Vatican II and Interreligious Dialogue: It’s Impact on the World and the African Church

By

Michael McCabe SMA (Tangaza College, Nairobi, Kenya)

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council was the first ecumenical council in the history of the Church to give serious consideration to the Church’s relationship to the followers of other religions and to advocate interreligious dialogue as an integral dimension of her mission. Its positive statements about other faith traditions decisively shaped the Church’s understanding of itself and its mission in ways from which there is no return, in spite of some current difficulties and set-backs. My presentation will attempt a) to highlight the significance of the Council’s teaching on interreligious dialogue and draw out its implications for the understanding and practice of mission and b) to flag some achievements, difficulties and challenges of interreligious dialogue, especially in the present African context. First, I will begin by stating two crucial presuppositions of this paper.

Two Presuppositions

My first that it is that dialogue is primarily between peoples not belief systems; my second is that it involves the entire culture of a people. The first presupposition clearly implies that respect for, and openness to, the followers of a religion is the necessary foundation for a better understanding and appreciation of that religion. The second presupposition highlights the fact that religions are embedded in, and carried by, cultures (the entire way of life by which a people express, confirm and nurture their identity as a particular people). Hence interreligious dialogue is, at one and the same time, intercultural dialogue. This is particularly true of religions where the forces of secularism have not yet divorced the spiritual from the material world as, for example, the traditional religion of Africans.
A. The Significance of Vatican II

Over the past 50 years the Church’s relationship to the followers of other religions has moved “from confrontation to dialogue,” to quote from the title of a familiar book by Belgian theologian, Jacques Dupuis.¹ Most missionary congregations were born at a time when the Church’s relationship to non-Christian religions oscillated between hostility and neglect. It was not the purpose of mission to enter into dialogue with the followers of other religions but rather to convert them to Christ and make them members of the true Church.

The missionaries were the Church’s frontier troops, leaving their home countries in a spirit of self-sacrificing love and service to proclaim the Gospel and establish the Church in pagan lands. They saw themselves as engaged in a one-way traffic.² It was they who had to bring the true faith, while the pagans were merely the recipients; it was they who had to convert, while the pagans were the ones to be converted. For the missionaries it was inconceivable that other religions apart from Christianity -- or more precisely the form of Christianity found in the Catholic Church -- could facilitate a saving encounter between God and people. Far from being “seeds of the Word” (AG 11), other religions were viewed as “cocktails of idolatry or superstition,”³ and works of the devil. This negative evaluation to other religions, which continued practically up to the time of the Second Vatican Council, found expression even in the language of Christian prayer. We prayed for ‘the poor heathen,’ for ‘those steeped in superstition and ignorance.’ In a Prayer for the Conversion of Africa, still in use up to 1964, when I entered the Society of African Missions, we prayed as follows:

O my God, behold us humbly prostrate in thy presence beseeching thee through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, to have pity on infidel Africa. Change the hearts of its unhappy children and save their souls.⁴

In the light of this negative evaluation of other religions, the positive approach endorsed by Vatican II seemed like a revolution. Jacques Dupuis has termed the Council a

¹ *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis), trans by Phillip Berryman, 2002.
⁴ Directory of the African Missions, Guy & Company Ltd., Cork, 1957, p. 44.
“watershed”\textsuperscript{5} in the Church’s approach to other religions. Certainly no simple ‘hermeneutic of continuity’ can do justice to the newness of the Council’s teaching. However, this positive approach did not just suddenly appear out of the blue, so to speak. It should be seen rather as the climax of a theological and pastoral movement around the middle of the 20th century that tried to develop a more positive approach to other cultures and religions and to promote dialogue as an important component of mission.

In Africa and Asia there were theologians and anthropologists who sought to find within the local cultures of ‘non-Christians’ what were called human and spiritual values that could serve as ‘stepping stones’ to the Gospel (\textit{preparatio evangeli}). I should also add here that missionaries themselves played a significant role in bringing about this change of approach.\textsuperscript{6} Their own positive experiences often led them to question the negative theological evaluation of other religions they had received and to bring to light the many positive values they found in the cultures and religious traditions of the people among whom they worked.

Vatican II took this irenic approach to a new level with its recognition and affirmation of spiritual and moral values (“seeds of the Word”) in non-Christian religions and cultures. This affirmation can be seen especially in the major documents of the Council: the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, \textit{Ad Gentes} (\textit{AG}); The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, \textit{Lumen Gentium} (\textit{LG}); the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, \textit{Gaudium et Spes} (\textit{GS}); and the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions, \textit{Nostra Aetate} (\textit{NA}).\textsuperscript{7}

\textbf{The Spiritual Treasures planted by God among the Nations}

The acknowledgement of authentic human and spiritual values in other religions is expressed more forcefully in \textit{AG} 9 & 11 and \textit{NA} 2 than elsewhere in the Council documents.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 59.
\item \textsuperscript{6} In Africa the contribution of Placide Frans Temples, a Belgian Franciscan missionary who worked for over 20 years in the Congo and published an important study of what he termed Bantu Philosophy (\textit{Philosophie Bantou}) in 1945 is widely acknowledged. Less well known is the contribution of Kevin Carroll, SMA, a missionary in Ghana and Nigeria for nearly 50 years, to the appreciation of African art and culture, especially among the Yorubas. That lacuna is now being rectified with a major Conference on his work being organised by the SMA to take place in the Dromantine Retreat and Conference Centre, Newry, N. Ireland on the 6\textsuperscript{th} October, 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Other themes found in these documents, e.g., the broadening and deepening of the meaning of mission, and the acknowledgement of cultural diversity as a value to be cherished by missionaries, also give strong theological foundation for viewing interreligious dialogue as an integral dimension of mission. I have elaborated these themes at greater length in an article I wrote a few years back. Cf. “Mission as Dialogue” in the \textit{Tangaza Journal of Theology and Mission}, 2010/1, pp. 31-46.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
AG 9 states that “whatever truth and grace is already found among the nations is a sort of secret presence of God.” AG 11 goes on to spell out the implications of this affirmation for the members of the Church and especially for missionaries, emphasising the need for dialogue:

In order to be able to witness to Christ fruitfully, Christians must be united to those people (gentes) in esteem and love. They must take part in their cultural and social life through the various dealings and occupations of human life. They must be familiar with their national and religious traditions; with joy and reverence they must discover the seeds of the word hidden in these traditions…. Just as Christ searched the hearts of people and led them to the divine by truly human contacts, so his disciples, deeply imbued with the Spirit of Christ, should know the human persons among whom they live and associate with the. In this way, through sincere and patient dialogue, they will learn what treasures the bountiful God has distributed among the nations.

This positive approach receives even more emphatic expression in the Declaration Nostra Aetate. In its first paragraph the Declaration situates its directives on the Church’s relations to the followers of other religions in the broad context of the common origin and destiny of all people in God, and of the search, common to all religious traditions, to answer ultimate question about the meaning of human life. It then goes on, in the second paragraph, to exhort the members of the Church

prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness to the Christian life and faith, to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral good, as well as the socio-cultural values found among them (NA 2).

Despite its appreciation for the authentic human and spiritual values to be found in other religions and its exhortation to missionaries, and to all members of the Church, “to acknowledge, preserve and promote” these values, Vatican II did not offer, according to Dupuis, a definitive theological evaluation of non-Christian religions or spell out what role, if any, they may have in God’s plan for the salvation of humanity. Be that as it may, there is more than sufficient evidence to support the conclusion that the Council viewed the spiritual and moral values found in other religions as part and parcel God’s personal outreach to all peoples and not merely an expression of the human search for God.⁸

---

⁸This seems to be the line adopted by Pope Paul VI in Evangelii Nuntiandi (1975), where non-Christian religions are termed “natural religious expressions, worthy of esteem” but incapable of establishing “an authentic and living relationship” with God (Cf. EN 53). The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s
A major theme running through several of John Paul II’s encyclical letters and speeches is that of the universal presence and action of God’s Spirit in human history. His first encyclical, Redemptor Hominis speaks of “the firm belief of the followers of other religions” as an effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body” (RH 6). His strongest statement on the universal presence and action of the Holy Spirit is in his encyclical on the Permanent Relevance of the Church’s Missionary Mandate, Redemptoris Missio (RM), published in 1990. RM 28 states unambiguously that the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, everywhere in the world, “affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions.”

It is clear that, for Pope John Paul II, the many and varied religious traditions of humanity are much more than mere attempts by human beings to reach out to God. They are genuine, if always limited, expressions of God’s outreach to human beings beyond the boundaries of the Church and manifestations of the Spirit of God at work in the world. If, then, God’s Spirit is present in, and works through, other religions, it is surely legitimate to speak of these religions as playing at least a participatory role (albeit dependent on the unique and definitive mediation of Christ) in the salvation of their followers. And, if this is accepted, may we not also view these religions as integral elements in God’s providential plan for the salvation of human beings? This is the line being followed by a number of highly respected Catholic theologians, notably Jacques Dupuis and Claude Geffré, and it provides, I submit, a strong case for attuning mission to the key of dialogue.

Dominus Iesus (2000) seems altogether too niggardly in its theological evaluation of other religions as representing “the sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration,” but not to be considered in any way as revealed truth (DI 7). This, in turn, means that the followers of these religions cannot be said to have “theological faith” (ibid.). This position, it seems to me, is impossible to reconcile with Ad Gentes 9 which speaks of “elements of truth and grace” to be found among the nations and which “are, as it were, a hidden presence of God” (italics mine).

Christianity, too, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, is also a limited expression of God’s loving self-donation in history.

Redemptoris Missio seems to allow for such a dependent but important mediatory role for non-Christian religions when it refers to “participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees” beyond the frontiers of Christianity. Cf., the final sentence of RM 5.

While Dupuis’ views came under the scrutiny of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, its final judgement cleared Dupuis of any trace of doctrinal error.
Mission as Dialogue

The teaching of Vatican II on other religions has enormous implications for the understanding of the Church’s mission, especially its mission ad extra. The Church and all its members are called to participate in a movement of self-giving love that comes from God and of which God’s Spirit is the primary agent -- and who is present and active among all peoples in and through their religions and cultures.

As participants in God’s mission, missionaries never begin from a tabula rasa. Rather they encounter human beings and a world in which God’s Spirit is already operative. God is everywhere before them, and salvifically active in ways unknown to us. Mission thus means entering into the mystery of a missionary God whose love embraces the world and all its inhabitants: the mystery of the Spirit’s power, present in unexpected places and unsuspected ways; the mystery of people’s participation in the paschal mystery in ways we have neither known nor imagined (cf. Gaudium et Spes, no. 22). To encounter this mystery we need to look, to contemplate, to discern, to listen, to learn, to respond, to collaborate.

Engaging in mission in this more open and dialogic mode does not mean in any way bracketing, much less abandoning, the missionaries’ core convictions, as disciples of Christ, about the unique and constitutive role of Christ in the salvation of humankind. Some advocates of religious pluralism, like Alan Race, John Hick and Paul Knitter argue that in order to enter into genuine dialogue with the followers of other religions, Christians must abandon or radically revise their claims about Christ so as to accord other religions parity of esteem with Christianity. However, the parity of esteem required for genuine dialogue is to

---

13 The clearest official endorsement of this position is to be found in a 1984 Document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue on “The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions” which insists that mission and dialogue can never be separated: “Dialogue is the norm and necessary manner of every form and aspect of Christian mission” (no. 29). Cf. also in this regard the major contributions of Michael Barnes SJ (Theology and the Dialogue of Religions, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2002) and Paul F. Knitter (Introducing Theologies of Religions, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2002).
15 While Hick has written several books in support of the pluralist model of the relationship between the religions, the clearest exposition of his position is to be found in God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religions, Macmillan, London, 1973.
be accorded to the dialogue partners, not necessarily to the belief systems they espouse. As Jacques Dupuis rightly points out, holding on to one’s faith in Jesus Christ as unique Saviour of all people need not undermine a commitment to mutual dialogue on equal terms. What is essential in interreligious dialogue is that one is prepared to listen to the other, to allow oneself to be challenged by the other, and to believe and hope that through this dialogue one can come to a more adequate understanding of the faith of the other and of one’s own faith as well. This is the approach taken by a number of Catholic theologians today, who are committed exploring their own Christian faith in the context of dialogue with other religious traditions. For example, John Keenan and Joseph S. O’Leary are exploring Buddhism to gain a better understanding of aspects of their own Christian faith. Francis X. Clooney is doing something similar while comparing Christian and Hindu texts, and David Burrell finds it profitable to dialogue with Islamic thought so as to deepen his understanding of the Christian doctrine of God.

In the encounter with others, the first task of missionaries is to seek out and discern where and how God’s Spirit is present and active among them, in and through their religions and cultures. They must not impose our agendas on people. Rather they must try to discover God’s agenda by entering into the already existing dialogue between God and people with the heart and mind of Christ. For this they need to develop a capacity to be surprised by God and to recognise how the Christ “who plays in ten thousand places/, lovely in eyes and lovely in limbs not his/ to the Father through the features of men’s faces” (G. M. Hopkins).

### B. Achievements, Difficulties and Challenges of Interreligious Dialogue in the African Context

It must be acknowledged that the Council’s teaching on other religions and on interreligious dialogue as an essential dimension of the Church mission was, for the most part, taken to heart by the missionary and religious congregations working in Africa as well as by the local Church. Catholics no longer speak in derogatory terms about the followers of

---

17 As the Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, states: “Equality, which is the presupposition of interreligious dialogue, refers to the personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content” (no. 22).


19 Cf. also, James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and non-Christian Religions*, Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1999, pp. 139-180. This author also sees the positives to be gained from a comparative study of non-Christian religious traditions.
other religions as “infidels” or “pagans” but rather refer to them by name, e.g. Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, or followers of traditional religion. Courses in Islamic Studies, Interreligious Dialogue, Traditional African Religion, The Christian Theology of Other faiths, are offered in many African seminaries (though not all), Universities and Theological Colleges throughout the continent.

Numerous seminars, Summer Schools and workshops have updated and deepened the understanding of priests, religious and some of the laity regarding the Council’s teaching on interreligious dialogue and the new faces of mission. Congregations like the Jesuits, the Dominicans, the Franciscans, the Passionists, the Combonis, the Missionaries of Africa, and indeed many others, have not only initiated specific projects of interreligious dialogue (especially with Muslims) but have adopted a dialogic approach in their understanding and praxis of mission. I will illustrate this point with just two examples, the first taken from the revised Constitutions and Laws of the Society of African Missions and the Second from the Constitutions of the Medical Missionaries of Mary.

The SMA Constitutions and Laws (2004) article 1 states:

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we aim to be a sign of communion and an instrument of dialogue among cultures, religions and churches, so that the Kingdom of justice and peace, love and truth, may become a reality.

Article 20 gives even clearer expression to the dialogic dimension of the Society’s mission:

In our mission we seek to be enriched by the cultures and religions of the people among whom we live and work. Thus with them we may be more fully evangelised by the Holy Spirit who works in all.

The revised Constitutions of the Medical Missionaries of Mary (2005), article 9:15, states that the members of the Congregation are “called to pray and to celebrate the liturgy with people of different national and religious traditions and beliefs and to search with them for the ‘seeds of the Word’ which lie hidden in their cultures.” An earlier article, referring to

---

20 A lacuna in this context has been the religions of Asia which have received very little attention in most African theologates, seminaries or universities. Cf., Guido Oliana’s “The Theological Challenges of Religious Pluralism: Towards a Christian Theology of Other Faiths” in the Tangaza Journal of Theology and Mission, 2010/1, pp. 9-30, at p. 17
21 However, as Albert de Jong had pointed out, religious and missionary Congregations were given many more opportunities for updating on the theological and pastoral orientations of Vatican II than were the pastoral agents of the local Church. Cf., his work, The Challenge of Vatican II in East Africa, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, 2004, pp. 186-192.
the healing ministry of the Congregation, insists that its members should study the history, traditions and customs of those among whom they work and strive “to understand their interpretation of misfortune, sickness, suffering and death.”

**Setbacks, Difficulties and Challenges**

Despite significant achievements and some outstanding efforts on the part of a number of missionary congregations, it must be admitted that interreligious dialogue, especially the dialogue with Islam and with African traditional religion(s) is still in its infancy in Africa. Indeed, in some places and instances, it has gone into reverse mode. Regarding the dialogue with Islam, following many decades of peaceful coexistence and collaboration between Christians and Muslims, the relatively recent emergence of a virulent stream of Islamic fundamentalism and an equally dangerous Islamophobia in some Christian circles, has given rise to new tensions and open conflict in many countries. In the missionary society to which I belong (SMA), our 2007 General Assembly noted a significant lessening of enthusiasm for dialogue with Islam in recent years.\(^{22}\)

However, sometimes setbacks can be a stimulus to fresh efforts. The recent clashes between Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria have led to renewed efforts at dialogue and collaboration.\(^{23}\) Paradoxically, too, the debacle of Pope Benedict XVI’s 2006 Regensburg Lecture,\(^{24}\) where he cited a disparaging remark about Islam’s violent tendencies, made by a medieval Byzantine Emperor, has led to a renewed and intensified dialogue between Muslims and Christians under the initiative known as “A Common Word”\(^{25}\). It should be noted that this initiative was taken not by the Vatican but by 138 Muslim scholars who sent a document (“A Common Word”) to the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and other Christian leaders, reminding them of what Muslims and Christians hold in common, namely, love of God and

---


\(^{23}\) In September 2011, a two-week workshop for SMA missionaries working in eight African countries was held in Abuja, Nigeria. It was launched by the SMA General Council and facilitated by Fr Basil Soyoye, SMA, and Sr Kathleen McGarvey, OLA. An account of the workshop can be wound on the website of the SMA Irish Province at: [http://www.sma.ie/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=903%3Achristian-muslim-dialogue-2011&catid=100%3Aministry&Itemid=101](http://www.sma.ie/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=903%3Achristian-muslim-dialogue-2011&catid=100%3Aministry&Itemid=101). Accessed 12 July 2012.

\(^{24}\) An English translation of the Pope’s lecture can be found at: [http://www.zenit.org/article-16955?l=english](http://www.zenit.org/article-16955?l=english).

love of neighbour, and challenging all to search for mutual understanding in the cause of peace. In spite of this progress, the dialogue with Islam remains an extremely difficult one which, nevertheless, must be pursued with courage and patience for the sake of reconciliation, peace and religious freedom.

If the dialogue with Islam is still in its infancy, this is even more true of the dialogue the followers of traditional religions in Africa. I must confess disappointed that Pope John Paul II’s post-synodal Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995) had so little to offer by way of orientation for this dialogue beyond saying that the followers of traditional religion should be treated with respect and esteem and that courses on African traditional religion should be given in houses of formation for priests and religious (cf. EA 67).

Pope Benedict XVI’s *Africae Munus* (2011), his Exhortation, following the Second African Synod (2009), has somewhat more to say but is rather guarded and more focused on the dangers to be avoided than the potential to be developed in this dialogue. While acknowledging the need for dialogue with traditional African religions, the focus of *Africae Munus* is on the need for “guidance in gaining a deeper and more accurate knowledge of the traditions” in order “to identity points of real divergence” from the Gospel message, to “clarify the vital distinction between culture and cult and to discard those magical elements which cause division and ruin for families and societies” (*AM* 92). The Exhortation also sounds a dire warning particularly about the “scourge” of witchcraft “currently experiencing a certain revival” (*AM* 93) in Africa.

The dialogue with traditional religion in Africa had been stalled by the enormous rift which developed between the Christian faith and traditional African cultures during the modern missionary era when the Church was implanted in Africa. This rift has been deepened more recently by the transportation to almost every part of Africa (especially through the mass media) of the secularised and materialistic Western culture with its attendant problems and negative influences. This situation surely calls for a deep healing

---

28 One of today’s leading African theologians, Laurenti Magesa, insists that the Church must help African peoples resist the forces of globalisation and regain the ability and power of self-definition, thus affirming their dignity and self-respect. For Magesa, the issue of self-definition is critical, for this is precisely what globalisation, following on the heels of colonisation, is taking away from Africans. Cf., “Africa’s Struggle for
and integration, which can be effected only through a painstaking and sustained dialogue with the local cultures, in which the traditional religions are embedded. Here is surely a major challenge for the African churches today.

Another difficulty which confronts the Church’s dialogue with traditional religion is its heavy and heady emphasis on creeds and doctrines, whereas in traditional religions (not only in Africa but throughout the world), the emphasis is more on myth, ritual and celebration. Those who wish to engage in a fruitful dialogue with the followers of traditional religions have to get out of their intellectual grove and examine how the rituals of traditional religion function within the community and respond to human needs rather than to abstract or theoretical questions. To dialogue with the followers of traditional religion we need to attend to what we are feeling or experiencing than to what ideas come into our mind. Indeed, if we are open enough, this dialogue can awaken dimensions of our own experience (for example, greater awareness of our bodies) which we have forgotten or ignored – and may lead us to a more integrated or holistic practice of our own faith.

Personally I have found helpful a suggestion made by one of the participants at a Staff Colloquium on Interreligious Dialogue held in Kimmage (Dublin) in 2001. She said that instead of trying to search for answers given, or even for the questions being addressed, by other religions, it might be more fruitful to try and identify the core values of a religion. In this perspective, it is assumed that each religion has some key or core religious value or set of values which, while probably overlapping with those of other religions, can nevertheless be said to be distinctive to that religion. An Irish missionary and author, Donal Dorr, has identified the core value in traditional religion as “rootedness in nature and in the community.”

From my own experience missionaries who have worked in Africa can readily identify and name the key values of traditional religion. This was verified for me some years ago when I gave a three day seminar on the theme “Mission and the Challenge of Interreligious dialogue” to a groups of African missionaries on a Renewal Course in Jerusalem. I asked them to identify the values they discovered in the local cultures of the people among whom they worked. The values they identified were: joy and celebration, the


unity of all life, relationship and friendship, hospitality and solidarity, patience and endurance. These were not values they brought to the people, but values they found among them, religious values embedded in the cultures – values which they found had enriched and deepened their living out of their own faith in Christ. From my own experience of working as a missionary in Liberia I would add the value of forgiveness. The capacity of so many Liberians to forgive those who have inflicted the most abominable atrocities upon them in the aftermath of the civil wars (1990-2005), when I visited there in 2006 I found utterly extraordinary. As an Irishman I have never come across anything like it in my own country, where we have certainly been victims of criminal oppression by the British but find it so hard to let go of the past.

While focusing on the positive values to be found in traditional religions, we must be careful not to romanticise these religions (as was done in the film “the Emerald Forest” which hit the headlines some 25 years ago, and perhaps more recently in the film, “Avatar”) and ignore negative and apparently destructive elements in them. Spirit possession is a striking feature of many traditional religions, where a group of people or a shaman deliberately set out to be possessed by a particular spirit. While such spirit possession may not always be for an evil purpose (in Zambia, for example, it is used to bring about healing), it is at least ambiguous.

Even more ambiguous is the practice of witchcraft, which, as Africae Munus acknowledges, still has an enormous impact on the everyday life not only of adherents of traditional religion but also of African Christians. There is here a dabbling in the forces of evil which creates an enormous amount of fear, even terror. We cannot ignore the presence of “witch camps” in some of the most developed countries of sub-Saharan Africa. A fundamental Christian conviction is that Christ came to liberate people from this kind of fear. Dialogue with the followers of traditional religions surely requires that the oppressive elements in these religions are also identified and honestly named, and that people’s fears are addressed and redressed. This is what I would see as the purifying or redeeming aspect of the dialogue between the Gospel and a particular culture.

Kate Whitaker, of BBC World Service, gives a disturbing account of the horrific conditions under which these women now live in such camps in Northern Ghana. Her programme, “No Country for Old Women”, which was broadcast on 1st September, 2012, can be accessed on the website:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00x8hm4
So we come back again to the issue of culture. Dialogue with Traditional Religions means dialogue with the followers of these religions and their cultures. Mention of the dialogue with culture raises another difficulty: namely, the sense that this dialogue, despite the many positive statements made in official and unofficial circles, is somehow stuck in a rut or deadlocked. The gap between the Christian world and the world of traditional religion in Africa has certainly not been bridged and hardly even lessened. Many reasons are advanced for this failure. The main ones are a) that past and present inculturation projects are not sufficiently anchored in the everyday life of the people and b) that the process of inculturation was and remains mostly a dressing up with some local colour or an essentially foreign (western) product.

It is sometimes said that the new Religious Movements, offering healing, success, security, dignity and recognition to people, have stepped into the lacuna created by the failure of the mainstream Christian Churches to inculturate the Gospel message. True, the solutions these movements are offering are simplistic in the extreme. Yet, they are responding to real needs in the everyday life of the people. I would suggest that a possible way out of the present deadlock in the Churches dialogue with local cultures is to identify what Paulo Freire terms “the generative issues”\(^{31}\) of a particular culture. There are the issues which respond to the deep, unmet needs and hungers of the community (or significant sectors of the community). Then, instead of just adding and African, Indian or Caribbean flavour to existing rituals, the Church should develop new rituals in response to these issues. While this may be primarily a challenge for the local Church it is also a challenge to which religious and missionary congregations also must respond and for which they have an important contribution to make.

**Conclusion**

A few days ago, I read the now widely circulated interview in *Corriere della Sera*, given by the well-known Italian Prelate and Scripture Scholar, Cardinal Carlo Martini a few days before his death to.\(^{32}\) In the interview he criticised the institutional Church for its pomp and circumstance, its inability to relate to the world in which we live and to communicate the Word of God effectively to the men and women of our time, its lack of flexibility and


\(^{32}\) An English translation of this interview can be found on the “Clerical Whispers Website at: http://clericalwhispers.blogspot.com/2012/09/translated-final-interview-with-martini_5.html
courage. As I read his remarks in the context of revising this paper, I was struck by the relevance of interreligious dialogue not only to the Church’s mission of creating truly inculturated Christian communities and of promoting peace in the world but for its own renewal and creative fidelity to the divine truth it bears but never fully grasps. This idea is beautifully expressed by an Irish theologian teaching in Japan, Joseph S. O’Leary:

Christian thought has to be fully open to the plurality of religious and secular voices that situate and relativise it as a contingent cultural history, which can be responsibly continued only in attentive response to these other voices. This imperative has begun to make itself strongly felt only in the recent past, and it has given rise to the most interesting religious thinking of today. Dialogue... saves Christianity from turning in on itself in an incestuous rehash of its traditions, lets in some fresh air, and restores a human, natural complexion to religious language.

My hypothesis is that pluralism is an irreducible aspect of religious life and thought that can never be ironed out in the final triumph of a single viewpoint. The reasons for this lie in the grain of religious language itself, its reliance on ideas and images that are always culture-bound. The vitality of religion, like that of art, depends intrinsically on the maintenance of a variety of divergent styles.33

Why has there to be a final triumph of one religious viewpoint? Is it not enough that God and his truth should triumph in the end and that, in this triumph, we can all be victorious.