muslim Qur'ān, the advice of Mahmoud Ayoub is worth accepting. Though his audience is fellow Muslims, such advice is also relevant for Christian exclusivists. He calls attention to the context of such passages in sacred texts that condemn other religions in the Qur'ān. Understanding the circumstances surrounding the context upon which a passage is written helps to put such views in the right perspective. See Mahmoud Ayoub, "Jesus the Son of God: A Study of the Terms *Ibn* and *Walad* in the Qur'ān and Tafsīr Tradition" in Yvonne Y. Haddad and Wadi Z. Haddad (eds.), *Christian – Muslim Encounters* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), pp. 65 – 81. In the Qur'ān, though there are passages that go against the Christian Trinitarian doctrine, there are also passages that affirm the legitimacy of the Christianity and Judaism.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Cardinal Arinze, *Church in Dialogue: Walking with Other Believers* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), pp.201 – 202.

also a sense of humility rooted in the understanding that one cannot exhaust the revelation of God. This attitude toward dialogical encounters needs to reflect in the way the different religions in Nigeria engage each other. The religions must operate with the understanding that each one has a right to claim its legitimacy without being ridiculed by the negative apologetics from the other religions and denominations present in the country.

Trust, as a quality of interreligious hospitality, evokes a sense of fraternity among the religions. Most religions will affirm the oneness of humanity and the belief in the ability of humanity embracing their common goodness. Interreligious hospitality affirms this position. In the encounter with other religions, a sense of relevance of the other is appreciated through the willingness to trust the other as being able to serve as agent of the divine who reveals himself. In the Nigerian context, Muslim and Christian leaders have mostly constructed an identity that denies any legitimacy to the religious other. To justify this exclusivistic identity, negative apologetics is fast becoming the norm. An attitudinal conversion is needed today if the conviction that God is the determiner of the legitimacy of any religion is to gain grounds among the followers of Islam and Christianity. Perhaps the words of Arinze concerning interreligious dialogue may serve as a wake up call for the religious people in Nigeria to begin to respect each other and their respective religions. He writes: “Interreligious dialogue is a meeting of heart and mind between followers of various religions. It is communication between two believers at the religious level. It is a walking together towards truth and a working together in projects of common

concern. It is a religious partnership without compromise and without hidden agendas and motives.”<sup>12</sup>

All religions have legitimacy among their respective followers because the followers have a strong sense of commitment to their religions. Hospitality affirms this trust in one's religion and in others' commitment to their own religions. One cannot engage in a fruitful interreligious encounter when one views the religious other with suspicion. For Nigerian Christians, the sense of trust in the context of interreligious engagement must be seen as an invitation by the Spirit to embrace the will of the Father to unite humanity in their desire to work toward a better human community. The religious other cannot be seen as a competitor that must be overcome. Rather, the other religions and their adherents serve as legitimate extensions of the revealed truths.

Vulnerability involves the willingness to engage without prejudging and the openness to even being rejected by the religious other.<sup>13</sup> Hospitality does not necessarily mean it must be reciprocated. This is the point Levinas is making by criticizing Buber's view of relationality as being reciprocal. Expectation of reciprocity in interreligious hospitality can lead to a distraction from embracing the moment of the encounter. The willingness of the other to encounter or not cannot be taken from her. However, it can be argued that the reality of the human condition is such that no one can escape from encountering one another. Buber's claim of reciprocity has legitimacy only because humanity has been made prisoners of relationality. How one responds to the reality of encounter is a different issue.<sup>14</sup> This is true also among religions. All religions are

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 332.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), pp. 52 – 53.

practiced in the human context and as such are conditioned by relationality. To embrace relationality, a religion must be willing to trust the other religion being encountered and be open to the encounter even to the extent of being vulnerable. On the other hand, a religion can decide to engage manipulatively by seeing the other religion as a threat and a false reality. Both Buber and Levinas reject the latter approach. For Buber, an encounter that is not conditioned by trust, openness, and willingness to respond adequately to the encounter leads to a false self-understanding. Levinas goes further. For him, in the context of encounter, the subject is invited by the other to engage ethically even to the point of substitution. The subject is invited to embrace the other wholeheartedly and absolutely. This is what it means to be human or religious. To turn away from the other is to do utmost violence to oneself and perpetuate the grave violence the other faces from a world that has been shaped by the false sense of the self as the center of meaning. Levinas' view applies to many teachings among many religions. Among the indigenous religions in Nigeria, there is the understanding that one cannot love God or one's neighbors enough. Among the Ihievbe people of Nigeria, the view of collective humanity is appreciated through the visible reality of the forest. Human society is equated to a forest. Thus, just as a tree cannot make a forest so also can an individual not express the multiple dynamics of human society. In other words, relational love is always constitutive of the human condition and cannot be exhausted. Islam has a very rich tradition and spirituality of self-effacing love for the other. Christianity is rooted in the understanding that God's love is non-exhaustive and is the model for love in human society.

### *Hospitality and the Catholic Church in Nigeria*

. Though Levinas does not treat hospitality in the context of reciprocity, he, nevertheless, attests to this mutual affirmation or awareness of the proximity of one before the other. Even when the subject refuses to extend a helping hand toward the "suffering" other, the face of the other is never removed from the gaze of the subject. In other words, there can be no escape from the encounter.<sup>15</sup> This proximity of the other, argues Levinas, enacts in the subject a moral obsession toward the other. It is in this obsession for the other that one's subjectivity is found. In other words, identity is always within the context of "for the other." Identity is not to be construed as an isolated reality created in the isolation of being; rather, it is in the crossroads of encounter that identity is created and shaped.<sup>16</sup> The introduction of obsession as a religious and moral imperative in shaping the type of openness toward the other by the subject encountered is significant in shaping the interreligious encounter. In hospitality, religions are invited to encounter the other to whom they have been drawn toward and for whom they have an enduring obsession. Obsession can also be understood in the context of interreligious pluralism as the inevitable engagement with the religious other from which there can be no escape without denying the graced-gift of encounter.

In a religiously pluralistic society like Nigeria, there is already a sense of proximity that is enduring. Christians in the country are held "captive" by the presence of other religious traditions. Their proximity is not one of mutual isolation; rather, it is proximity of invitation to engage – an invitation to be hospitable. It is an invitation to

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<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Bloechl, "Words of Welcome: Hospitality in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas" in Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch (editors), *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p. 233.

<sup>16</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), pp. 86 – 89.

embrace the grace of affirmation of the workings of God made manifest through the religious other and not through the self-reflective effort of the Christian churches. It is an invitation to embrace relationality with authentic openness without theological hesitations. In fact, it is an invitation to embrace with the risk of trusting God to be the guide and shaper of the encounter even when human logic dictates otherwise.

The Christian churches in Nigeria must engage in a critical evaluation of their histories and be willing to critique their own theological views in relation to other religions in the country. Without shying away from this project, they must make their identities reflective of the interreligious currents present in the country. They must possess an obsession for the religious other and by so doing, arrive at a more salubrious knowledge of their place in the religious life of the nation. As Levinas states, the face of the other is the possibility of awakening to the responsibility for the other.<sup>17</sup> Buber even goes further by stating, "He who ceases to make a response ceases to hear the Word."<sup>18</sup> Most importantly, the presence of the other religions can be an occasion for Christians in Nigeria to understand how God continues to reveal himself to their communities in a way unique to their experiences and yet authentic, even if it may be different from the identity constructed by other Christian communities outside the country.

In the context of interreligious dialogue, trust is foundational especially when it involves the dynamic presence of God working in the respective religions. For the Christian churches in Nigeria, the practice of hospitality toward other religions should be rooted in having complete trust in the relational encounter as a gift from God who invites Christians to embrace the relationship as a means of sustaining them and growing in their

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<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity & Transcendence*, p. 170.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p 45.

destiny. To trust the relationship with the religious other is a sign of having faith in the workings of God in the respective religions. This religious dimension to hospitality is important if hospitality, as a religious model for articulating interreligious engagement, is to have any relevance at all. By linking it to the religious, Levinas has helped to show the viability of hospitality as a means for articulating God's will for the church.

Trust, in the context of interreligious engagement, does not originate from the subject. In this case, it does not originate from the Christians; rather, it proceeds as a graced-gift from God, who is perfect alterity. As Levinas points out, this understanding of trust in hospitality is not some abstract reasoning devoid of concrete relational engagement. Rather, it is concretized in the actual encounter with the other.<sup>19</sup>

Trusting the relationship with the other as a legitimate way of being for religions justifies the need to be vulnerable within the relationship. Vulnerability includes the limitation involved in the failed attempt to contextualize and conjure limitations to the relationship. The religious other is not an object that can be limited and held captive by the categories of meaning enacted by the religious subject. Levinas and Buber both affirm the freedom and transcending nature of the religious other who escapes all attempts of imprisonment by the religious subject.<sup>20</sup> Again, the logicity of this argument is attested to by the fact that the religious other stands in the place of the transcending Otherness of God. God defies all forms of boundary and imprisonment by the hermeneutic flirtations began by the religious subject. Thus, vulnerability is a reminder of the limitations of the religious subject and an invitation to embrace an epistemological humility needed for the appreciation of the rich dynamics of the relational encounter.

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<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 172

<sup>20</sup> Martin Buber *Between Man and Man*, pp. 7 – 8; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 172

The sense of limitation brought about by the trust in the religious other ought to lead Christians in Nigeria to embrace a relational practice that does not reflect a sense of religious supremacy. It should evoke in them a sense of commitment to the practice of engagement and a deeper reflection on how God is inviting them to embrace their own commitment to their Christian faith, which ought to play itself out in the context of religious pluralism. They should take seriously the belief that God is present in other religions. This understanding must not proceed solely from the hermeneutic traditions of their respective churches, since such an approach will always justify a sense of religious and moral supremacy over other religions. Belief in God's presence in other religions has a more epistemological conviction when it proceeds from a shared reflective experience with other religions within the context of encounter. Perhaps the words of Buber can serve as a constant reminder of the importance of interreligious dialogue. He states; "A time of genuine religious conversations is beginning – not those so-called but fictitious conversations where none regarded and addressed his partner in reality, but genuine dialogues, speech from certainty to certainty, but also from one open-hearted person to another open-hearted person. Only then will genuine common life appear, not that of an identical content of faith which is alleged to be found in all religions, but that of the situation, of anguish and of expectation."<sup>21</sup>

*Ways of Applying Hospitality as a Tool for Engaging in Interreligious*

*Dialogue/Encounter*

For there to be openness of heart toward the other, there need to be a prophetic engagement with one's religious tradition. The entire missionary project of centuries of engagement with people of other religions by the Catholic Church in general has been

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<sup>21</sup> Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, pp. 7 – 8.

shaped by the ideology that the fullness of salvation can only be found within the Catholic Church. What is most alarming about this approach is the fact that the truths of the Catholic Church have been defined in relation to other religions. A radical stance was adopted by the Catholic Church during the Council of Florence when all other religions were proclaimed to be of the devil and salvation was reserved only to those who belonged to the “Holy Roman Catholic Church under the leadership of the Roman Pontiff.”<sup>22</sup> This view was already previously declared dogmatic by Pope Boniface VIII in the papal bull, *Unam Sanctam*.<sup>23</sup> Other Christian churches have also emphasized the universal nature of salvation only through Jesus Christ. Through engaging one's own religious tradition and becoming aware of the contradictions within, dialogue can proceed from the place of humble acceptance of one's limitations before God and before the religious other who stands in the place of God.<sup>24</sup>

The fundamental question that should guide one's engagement with one's own religious tradition is to understand how the practices of the religion by the faith community in general have strayed from the ideals of the religion. In other words, it is important to engage those historical moments where human power and manipulations of the other have shaped how a faith community understands its own religious truths. It involves speaking truth to one's own religious heritage.<sup>25</sup> This approach must not be

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<sup>22</sup> The Council of Florence affirms the Catholic view that heretics, Jews, schismatics, and pagans were destined to suffer eternal punishment for not being within the Catholic Church. See the declaration of the council as quoted in Maurice Wiles, *Christian Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, London: SCM Press, 1992), p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Pope Boniface VIII, Papal Bull *Unam Sanctam*, November 18, 1302 in <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Bon08/B8unam.htm> (accessed August 21, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> See Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*. Edited by J. Shannon Clark and Kate M. Ott (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> See a summary of the conditions necessitating a shift in the Roman Catholic Church's perception of other religions and Christian denominations from Trent to Vatican II in Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Responding to Religious Difference: Conciliar Perspectives." Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella (editors),

engaged in with a faint commitment; rather, it involves total commitment and a resolve of the collective will of the faith community to be willing to repent and acknowledge that their religious history has not always been faithful to the ideals of the God who has engaged them in history. In the case of the Catholic Church in Nigeria, the church has not always reflected the ideals of Christ. Conversion to the Catholic faith was used as a condition for providing Western education to the people of Nigeria during colonial rule.<sup>26</sup> There were also many instances when converts to the faith were made to deny their very identity and embrace the Western concept of civilization.<sup>27</sup> Traditional names were rejected and deemed too barbaric to be used as baptismal names even though the meanings of those names reflect the very ideals of the Christian life.<sup>28</sup>

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*From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 267-281.

<sup>26</sup> In May of 2011, I carried out series of interviews and administered survey questionnaires to Catholics, Muslims and members of Ihievbe Traditional Religion in Ihievbe. I wanted to understand why the community, though religiously pluralistic, has never had violence motivated by religious differences. During the course of my interactions with the people, all those who experienced colonial rule in the country and the advent of Catholic missionary activities in the country attested to the fact that the Catholic missionaries made conversion to the Catholic faith as a precondition for one to be admitted to the Catholic Schools in the cities, towns, and villages they were living.

Approval for this research was sought for from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Duquesne University. The researcher sought for an Expedited IRB approval. As part of this request, the researcher had to take a research course and examination under the Human Subject Research Training Certification Program. The course, Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Training Program administered by Duquesne University was completed by the researcher in March of 2011. The IRB approval was granted on May 16, 2011, valid until May 16, 2012 under 45CFR46.101 and 46.111 on an expedited basis under 45CFR46.110. The protocol number for this IRB approval is Protocol #11-61. Letters introducing the researcher were sent to the respective heads of the religious communities present in Ihievbe on May 17, 2011. These include the Roman Catholic pastor of the Catholic community, the chief imam of the Muslim community and the High Priest of *Akakamiya* Shrine, which is part of the shrines that make up Ihievbe Traditional Religion. In the letters, the researcher was introduced, his intention was declared, and these leaders were asked to produce the names of the adult members of their communities. The letters were approved by the IRB on May 16, 2011. The researcher chose the participants from the list randomly to preserve the anonymity of the participants. Every participant in either the surveys or interviews was given a consent form, which was also approved by the IRB on May 16, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> For a broader perspective on the activities of Christian missionaries in Nigeria and the arguments shaping their policies toward the people see Lamin Sanneh. *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Maryknoll, New York. 1983) pp. 151 – 167).

<sup>28</sup> Many of those I encountered in Ihievbe during my interviews reminded me that it was a common practice during colonial rule for Catholic missionaries from Ireland working in Ihievbe to insist that those seeking baptism choose only European and/or biblical names. Native names, even when they have religious

Islam is not free from this accusation. Many communities in Nigeria were forced to embrace Islam during its spread in the country during the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> There need to be a sense of *metanoia* emanating from the resolve to speak truth to one's own religious history and be determined to making the future better.

The need for self-reflection both on the level of the practice of the faith by a particular religious community and by the entire religious tradition is fundamental in shaping the path for engaging in fruitful interreligious encounters. When there is no repentance, there is bound to be a repeat of centuries-old biases and exploitations.

Becoming aware of the contradictions of how one's religion has been practiced in history ought to lead to the awareness of limitations in the collective hermeneutics on the deposits of faith in one's religion. The mere fact that over centuries there have been many sad instances when Christian churches have been agents of oppression, exploitation, intimidation, manipulation, and marginalization of the poor, the religious other, and those considered unholy justifies the need to be humble before God and before the religious other. This is most necessary especially when these instances were viewed during those times as being faithful to the will of God. The development and the spread of theological hatred against Jews, Muslims, and other religions, show that Christians, even with the best intentions, can sometimes misunderstand God's will and become agents that promote

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meanings were forbidden by the missionaries. During my time as a professed religious member of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, Province of Nigeria, I experienced a continuation of this practice by indigenous Catholic priests insisting that catechumens choose biblical names instead of having the freedom to choose traditional names. Fortunately, this trend is gradually changing. Many priests are beginning to appreciate the cultural values of traditional names as a way of making the Catholic faith relevant to the cultural context of the people.

<sup>29</sup> The Ihievbe people were Islamized by the Nupe jihadists during the nineteenth century. Those who refused to convert to Islam were bared from participating in the life of the community. As a result of this, some of the indigenes invited the Catholic missionaries working in Uzairue, Nigeria to receive them into the Catholic Church. This was a political move, since the colonial rulers were Christians. The people saw the Catholic faith as a means of having political protection from the radical Islamization policy adopted by the Nupe jihadists and their representative, the Oba of Agbede, who was given the authority to rule over Ihievbe by the Etsu Nupe.

manipulative human agenda all in the name of God. This awareness ought to lead the Christians in Nigeria, as faith communities, to welcome the religious other as a legitimate medium in understanding the complex ways God engages humans in their historical contexts.

When the religious other is encountered in the context of humility, she can become God's corrective grace for one's religious tradition. God's otherness does not reside solely in one's religion. God's transcendence can be encountered within the boundaries of another religion. In the Hebrew and Christian Testaments, many instances abound that buttress this argument. The king and people of Nineveh who were considered by the postexilic Israelites as their archenemies invited the Israelites to a newer way of understanding how their God relates with humanity. The Chosen People had a supremacist mentality and saw their God as a personal possession that will save them only. The prophet Jonah is surprised to find that Nineveh and its people do not only take seriously the warnings from God, but also are spared the destruction that was to befall them. This awareness and deeper understanding of God's will and teachings would not have been appreciated unless through this encounter (Jon. 1 – 4:11). Also, one reads about the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Even though the Jews saw the Samaritans as infidels and unworthy of God's love, Jesus' encounter with the woman and her fellow Samaritans astounds his followers. Everything about her and her people was considered unworthy of God's love, yet, in her and her people, Jesus found worthy dialogical partners and recipients of God's salvific love (Jn. 4:1 – 42). These stories legitimize the claim that when there is openness of heart in encountering the religious

other, one can truly be led to understand new realities of God's fruitful presence to human societies, irrespective of their religious affiliations.

Hospitality must be concrete or else it is mere ideology that has no legitimate claim to transformation. In the Nigerian context, a concrete way of practicing hospitality is through collaborative worship. It is not enough to see the religious other as a friend or a neighbor without having a place for her in the sacred space of worship. Worship can become a place of encounter and a way of commensality by inviting and sharing the food of worship that gives every religion its vitality. By inviting the religious other to worship with one, there is a concrete affirmation of the religiosity of the religious other and her claim to legitimacy. Even when the religious other is not present, the recognition of her proximity during worship is a concrete way of disposing and opening one's heart constantly to the grace of presence by the religious other.

Collaborative worship implies making room for the religious other at the center of one's own religious rituals. For example, for Catholics in Nigeria, it involves creating space in the celebration of the Eucharist for Muslims in such a way that the legitimacy of Islam as God's gift to humanity is affirmed and celebrated in the worship rituals of Catholics. Since in the intercessory prayers secular leaders are prayed for that they may rule justly, it will not be too much of a stretch to include other religions especially those within the social context of a faith community. However, the point is not to pray for them to embrace Catholic beliefs but to celebrate God's gift to the Catholic community of the presence of these other religions. This sense of collaborative worship involves taking seriously the belief that God has encountered us in many legitimate ways. Again, the possibility of this happening involves taking seriously the obligation of self-reflection,

accepting the contradictions in our faith, working toward correcting those contradictions in humility, and having the resolve to embrace the religious other in the spirit of hospitality within worship. It is only when the religious other has a legitimate place and role in our worship rituals that our praying together can be authentic and transformative. When this is not the case, our praying together will simply be a form of superficial gestures of civility, which is a reality that becomes a mask covering up active suspicions and hatred of the religious other.

Collaborative worship can become the fruit of taking seriously the demands of interreligious dialogue. It should be the product of encounters with the religious other. As religions update their religious rituals, orthodoxy does not mean a denial of the reality of religious pluralism; rather, it should reflect the grace of present realities and an acceptance of these realities by creating a sacred space for the religious other in thought, desire, and above all, at the heart of worship. Breaking bread with the religious other has its full legitimacy when it is done within the sacred space of worship.

Another concrete way that Nigerians can engage in productive and hospitable dialogue has to do with the role and significance kola nut breaking has in the cultures of the different tribes that make up the country. Many books have been written about the significance of kola nut in some of the dominant cultures in the country. However, the less known cultures also have great reverence for kola nut and attach religious significance to it as well.

Kola nut breaking among the people of Nigeria is linked to collective harmony among those who partake of the rituals. Though the different cultures have different nuances on how the ritual is performed, fundamentally, it is cherished and revered as

a gift to the cultures by God as a way of preserving, restoring, and promoting peace and harmony. For the Igbos of Nigeria, kola nut is regarded as life. Hence the Igbos have an adage which states; *Onye wetera oji wetera ndu* (he who brings kola brings life). The broad appreciation of kola nut by the Nigerian people is affirmed by the report of McPhilips Nwachuckwu in his publication in the Vanguard. He writes:

In Nigeria, nothing is said at any event, no matter how serious the occasion may seem, without the presentation of kola nut ritual. It is the first thing to be presented on the occasion of birth as much as on the event of death. It is presented on the occasion of marriage, divorce as much as on the event of political rally. In the same way, it inaugurates political meetings as much as it is used in sanctifying the ground for ordination of priests and in the invocation of the gods.<sup>30</sup>

The viability of using such a cultural and religious ritual to promote harmony among the people of Nigeria is apparent, especially when it is seen by the people as a symbol of hospitality. In the respective cultures, participating in the ritual of kola nut breaking is considered sacred and leads the participants to a deeper appreciation of each other. Kola nut breaking establishes a commitment to embrace peace and harmony among the partakers of the ritual meal.

For the Ihievbe people of Nigeria, to partake of kola nut is to enter into a sacred commitment to live in harmony. As a hospitable gesture, every visitor who enters an Ihievbe person's house is offered a glass of water and a prayer is offered to the ancestors and the deities, to Jesus Christ, or to Allah to protect and bless the guest. However, when the visitor is offered kola nut along with alligator pepper the dynamics of the relationship that exists or is about to exist between the host and the guest goes beyond mere civility. It depicts either the intent to enter into a bond of friendship or the actual ritualistic

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<sup>30</sup> McPhilips Nwachukwu, "Kola Nut: Nigeria's Seed of Togetherness," *Vanguard*. May 4, 2012 in <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/05/kola-nut-nigerias-seed-of-togetherness/> (accessed August 22, 2012).

celebration of friendship. While a host may offer kola nut and alligator pepper to a guest to reflect their friendship or desire to become friends with the guest, the guest can also offer kola nut and alligator pepper to the host as a sacred symbol to reflect the desire to become friends with the host. The host has an obligation to both accept the gifts and agree to enter into sacred friendship with the guest, or reject the gifts to show that there is no fraternal bond between the host and the guest. A refusal of the gifts of kola nut and alligator pepper is considered very grave and must be made public to the community, since it reflects a state of tension between the host and the guest. Both the host and the guest are expected to seek reconciliation and resolve the tensions by having recourse to the elders of the community; who in turn will require both parties to offer prayers and perform rituals to restore accord between them.

The appreciation of kola nut is not limited to only adherents of the indigenous religions. Christians and Muslims in Nigeria appreciate the importance kola nut plays in their lives because they belong to these cultures where kola nut breaking is practiced. However, the question would be, how can kola nut breaking be used in a concrete way to encourage dialogue among the religions? I would like to give a brief pragmatic example. In the different cities, villages, and towns in Nigeria, people of different religions live side by side as neighbors even though they may harbor ill-will against each other. The religious leaders in the different communities located in these towns can begin first by gathering together and partaking in kola nut breaking while remembering the significance of such a ritual in the cultures as a way of fostering harmony. When they have established trust among themselves, then they can extend such gestures to their fellow religious members and begin their meetings by breaking kola nut and emphasizing the importance

kola nut plays in their cultures to foster peace and harmony. This is important since other ritualistic objects in the respective religions may not be appreciated by members of other religions. Kola nut can transcend this obstacle since it is commonly regarded by the people as a sacred gift from God to their respective cultures. When religious affiliation fails to establish harmony and peace in the country, it will be worth appropriating such a ritualistic symbol like the kola nut as a means of fostering peace and harmony in the country.

### *Conclusion*

It is most appropriate to commend those women and men who adhere to different religious traditions in Nigeria but have taken up the task of fostering dialogue among the religions. These are the luminaries of our time and worth commending for such a noble task. However, it is of utmost urgency that on the institutional level, the different religions present in Nigeria begin to take seriously the need to engage. The practice of selective dialogical engagement must be rejected. While effort is being made by some Christian leaders to engage Islam, many have not made such commitment. There is a noticeable absence of dialogical engagement with members of the traditional religions in the country. Embracing the spirit of dialogue means that one must not be selective. God's revelatory presence through other religions is not selective and neither should adherents of the different religions in Nigeria be selective in their engagement with each other.

Every act of violence motivated by religious fanaticism is a sign of failure on the part of all religions. The peace of God can fully be realized in human community when religions become agents of this peace and not agents of discord.

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