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ENCOUNTER OF RELIGIONS IN AFRICAN CULTURES

LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

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II. RESURGENCE OF ISLAM: IMPLICATION FOR AFRICAN
SPIRITUALITY AND DIALOGUE

A MUSLIM RESPONSE

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A MUSLIM'S RESPONSE

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Our understanding of resurgence is reawakening, revival or reactivation. Is it offensive of a friend or neighbour, considered rightly or wrongly as dying, to gain consciousness and jump back to life? Non-Muslim writers on Islamic resurgence often make the assumption that the resurgence of Islam is a negative development. It ought to be noted that Islamic resistance to external onslaught is a duty which Muslims owe their Creator, and this resistance should be given an attention that is not less than the attention being given to the forces which Islam finds itself resisting. Justice and freedom, in our opinion, are prerequisites for peace and harmony.

Resurgence of Islam in Africa is expected to influence and be influenced by both African spirituality and the plurality of African society, which in turn makes dialogue an inevitable reality.

As noted by Ikenga-Metuh,¹ spirituality may be good or bad. The consciousness of Islam by Muslims challenges the validity of African spirituality. It proposes a new approach to spirituality of Africans, while Islam too reaps the bedrock of spirituality, which African culture has laid down in the life of Africans. Devotion, a wholistic view of humanity and unallayed commitment to religious dictates were not new to Africans.

In a wider sense, resurgence of Islam needs to provoke a new understanding of spirituality which lays emphasis on asceticism and mysticism. To what extent African spirituality will accommodate Islamic spirituality remains a question for the individual or groups of individuals who are caught between Islamic consciousness and traditional spirituality.

In our opinion, the implications of Islamic resurgence for dialogue have to be considered along with the following questions:

- i) What were the causes of the presumed docility of Islam prior to the period of Islamic resurgence?
- ii) What are the goals of the resurgence?
- iii) Are the goals and objectives of Islamic resurgence compatible with dialogue?
- iv) Would dialogue impede or speed up the reactivation of Islam in Africa?
- v) What are the theological bases in Islam for dialogue with adherents or peoples of other faith traditions?
- vi) Does Islam not remain a misunderstood religion in Africa in particular and in other parts of the globe in general?

These questions continue to arise, without attracting sufficient attention throughout the scholarly and highly educative paper under discussion.

¹ E. Ikenga-Metuh: "The Revival of African Spirituality. A Leaf from African Instituted Churches". See below: Chapter III.

The history of Islam in Africa is replete with facts pointing to the low status (slaves, servants and petty traders and preachers) of those who were first associated with Islam. British and French colonialism in Africa, which made Christianity a more or less state religion in the colonies, put African Muslims in a position of weakness which generated in them a suppressed hatred not only for the colonialists but also for their African brothers who are conceived as collaborators and beneficiaries of Muslim subjugation in most parts of Africa.

Secularism, which is defined as "a system of beliefs which rejects all forms of religious faith and worship",² has operated in Africa as "Christianisation", and this further confused the situation of religions vis-a-vis the state in Africa. The African Muslims find their children being forced to accept Christianity if these are to receive Western education and medical attention in educational and medical institutions 'established' by Christian missionaries who were actively supported by the government.³ Without the opportunity of Western education, Muslims continue to be denied meaningful existence. Hence they are faced with the ugly option of losing their religion or their meaningful existence. What moved American constitutionalists towards secularism drives the African Muslims away from secularism.

According to C. Williams: "The situation facing the American constitutionalists was not to split life into two realms—sacred for the church and secular for the state—that too is still under God, what they were seeking to do was to defend the world against the church, because from European experience the church showed all the same tendencies to imperialism as any other institution."⁴

This explains why opposition of Muslims to secularism remains today as strong as ever in Africa.

The resurgence of Islam in Africa is to reclaim the right of African Muslims to equal opportunities,⁵ and to oppose immorality, injustice, oppression and subjugation. In a few instances, Muslims aim at vengeance against their Christian brothers. Where Muslims had got opportunity to rule, some of them had demonstrated Islamic spirit of justice. Iran, which is considered as the most fundamentalist Islamic state, makes a constitutional provision which reserves five out of the two hundred and seventy seats (cf. Article 67) in the national parliament for Christians, who are less than one percent of the population of Iran. This, we believe, commends itself to all lovers of justice, in their dealings with tribal/racial or ideological minorities.

In our opinion, though painful, the oppressed must not be adverse to dialogue. Muslims have little justification for recourse to forceful change unless a dialogical approach has proven to be fruitless. They need to clearly articulate their unpreparedness to be denied Islamic education, application of the *Shari'ah* in matters affecting Muslims alone, right to worship and equal rights and opportunities with others.

² *The Lexicon Webster Dictionary*, U.S.A., 1971, Vol. II, p. 869.

³ I.O. Oloyede: "The Council of Muslim Youth Organisations in Oyo State", in *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1987, pp. 81 ff.

⁴ Colin Williams, "Faith in a Secular Age", *Religion in Secular Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 65-66.

⁵ I.O. Oloyede, *op.cit.*; I.O. Oloyede, "Missionary Proprietorship of Post Primary Institutions in Kwara State; Its Implications for the Educational Development of the State", in I.A.B. Balogun, I.O. Oloyede et al., "Religions and National Development" (Nigeria: Dept. of Religions, University of Ilorin, 1989).

The position of Islam with regard to Jews and Christians is clearly stated in the Qur'an. They are friends and brothers in faith (cf. Qur'an 5.69; 5.47-51; 3.64). More often than not, unfavourable socio-political situations in African countries make Muslims abandon the beautiful pattern of relationship which the Qur'an has laid down as guidance for Christian/Jewish-Muslim relationship. The Muslims believe that the theological bases which the Qur'an abundantly provides for a good and cordial relationship between Muslims and Christians are rendered inapplicable by persistent disregard and attitudes which portray their Christian brothers as harbouring a superiority complex in their dealings with Muslims.

The situation is further complicated by what Muslims consider a mixture of Christianity and European culture. For instance, the notion that Christianity is opposed to polygyny, clapping of hands, drumming, etc., is considered by Muslims as being influenced by European culture. With all sense of responsibility and respect, we are constrained to observe that it appears to Muslims that their Christian brothers do not always allow the rules and regulations contained in the Bible to influence their (Christian) theological positions.⁶ These factors have a very significant implication for Muslim theologians who are conversant with the Qur'anic provisions that the basis of relationship with Christians and Jews is their (Christians and Jews) preparedness to abide by their revealed books (Qur'an 5.68) and that anyone who exhibits disregard for God and Prophet Muhammad is no longer entitled to cordial relationship with the Muslim community until such a person desists from such actions (Qur'an 5.57). This implies that Christians would be helping their Muslim brothers to abide by Qur'anic provisions for good relationship with Christians/Jews by ensuring reciprocal respect and adherence to their respective revelations. Human interpretation with its possible errors could be easily tackled once we all agree to make our respective scriptures the starting points of our inter-faith relationship.

The relationship between Islam and other faiths, apart from Christianity and the Jewish religion, could be accommodated within the provisions of common humanity and goodness to all and sundry. The Sabians mentioned in the Qur'an (2.62)⁷ as members of the family of believers could still be searched for, and identified among adherents of other faiths.

Theologians need to widen their knowledge about faiths other than theirs in order to remove ignorance and its attendant disastrous consequences. Truth about other faiths should not only be known but made crystal clear in order to avoid mutual suspicion and prejudice. It is not unusual to talk about the adaptability of Islam to African culture as a reason for the spread of Islam in Africa. It may not be correct to assume that Islam adapts itself to the African culture of polygyny, belief in supernatural forces and attire. Islam outside Africa still maintains these features. Then, is it not better that we consider such parallel cultures as co-incidental similarities?

It is suggested that Islam adapt itself to African culture, and that "Islam ought to adapt itself sufficiently to African realities, if it is to be more relevant to the African masses." Here one may sense a lack of clarity with regard to the position of Islam vis-a-vis African culture.

⁶ This belief is concretized by the arguments of some church leaders that those things have no theological basis in Christianity. See Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1975), pp. 19 ff. G.H. Joyce, *Christian Marriage: An Historical and Doctrinal Study* (London, 1933); and Schillebeeckx: *Marriage: Secular Reality and Saving Mystery*. Translated by N.D. Smith (New York, 1968), pp. 39 ff.

⁷ See also A.Yi Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, (Translation), Note 76.6.

Muslims will find it difficult, if not impossible, as Mandivenga proposed, "to forgo their cultural identity". The position of *Urfu* and *Adat* (customary practices) in Islamic law is clear. Customary practices are acceptable to Islam only in so far as such practices are not repugnant to provisions of the Qur'an and authentic traditions.

Inter-faith dialogue is necessary for the collective survival of humanity and religious values. Sincerity, frankness, competence, knowledge, conviction, openness, broadmindedness, commitment and emotional stability are essential demands of fruitful dialogue. Justice and fairplay are the guidelines towards understanding and peace.

Religious groups have made sufficient reference to the past. While history is essential, more attention needs to be paid to the future. What can religious groups do together for the enthronement of peace and concord? This, in our view, is the only way forward.