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## Review – SimonMary Asese A. Ahiokhai, *Fostering Interreligious Encounters in Pluralist Societies: Hospitality and Friendship*

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***Fostering Interreligious Encounters in Pluralist Societies: Hospitality and Friendship.* SimonMary Asele A. Ahiokhai. : Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 239pp. \$22.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-3-030-17804-8**

Part of the *Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue Series*, this is a work born of the experience of a Nigerian Roman Catholic, who found himself impelled to rethink his supersessionist ideas about salvation through an encounter with the religious Other in concrete circumstances. This led him to wrestle with how to frame theological discourse that is authentically interfaith and dialogical. An implicit trinitarian thread runs through the text, which posits a model of interreligious dialogue grounded in hospitality and friendship. For example, hospitality, a central concept, is explored through philosophical, cultural and theological lens via the lived experiences of Christian, Muslim and Traditional believers in Ihievbe Town in Edo State, a richly pluralistic region of Nigeria. The experiences of these three faiths concretize the text's argument that dialogue among religions is not only necessary but possible. SimonMary Asele A. Ahiokhai demonstrates well that hospitality and friendship are indeed innate to both the human condition and the religious experiences by which they connect with the divine. Importantly, friendship and hospitality are essential to the interfaith enterprise as friendship concretizes hospitality, but hospitality is prior to and necessary for friendship.

The author undertakes an ethnographic study to capture the perspectives among the members of the three faiths with whom he engaged. Such ethnographic study is rarely done in attempts at theological engagement, but it was certainly necessary to enrich and justify how and why friendship and hospitality are necessary tools of interfaith dialogue. This ethnographic study was undertaken in engagement with the thought of selected Western philosophers, including Buber, Levinas and Aristotle, particularly as they contribute to a deeper understanding of hospitality and friendship with the Other. These perspectives are rounded out with a discussion of the soteriological concept of the hypostatic union which leads humanity into a new way of relating with the Godhead and with each other. Standing firmly in his identity as a Nigerian Roman Catholic, Ahiokhai critically engages the interfaith perspectives of his religious tradition and tells the intriguing though not naively positive story of the process by which

Ihievbe became multi-faith; he is honest and pragmatic. Notably, the people of Ihievbe share worldviews and traditional practices and rituals originating from African Traditional Religion and this validates the centrality of traditional spiritualities, which are too often dismissed by Christianity. For example, giving land to Catholics in the early history of the Catholic Church's mission to the Ihievbe people is a concrete expression of friendship and becomes a basis for communion. This speaks to the uniqueness of the Ihievbe experience, which may not be easily replicable elsewhere.

The author opens up the world of African philosophers on friendship and hospitality in a very useful fashion. Mbiti, for example, shows up particularly in the discussion of "the paradox surrounding friendship as good relationships and enmity as bad relationships within the context of communities whose worldviews emphasize close relationships among their members" (102). Happily, the work of Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Amba Oduyoye are engaged ensuring that the conversation was not only among male philosopher-theologians. Even so, I wanted more. Importantly, Ahiokhai opens up to the world the important and singular contribution of African philosophers and theologians to the scholarship of interfaith engagement. Furthermore, an important part of the attraction of this text is the signal relevance of its content and context to our world today. In spite of much growth, our world is as divided as ever, especially along religious lines. Sadly, the examples are well known and include the USA, Myanmar, Nigeria, India, and Israel. His assessment as captured in the extended quote below calls out to be taken seriously:

Wars of religion are fought most often because there ceases to be any true relational encounter among the adherents of the respective religions. The other religion and its adherents simply become obstacles. The adherents are denied a human face and presence. But when interreligious dialogue is encouraged and friendships are established, the face of the other, wherever she/he may be found, becomes an invitation to encounter. Religious differences become opportunities for dialogue and mutual deliberations (132).

In fearlessly identifying and critiquing the paradoxical elements in Roman Catholic magisterial teachings, which may lessen the opportunity for true encounter, he makes the radical suggestion that the Roman Catholic Church should adopt the religious texts of other denominations and use these in our liturgy. These and other proposals for a radical

way of living together in pluralist societies that are religiously divided are relevant and necessary, but will they get a real hearing?

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