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Transformational Dialogue and Christian Identity in a Multi-Religious Context: Nigeria in Focus

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Abstract: Dialogue within a multi-religious context presupposes the recognition of the many identities that are involved in mutual encounter and exchange. The understanding, shape or interpretation of each identity plays a critical role in the nature of the dialogical process as well as the outcome of the dialogue itself. This article re-assesses the Christian identity in the dialogue between Christians and Muslims, with a focus on how this plays out in the Nigerian context. It explores how a distinctive African worldview can shape the Christian identity towards an increased relationality, solidarity, and interdependence. Furthermore, the article critically investigates fundamentalist tendencies within Nigerian Christianity, and finally addresses how ‘a personalist approach’ could foster better intra- and inter-religious encounters in Nigeria in a manner that preserves identity while remaining open towards the other (Christian or religious).

Keywords: dialogue; Christian identity; interreligious; interrelatedness of reality; personalist approach



Citation: Okpaleke, Ikenna Paschal. 2022. Transformational Dialogue and Christian Identity in a Multi-Religious Context: Nigeria in Focus. *Religions* 13: 1166. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121166>

Academic Editor: Marinus Iwuchukwu

Received: 8 October 2022

Accepted: 28 November 2022

Published: 1 December 2022

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1. Introduction

Christian solidarity towards the religious other is a concrete example of Christian self-understanding in a space such as Nigeria. This is part of what it means to live out the ideal of Christian identity. However, this practical expression of solidarity is informed not only by a common understanding of the Christian identity but also by a specific African existential worldview that is present in the philosophical and theological contributions of Africans. Thus, the general question of Christian identity in the face of pluralism is asked again, but this time is directed to African theologians. To do this, the opinions of relevant scholars will be examined with the aim of re-evaluating the interreligious engagement by Christians in Nigeria. Appraisals for positive disposition towards, and engagement in, interreligious dialogue are simply not enough. A negative fundamentalist Christian perspective equally needs to be examined as an instance of a projection of Christian identity. Whether a fundamentalist Christian attitude is justifiable in the context of Christian persecution where dialogue appears ineffective in guaranteeing peaceful co-existence is a question that demands a response beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, a Christian disposition to dialogue defined from a lived experience of personal encounter with the religious other, otherwise referred to here as a *personalist approach*, is quite promising for a fruitful interreligious engagement in Nigeria. Meanwhile, to fully understand the local multi-religious context of Nigeria that provides the locus for the exploration of dialogical and Christian identity questions, the starting point is a sufficient analysis of the African particularity, marked by the worldview of interrelatedness of reality and meanings. Here, I have chosen to explore the works of the Nigerian-born, Duquesne University Professor of Theology, Elochukwu Uzukwu, which sufficiently address the African notion of interrelatedness of reality. The search is to explore how dialogue can bring about transformation in a classical multi-religious space such as Nigeria.

2. Christian Identity and Uzukwu's Thesis of African Relatedness

Elochukwu Uzukwu's theological scholarship is underlined by an ecclesiology that is focused on African particularity, which significantly contributes to global theology. Without any disconnection from other contexts around the world, any crisis in Africa ought to be addressed with input from 'a Christian theology that is brewed in Africa' (Orobator 2008). Problems of particular contexts require the inclusion of voices from *within* in the search for solutions. African voices such as Uzukwu's have a lot to contribute in terms of Christian identity that is lived in Africa and even beyond. His work, *A Listening Church* (Uzukwu 1996), is in some sense one of the foremost works in African theology that follows in the robust tradition of theologians such as Jean-Marc Ela, Laurenti Magesa, Jesse Mugambi, Benezet Bujo, Kwame Bediako, Vincent Mulago, Charles Nyamiti, Eboussi Boulaga and Hubert Kamgang. These theologians, and contemporary African theologians, in their diverse approaches and areas of intersection are "saddled with a checkered history of an inherited antiquated ecclesial structure, confronted with a present reality of faith, culture and society," that comes "in precipitated mutations", as well as "a future of complex possibilities at once promising and petrifying" (Orobator 1996, p. 267). The resurgence of violent religious conflicts and radicalization is considered as part of these challenges today. In responding to these challenges, the retrieval and modernization of African cultural values is important for a better Christian theological response. Yet the central question of what it means to claim the identity of African Christianity must be responded to in a way that upholds "the peculiarities of African cultures and the Christian faith" (Ezigbo 2018, p. 682), and in a manner that is mutually enriching. While the Christian faith ought to be expressed and lived out in the cultural codices of the African people, in turn, the person and teachings of Christ ought to be allowed to constantly critique, purify and elevate the African culture.

Uzukwu's contribution begins as an attempt to sketch out the "emergent structures of an African ecclesiology as the point of departure for an African theology of inculturation" (Uzukwu 1996, p. 9). Inculturation was, in the 1990s when Uzukwu wrote *A Listening Church*, the 'poster child' in the African theological enterprise, following the 1994 Special Synod of African Bishops. Underlying this theological trajectory, however, was the desperate search for Christian communal identity among Africans, which at the time shifted from the Christological experiments of the likes of Bujo and Nyamiti to the liturgical articulation of inculturation theology (championed by Mulago and Bediako) as well as the ecclesiological model of 'family' of the African Synod. In all these, African worldviews—despite their variations—remained the key resources and remain relevant today. *A Listening Church* was therefore an ecclesiology in which the church is construed as a family of dialogue (see Orobator 2008, p. 91).

Today, the search for identity among African Christian communities is no longer to be determined solely by a consideration of the events and worldviews of the past but also allows for reflection on the experiences of the present that accommodates the reality of new forms of religious plurality. For while the traditional practice of religion in Africa could be described as pluralistic or diverse, the emergence of Christianity and Islam in the continent, with their respective diversities, further complicates the entire theological space. In the context of this search for identity, Uzukwu praises Vatican II for providing the framework for the emergence and integration of the African cultural and linguistic particularity within the church. It was a particularity that further improved the differentiated identity of Catholicity. Underlying the African particularity is the philosophical ideal of 'relatedness' of reality.

The ideal of 'relatedness' functions within the ambivalence of the African understanding of reality and identity. In the context of liturgy, Uzukwu argues that 'relatedness' reveals itself in the rejection of any form of separation between the *heart that worships* and the *body in worship*. Implied in this ambivalence is the entangled nature of particularity and difference, which according to Uzukwu (2013) constitutes "an ontological imaginative device" that "hovers over all patterns of living and being" (p. 302). The claim here is that the African

mode of knowing and of experiencing reality is captured in “the participant–performer dynamic” according to which “the experience of the other is also the experience of the self, within the rhythmic harmony of interaction” (p. 302). Functioning in the same way, ‘relatedness’, when applied to the ecclesiological model of the family, bridges the dialectical separation of identity and difference. It is characterized by “warmth, solidarity, and intimacy” (Uzokuwu 1996, p. 109) that is not limited to intra-ecclesial life but is essentially aimed at transforming the world. The ultimate aim is the promotion of the wholeness of life of both the individual and the community. There is no room for Christian exclusivism in this grand objective. Rather, the pursuit of wholeness should involve a certain level of disinterestedness that is rooted in the African metaphysic of the interrelatedness of all reality.

In a much later work, *God, Spirit and Human Wholeness* (2012), Uzokuwu critically enhances his thesis and broadens his methodological approach by recognizing the value of interdisciplinarity. Just as Jean-Marc Ela decries the ‘naivety’ of the inculturation model, without outright rejection, Uzokuwu argues that inculturation needs to face the caveat of having “a social liberating agenda” (p. 33) as the only condition for its adoption. Added to this is the fact that it must not be “locked up in mystification and sacralization of structures of power with seductive rhetoric of authenticity and cultural identity” (p. 33). The project of retrieving and modernizing African values, if they must form part of Christian self-understanding in Africa, must be at the service of social transformation.

Transformation in the area of resolving religious conflicts in the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria demands a certain degree of appropriation of African religious values. These values should enhance one’s Christian identity in order to better respond to the questions of identity and difference. In Africa (Nigeria—West Africa), the “creative divine economy” is “informed by dynamic hierarchy” that is “focused on the human good,” so insists Uzokuwu (p. 84). Transcendence is thus tied to immanence through a dispersed mediation of the divine. It would be totally wrong to understand this as a form of polytheism. In other words, what is at play here is that rather than maintaining a strict monotheistic belief system, the conception of the Supreme Being (*Chukwu, Olorun*) as distant from creation is complemented by the mediating agency of the various deities (*Chi, Orishas*).

This divine structure of relationship within creation that defines the African religious reality of the past is a value that Christians can retrieve today for a better self-understanding in the context of plurality. Guided by such a structure, it is claimed that traditional West Africa had no experience of religious war or conflict prior to the emergence of Islam and Christianity. There was indeed a “structural absence of a religion that generates violence” (p. 85). However, without affirming the sufficiency of the values of African traditional religion, Uzokuwu maintains that the focal point of religion must be redefined by a “relational flexible hierarchy, structural to encountering the divine” (p. 86). Rather than engaging in the contestation of doctrines that further deepen communal boundaries, religion ought to focus on “integral wellbeing” and must have “the purpose of realizing destined course in life, and ameliorating human life and human relationships in the world” (p. 86). This understanding is, for Uzokuwu, a panacea to religious conflict and violence, primarily caused by the rejection of difference within, and between, Christians and Muslims. The source of this proposal is the dynamic West African world in which, on the one hand, the invisible God (not represented in any image) is the ground of all narratives and, on the other hand, the “interrelationship between human and a multiplicity of deities is the rule” (p. 104). In this relationship, human beings determine and construct the image of their deities, while the deities in turn “shape the present and future of human communities” (p. 104). Nigerian Christians should therefore explore within the Christian faith the African resonances of dynamism, interrelatedness and diversity for a better and richer understanding of their communal identity. Uzokuwu’s contention is that the possibility of such exploration is already found in the Trinitarian ecclesiology in which “the Spirit is the most fertile entry point” (see also Uzokuwu 2014, p. 135). However, why the Spirit? What sort of pneumatology is being proposed here?

Within African (Igbo) cosmology, the Spirit *relates* with the personal spirits of human individuals enabling them to reach their destiny, their wholeness—by protecting them, healing them, granting them success and good luck, and so on. A personal spirit (*chi*—Igbo; *ori*—Yoruba) which refers to “a complex spirit dynamically related to individual destiny” (Uzukwu 2012, p. 152) is “providentially assigned by God” (p. 153). The personal spirit thus constitutes the link with God “in questions asked about fortunes and misfortunes by the individual and community” (p. 153). The personal spirit (as well as ‘destiny’) differs from one person to another, thus reaffirming the fundamental rule of diversity or multiplicity. This is notwithstanding the affirmation of the equality of all persons. In that sense, contrary to the Christocentric orientation of Christianity, Africa’s loose monotheism is at once anthropocentric in as much as it focuses solely on the realization of the wholeness (full destiny) of the individual and the community.

Relationality as the principle of the interaction between the Spirit of God and human persons thus best underscores the identity of the individual. When applied to Christianity, pneumatology becomes the entry point of the Christian identity in the context of plurality. Here, human persons, in their differences and in their relationship with the Holy Spirit, become the center of focus. God remains the center of unity for all human persons, through the relationship with the Holy Spirit (Okpaleke 2022). An extra role that is decipherable here is the critique of Western individualism, which according to Uzukwu is challenged by an African understanding of the relational character of the personal spirit. This relationality of the personal spirit invariably serves as an anthropological ground of openness towards the other. Hence, Stephanie Lowery is correct in observing that Uzukwu’s anthropology is one that “produces an ecclesiology that values each member’s participation and contribution and deliberately seeks relationships with other communities” (Lowery 2017, p. 137). Relationality is not, however, restricted to one’s community but extends beyond it. Additionally, this extended relationship, despite its challenges, must be constantly enacted particularly in the project of interreligious engagement involving African Christians.

3. Re-Thinking Christian Engagement in Interreligious Dialogue in Nigeria

Part of the implication of a pneumatological route for the African Christian engagement with the religious other is a disposal not only to internalize the Christian belief in the Holy Spirit (Trinity) but also to learn from the African worldview of interrelated reality. Yet, looking at things as they are at the moment, one could ask: What is the nature of Christian engagement in interreligious dialogue in Nigeria, and how has ecumenical dialogue contributed to this engagement? Behind these questions is the fundamental understanding that interreligious dialogue emerged from ecumenical concerns. Indeed, it is clear that the possibility of ecumenical dialogue paved the way for another form of dialogue in which the religious other is taken up as a dialogical partner. At the 1928 Jerusalem Conference of the International Missionary Council, there was a conscious move to engage dialogically with non-Christians with the aim of confronting what was then perceived as a common enemy, namely secular civilization. The initiative was heavily criticized and it generated a lot of controversy. Nonetheless, it later “prefigured one of the platforms of dialogical engagement that would emerge later: working together in a common cause” (Pratt 1991, p. 275). In other words, the pursuit of a *common cause* opened the door to the discovery of the commonalities among world religions through the instrument of dialogue.

Soon this concern initiated a shift from the question of common causes to the question of identity; firstly, from a common cause to common identity of all humans (*Nostra Aetate* §1), and secondly, to the Christian identity in a religiously diverse world. For having come to terms with the plurality of religions in a world in which Christians are called to a mission that often needs the collaboration of non-Christians, the central question was now focused on Christian identity within a pluralistic world. In a way, one could claim that the question of the ‘other’ in interreligious dialogue is first posed within ecumenical dialogue. The ‘other’ was first identified with the *one* that belongs to another ecclesial family. Therefore,

the 'other' was first to be located in the identity of Christian denominations, confessions, or ecclesial communities. As such, the possibility of posing the question of the 'other' within the Christian circle is the condition for the possibility of posing the same question outside of it (see [Okpaleke 2022](#)).

An exemplary site for an appreciation of this dialogically linked 'other' is the *Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa* (PROCMURA), which is the foremost Christian platform of interreligious dialogue. On a general scale, PROCMURA could be acclaimed as an ecumenical venture that is committed to interreligious dialogue, especially with Muslims. Membership, as already indicated, is Christian, though Muslims are always invited to most of its interfaith deliberations. PROCMURA's composition is thus consistent with its origin which has to do with the missionary and ecumenical activities of Protestant churches of both European and African origins. Given both its ecumenical origin and composition, the interreligious dialogue agenda of PROCMURA is sustained by an ecumenical foundation. This explains why it has outlived and outperformed other initiatives such as the *Advisory Council on Religious Affairs* (ACRA) and the *Nigeria Inter-Religious Council* (NIREC).

However, mere ecumenical origins and composition remain insufficient criteria for determining the ecumenical character of any organization. In the absence of ecumenical dialogue, such an organization remains merely an 'ecumenical association'. In fact, a certain attention to "intentional intra-faith or ecumenical effort" ([Ellingwood 2008](#), p. 80) within PROCMURA appears to have been an afterthought in the face of the difficulties with its interreligious engagement. It is not surprising that PROCMURA would later realize that ecumenical disharmony has a great impact on interreligious encounters. This realization became evident in the divergent responses to interreligious dialogue within Christian circles. While some churches were very eager to welcome the idea of dialogue with the Muslim other, some were only interested in converting Muslims. There were still others who would go to the extent of castigating those churches committed to interreligious dialogue, referring to them as "traitors of the [Christian] faith" ([Mbillah 2009](#), p. 40; see also [Ellingwood 2008](#), p. 84).

PROCMURA's realization of the difficulty of interreligious dialogue in the absence of sustainable ecumenical cooperation is not helped by its marginal ecumenical involvement. By primarily seeking inter-faith cooperation, its interreligious project already excludes the participation of those Christian communities who at the first instance are opposed to such a dialogue. In the event that all present circumstances remain constant, one therefore cannot expect a sustainable impact from PROCMURA. This is in accord with the consistently argued standpoint that a sustainable interreligious dialogue presupposes a sustainable ecumenical dialogue. The problem here is further caused by the disconnect with the African understanding of interconnectedness, according to which a Christian already grounded in the Trinity appreciates the link between his or her Christian identity and the openness to both the Christian 'other' and the religious 'other'. Failure in understanding and embracing this existential connection leads to a disconnect between belief and actions, as well as between one well-intended programme of dialogue (say, ecumenical) and another (say, interreligious). Unfortunately, PROCMURA's limitations are thus reflected in the fact that, (a) it did not consider ecumenical dialogue but rather built its programme on an 'ecumenical association' of similar interests, and (b) its mission and methods do not arise from similar visions and methods that ought to have already been tested within ecumenical dialogue. If the actions are not derived from the level of the interrelatedness of reality and meaning then they would lack the power to engineer a sustainable transformative character. One thing is clear, conflict cannot be dispelled merely by legal advocacy or through the provision of assistance to both victims and perpetrators. It may be ameliorated by mediation and preaching, but it takes the transformation of individuals and communities to properly address religious conflicts in a profound manner. Once there is a certain but positive shift in one's self-understanding in relation to the 'other' then the possibility of eliminating religious conflict becomes real. While PROCMURA is representative "of a theology in action; of goals that are relationally proscribed; of commitment to a quality of life and

willingness to be and share with the neighbour who is Muslim” (Pratt 2017, p. 163), what is lacking in Nigeria is a rethinking of Christian identity that makes possible a form of learning *from* ecumenical encounters *for* a more transforming interreligious engagement. Still, from a Christian perspective, it is very difficult to determine how this goal of transformation is to be realized in the context of the fundamentalist attitude among some Christians in Nigeria.

4. Dialogue and the Case of Christian Fundamentalism

The traditional emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the agent of truth, knowledge and enlightenment (cf. John 14: 16–17, 26) became almost entirely displaced by an idea of the Spirit as an instrument of warfare against both spiritual and mundane forces by the Pentecostalism (and Charismaticism) in Nigeria from the 1980s. The indwelling of the Spirit within a Christian was then construed as some sort of empowerment for exclusion with the literal understanding that light must be separated from darkness, good from evil, and believers from unbelievers. Consequently, the Pentecostal attitude towards the ‘other’ became largely segregational and fundamentalist. The identity of the ‘other’ is not to be seen as related in any way to my own identity, and in fact, should not even be allowed to be, while conversion remains the only condition for communion. Massive ‘soul winning’ campaigns have been carried out, even towards Christians of other denominations. Note that this critique does not diminish the impact of Pentecostalism today. In fact, to put things into proper perspective, the 2010 Pew Forum on *Religion & Public Life* indicates that Pentecostalism accounts for about a quarter of the Christian population in Nigeria, and this amounts to approximately 12% of the Nigerian population. On a global scale, Akintunde Akinade affirms that Pentecostals are seriously engaged in “altering social boundaries, reconfiguring economic practices, introducing new moral and ethical standards, and providing new interpretations for interreligious engagement” (Akinade 2014, p. 122). Indeed, Nigerian Pentecostals are not left out as they appear to be redefining what it means to be Christian in a local context, and have increasingly become a great voice in the Nigerian public sphere. Yet some Pentecostal responses to dialogical engagement with both the ecumenical and religious other seem to be borne out of fundamentalist inclinations, and so leave much to be desired. Fundamentalism, of course, has a negative connotation and has been challenged when it concerns the description of Pentecostalism’s attitude to the faith particularly when dialogue with the religious other is at stake.

To illustrate, the Pentecostal Christianity that emerged in northern Nigeria in the early 1980’s was patronized initially by immigrants from the South. The movement had an aggressive evangelism that was targeted at converting Muslims as well as *winning over* lukewarm Christians from the mainline churches. Faced with an intolerant version of Islam, most Pentecostals adopted a corresponding attitude of suspicion and intolerance. There was no room for dialogue. Matthew Ojo (2007) reports that measures such as retaliatory attacks and the study of Islam for purposes of converting Muslims were adopted by most Pentecostals as ways of responding to Muslim fundamentalism (p. 182). Aware of the political instrument of religious domination by Muslims, many Pentecostals did not shy away from engaging in the contest for the public space. With their foray into politics. Pentecostals, as Ojo claims, “provided a mechanism for a wider linkage of opposition to Islamic fundamentalism” (p. 183).

Opposition to Islamic fundamentalism was, for many Christians who experience the effects of such radicalism firsthand, an opposition that is founded on a Christian version of fundamentalism. It was a matter of fighting for survival since the political space was perceived to have been hijacked by Muslims despite the constitutional secular character of Nigeria. Yet, it is in many ways a form of fundamentalism itself. Notwithstanding some obvious differences between the two, both of them are similar on some grounds, particularly in their obsession with ‘heaven’ and in their commitment to conquering the world. This could be seen either in the Pentecostal ‘prosperity Gospel’ or the Islamic ‘jihad ideology.’ Other reasons would include the cult followership of religious leaders with celebrity or charismatic status, the “copious use of the dominant media cultures”, as well

as the promotion of “scriptural literalism” (Iwuchukwu 2018, p. 53). The Pentecostal fundamentalist attitude was expressed in a “new theological and ideological discourse” that brought “the concept of evil and spiritual warfare onto the political agenda, and thus consolidat[ed] new forms of religious expression and political understanding” (Ojo 2007, p. 186). These intolerant ideologies were exacerbated by events such as the introduction of *Shari’a* law and the drafting of Nigeria into the Organization of Islamic Countries. As such, Islam has become, for some Pentecostals, the ‘enemy’ and ‘satanic’; a religion in which ‘the spirit of the anti-Christ’ thrives, Ojo argues further (p. 186). One can conclude that in northern Nigeria many Christians have remained negative, aggressive, and polarized in their relation to Islam. This of course is not different in most other parts of the country, especially in the wake of killings targeted at Christians by suspected Islamic terrorists even in southern Nigeria. The gruesome murder of over 40 worshippers at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church Owo on 5 June 2022 is the latest in a number of unprovoked attacks in recent times. Of course, one must acknowledge that many Muslims have also been victims of these terrorist gangs who are often motivated by sheer criminality.

Surprisingly, where one would have expected the deep pneumatology of Pentecostalism to find resonance with Uzukwu’s assessment of the values of African traditional religion, and so be more open and receptive to the religious other, as could be seen in the Pentecostal pneumatology of Amos Yong, the reverse appears to be the case. Yong (2003) argues for a pneumatology of “interreligious discernment” that conceives “Christian participation in the interreligious dialogue” as an engagement that goes beyond mere “affirmation of religious otherness” (p. 174). Dialogue in this case serves as an invitation to Christians “to discern the Spirit’s presence and activity in the world in general and in the world of the religions more specifically” (p. 174). Yong’s pneumatological approach to interreligious dialogue requires that “sources provided by religions themselves” be taken up in the task of theologizing (p. 188). In fact, for him, this approach guarantees an extensive study of “interreligious and intercultural engagement and comparative religion and theology at its depth,” in such a way that it even clarifies the praxis of authentic Christian faith (p. 190). Unfortunately, in place of a pneumatologically grounded openness and receptivity, we are presented with the harsh denigration and rejection of the religious other. Part of the reason could, however, be explained by the inability of many Nigerian Christians to admit, adopt and integrate the African value of interrelatedness as proposed by Uzukwu. However, beyond the African *raison d’être*, Iwuchukwu would argue that, on the basis of certain socio-political realities, fundamentalist Christians (as well as Islamic fundamentalism) have no option than to engage in interreligious dialogue. The reasons for this would include: (a) the unnegotiable, inalienable human rights with their legal and political consequences in cases of breach(es); (b) the reality of the ‘normatively multi-religious and multi-cultural’ societies of today’s Africa; and (c) the supreme nature of state constitutions which guarantee the freedom of religion and association (see Iwuchukwu 2018, p. 55). To ignore these realities is to be constantly frustrated by conflicts of different sorts.

The Christian penchant for fundamentalist attitudes (since this is not limited to Pentecostals) towards Muslims is to be understood as emanating from an exclusivist perception of the Christian faith that does not become aware of how this identity is intermingled with the other, although one cannot deny the fact that fundamentalist Islam also provides, in a way, the trigger for such a response among Christians. Nevertheless, exclusive Christian identity *in itself* does not really exist, since every identity is ‘compromised’ by difference. In every exclusive Christian identity is the *included* other, whether recognized or not. The consequence is that a claim to an exclusive Christian identity impedes not only the Muslim other, but every religious other, including the Christian other. As an African who is at once a Christian, both the Christian identity and the African identity rob off on and intermingle with each other. This interconnection also relates to other forms of identity that exist, notwithstanding the differences in the degrees or levels of relationality.

5. The Personalist Approach to Christian Dialogue across Multiple Contexts

Indeed, the claim that dialogue can bring about positive change across different platforms of encounter is specifically addressed to the Christian partner, although the change could equally be experienced by the dialogical ‘other’. Accordingly, the ‘asset’ for this transformation, besides others, could be located precisely in the *personalist approach*, which captures in practical terms the Uzukwu’s African interrelatedness of reality. Within the context of ecumenical dialogue, this approach has been argued out from the private testimonies of theological experts, particularly Theresa Okure and Konrad Raiser (2018); see also (Zikmund 2014) as representing an incorporation of the personal dimension to official dialogical encounters. Of course, there are many understandings of the idea of personalism/personalist approach that one could find in the fields of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and theology. However, I use the concept here to refer to the individual awareness of interrelatedness on the basis of personal experience within dialogical settings that are defined by institutional representation. A *personalist approach*, therefore, raises the critical question of *how* members of the church—besides the Magisterium and theological/dialogue experts—can participate in the process of dialogue itself (not merely in the reception of results) while remaining open to transformation without losing their identities. It challenges a dialogue model in which members of the church are considered passive agents in the dialogue, and then regain a moderate active agency at the reception process. It insists that the person should not be taken as an object of abstraction in the church. The *person-in-the-community* is a concrete entity, who, though shaped by the communal identity, is at once a singular embodiment of that communal identity. Without the person who believes, doctrines would generate no meaning; without a person, who is conscious of the interrelated nature of realities beyond his or her immediate community, dialogue cannot happen, neither would authentic reception take place. The radical nature of this approach is that it allows the person to bring to the sphere of dialogue a recognition of his or her multiple constitutive *identities*. In that way, an African dialogue partner no longer represents the ecclesial institution in a way that only projects the doctrine in its purity, but also brings along the many layers of identity that chime with the African idea of interrelatedness. The result is that the intersections of African and Christian values in terms of tolerance, hospitality, and community become clearer.

Okure (2017), a strong advocate of this approach, premised on the commonalities of Christian identity and reflected in the “one faith, one Christ, and one Bible (though with different canons)” (p. 153), and this should not be understood as a dialogue that is based on the lowest common denominators, but as an affirmation of a common heritage. Clearly, the personalist approach to dialogue does not go against any communal approach but complements it by recognizing the role of the individual subject or person—together with his or her cultural and historical experiences. In other words, the agency of the individual is highlighted as an active element within the community, and in this case, official dialogue is no longer reserved exclusively to experts but reconstructed as a place of encounter among persons of different faith communities who demonstrate an awareness of the interrelated nature of realities and meanings both within and beyond the communities to which they belong. I suspect that Okure must have been thinking along these lines in the context of the Anglican–Roman Catholic dialogue when she calls for a broad range of encounters built on mutual learning: “We have men, women and youth organizations in each of our churches. . . Can we challenge these groups to find ways of working together, getting to know one another and moving out of themselves into Christ?” (p. 154). In the pastoral structure, the laity is represented at different levels by associations such as the Catholic Men Organization (CMO), Catholic Women Organization (CWO), Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria (CYON), Nigerian Federation of Catholic Students (NFCS), and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria (CCRN) on the Catholic side, and parallel to the Anglican side, we have the Christian Father’s Fellowship (CFF), Church of Nigeria Mothers’ Union Council (CNMUC), Anglican Youth Fellowship of Nigeria (AYFN), and the Evangelical Fellowship of Anglican Communion (EFAC). Mutual learning is an opportunity to deepen

this consciousness of interrelatedness, and so establishing a scheme for mutual learning at parallel organizations will be beneficial to the overall programme of ecumenical dialogue and reception.

In the realm of interreligious dialogue, one finds the effect of the personalist approach in the transformation of the greatest proponents of dialogue with the religious other, whose biographies indicate their profound experience of the religious other that is deepened in the course of dialogue. Theologians such as Raimundo Panikkar, Jacques Dupuis, Mark S. Heim, Peter C. Phan, and Francis X. Clooney, or a spiritual master such as Thomas Merton, to mention a few, have experienced a change of perception of both the other and their own identity through direct encounter and dialogue. The challenge is to make such experience (notwithstanding the controversies sometimes) available to the community, even if in a somewhat structured way that equally involves experts in ‘participant-supervisory’ positions. In that sense, the challenge is to take the transformative experience beyond the narrow circle of experts to the wider community. This should be done in such a way that reception becomes at once an *experience* of the dialogue process itself, rather than a ‘receiving’ of dialogue results. Apart from the Christian partner, whose identity is to a great extent ‘familiar’, an encounter with the religious other means that certainty could only be maintained on the same side. However, the task is to apply the ‘dialogue asset’ of the *personalist approach* in such a way that the dialogue with the religious other could also benefit from the transforming power of dialogue, for the specific purpose or objective of this form of encounter. With such a framework of interrelatedness, it is only reasonable to modify the application of the *personalist approach* in line with the nature and goal of the interreligious form of dialogue.

6. Applying the *Personalist Approach* to Interreligious Dialogue

There is need to strategically modify the *personalist approach* to interreligious dialogue given the interplay of socio-political factors within this area of dialogue, at least in Nigeria. In a theological enterprise of dialogue that aims at peaceful co-existence, the use of ‘strategy’ in dialogue should not be considered optional. This is even applicable where a spirituality of dialogue requires that an openness to the ‘unexpected’ be maintained. Yet the ‘unexpected’ ought to be entertained as some form of *hope*. Strategy as a critical aspect of dialogue is quite popular in the corporate social world, with a higher ratio of measurable predictability when contrasted to theology’s ‘unexpected’. As such, for systems to function properly there should be a certain level of stability. Factors such as experience, clarity in judgment, structured planning and well-developed communication determine the strategic operation of most corporations (see Gilmore 1975; Cooper 1981).

Dialogue as a form of strategy in the corporate world considers three areas of action, namely (a) the ‘decision purpose’ which is the focus of corporate conversation or dialogue, (b) the ‘communication style’ which is always adjusted to the realization of the purpose, and (c) the ‘leadership role’ that involves casting the right kind of leaders for the task of realizing the set purpose (Bourgoin et al. 2018, p. 588). Dialogue conceptualized in this manner, is not to be considered as a mere “conventional communication channel through which information about decisions is disseminated,”; rather, it constitutes “the very tool with which a vision is formulated and strategic decisions are made and implemented” (p. 589). Beyond passing of information down the corporate chain, dialogue assumes a deliberate character whereby “it must be carefully orchestrated and facilitated so that it is truly productive and conducive to thrilling ideas” (p. 589) within the network of units of a firm. Within religious dialogue, strategy takes a slightly different approach.

Strategic modification of the *personalist approach* primarily seeks to integrate the approach within interreligious dialogue. This attempt does not directly take off from how it functions in the corporate environment, though one could ‘learn’ from the conceptual structures of ‘purpose’ and ‘communication style’. Since the purpose of interreligious dialogue in a setting such as Nigeria is the resolution of religious conflict, the element of ‘purpose’ remains unambiguous. What is yet to be addressed is the question of ‘how’. How

can we achieve the ‘purpose’? What dialogical mechanism or ‘style’ is needed? It is exactly in this context that the term ‘strategy’ assumes an important function in this article.

Turkish Professor of Islam and Interfaith Relations at the Necmettin Erbakan University, Kemal Argon, considers strategic methodology to be very important in interreligious dialogue. Argon who relies heavily on the idea of strategic formulation in the corporate community focuses on the safeguarding of the identity of minority Muslim organizations (Argon 2009). Argon’s operating strategic methodology accounts for both a background study as well as the practicality and functionality of the process and goal of dialogue; however, it fails to address the peculiarity of interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue cannot be construed as a project that is directed towards a defined, controllable and highly structured community. There must be a combination of structure and structurelessness that allows for the awareness of the interrelatedness of reality and, consequently, of lived encounters among participants in dialogue. Moreover, Argon’s strategic method operates from a completely different perspective and background. His standpoint is the Islamic identity and his methodology seeks to maintain the tension between inter-Muslim (by which he means the dialogue among different Muslim communities) and interreligious dialogue. With a focus on ‘local minority Muslim communities,’ Argon’s interest is the search for a “methodology that combines with a portfolio of choices of different genres of Christian–Muslim dialogue, observed in practice, which can also be adapted for planning and programming inter-Muslim dialogue” (p. 355). Admittedly, there is the intention of accounting for the different levels of dialogue (*ad intra* and *ad extra*) and communities, and this can only be made possible by a common grounding that we can only discover in the African understanding of the interrelatedness of reality.

Strategic integration of the *personalist approach* in interreligious dialogue, as proposed, could thus happen without a rejection of the different genres or practices of interreligious dialogue that exist today, particularly in Nigeria. As a ground rule, it must be marked by an open disposition towards various practices that address the diverse contexts and identities of the communities under focus. At the center, however, is an appreciation of the African value of interrelatedness. If the approach to dialogue with the Muslim other takes as its starting point the values of relationality, hospitality and communality that are found both in the religious sources and traditional mores of the individual participants then a more fruitful encounter is highly possible. This may even require a demonstration of acts of hospitality so that persons are first moved not just by their religious knowledge but by acts of service (*diakonia*). Doing something *before the other* and *for the other* takes a person away from a fixed position of identity preservation to a point of lived encounter. The *diakonia* redefines the religious other not simply as a dialogue partner but as *the other whose presence commands my service and to whom I am responsible for his or her well-being*. What comes to the fore is the lived reality of the African who is at once a cultural being and a believer; an African who understands the sacrality of the neighbour and the interrelated nature of the ‘other’ with the ‘self.’ Thus, the purpose, communication format, and leadership style must emanate from the background provided by the Africanness while insisting that dialogical encountered must be embodied in the persons involved.

7. Conclusions

When Reinhold Bernhardt (2013) describes interreligious theology as “an orientation of Christian theology” (p. 49), an ecumenical ground implicit in the ‘Christian theology’ is often lost to most Christians. The starting point is the Christian identity understood in its complexities, including its Africanness, as the case may be in Nigeria. In this same light, interreligious dialogue cannot be conceived as an aspect of Christian theology if it is not first and foremost designated as ‘Christian’, an identity that underlies all ecumenical relationships. A Christian transformational dialogue that cuts across the ecumenical and interreligious divides in Nigeria must answer the primary question of what it means to be a Christian and at the same time a Nigerian (African). What central values of relationality have shaped my self-understanding as an African and a Christian? What were

the formative worldviews that have defined my humanity and opened me up to the embrace of Christianity? These formative values and orientations are not historically isolated constituents of a person or even a community, but enjoy different levels of continuity, either covertly or overtly. Hence, the causative factor of dialogue is not the external, imposed by the conflict with the Christian or religious other. Rather the motivation is internal, namely a realization that one's self-understanding is intrinsically entangled with that of the other, and this awareness is that of the formative African *principium* of the interrelatedness of reality. This awareness, on the one hand, dissolves the claim that communal boundaries are rigid and impervious to honest dialogue, and on the other hand insists that acts of 'fidelity to one's identity' and 'openness to the other' (Pratt 2014) are not to be construed as contradictory. In fact, in this case, identity is taken seriously, but in its constitutive dynamism and complexity.

Finally, just as in the ecumenical *personalist approach*, the practice of interreligious dialogue would have to follow a similar integrative framework that bridges the gap between the academic and non-academic, expert and grassroots, elite and non-elite forms of dialogue. The practice of interreligious dialogue must be reconstructed in a way that accommodates the interplay of all its forms and cadres of practitioners. Overall, the transformation of communal identity remains the expected ultimate goal for all the agents of dialogue and of dialogue itself. It follows then that any ecumenical or interreligious engagement that does not transform society by reshaping the attitude, conduct, or behavior of people (primarily Christians) towards the other in a way that is reflective of their identity in Christ is highly suspect. It only reflects a theology that is not life-giving, and is irrelevant to the Christian mission in Nigeria and, even, today's world.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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