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Building Interreligious Encounter/Dialogue Through Friendship in a Pluralistic World: The Nigerian Context

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In this essay, Dr. Ahiokhai explores the philosophical concept of friendship as a model for fostering interreligious dialog across the Christian, Muslim, and the Ihibve Traditional religions in Nigeria, based on qualitative research conducted between 2011 and 2012, and also on first-hand experiences. By using alterity as grounds for communication and by worshipping openly and collaboratively, we can begin to appreciate not only the 'other', but also ourselves.

Introduction

The incessant tension and violence plaguing religiously pluralistic communities in Nigeria need to be addressed by all parties who are committed to peace and harmony in the country. To foster dialogue among members of the various religions in the country, a new approach of engagement, which originates from a shared human reality, needs to be pursued with all sincerity by those who take seriously interreligious dialogue. I will explore friendship as a tool for the construction of a dialogical model in the context of religious pluralism. In doing this, both the philosophical and the Christian theological traditions will be explored. Also, the

results of my study of the cultural practice of friendship among the people of Ihievbe in mid-Western Nigeria in their religiously pluralistic context will be part of constructing a viable model for interreligious dialogue in Nigeria.¹

By exploring some philosophical analyses of friendship, as well as the cultural and the Christian hermeneutics on friendship, this paper aims to show those enduring characteristics of friendship that can serve as the bases for constructing interreligious friendship. I am writing as a Catholic who had the fortune to be raised in three religious traditions (Christianity, Ihievbe Traditional Religion, and Islam), and who has had the grace to see the beauty of interreligious friendship play out among members of

¹ Approval for this research was sought for from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Duquesne University. The researcher sought for an Expedited IRB approval. As part of this request, I had to take a research course and examination under the Human Subject Research Training Certification Program. The course, Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Training Program administered by Duquesne University was completed in March of 2011. The IRB approval was granted on May 16, 2011, valid until May 16, 2012 under 45CFR46.101 and 46.111 on an expedited basis under 45CFR46.110. The protocol number for this IRB approval is Protocol #11-61. Letters introducing me were sent to the various heads of the religious communities present in Ihievbe on May 17, 2011. These include the Roman Catholic pastor of the Catholic community, the chief imam of the Muslim community, and the High Priest of *Akakamiya* Shrine, which is part of the shrines that make up Ihievbe Traditional Religion. The letters were approved by the IRB on May 16, 2011. I chose the participants from the lists of names of the members of the different religious groups randomly to preserve the anonymity of the participants. Every participant in either the surveys or interviews was given a consent form, which was also approved by the IRB on May 16, 2011.

different religious traditions both within and outside of Nigeria.

Some Philosophers on Friendship

For Aristotle, friendship is not simply a gesture of love between two persons; rather, it involves a triangular approach. Friendship involves the loved and the lover, as well as the object of love, which is the reciprocal goodness inherent in both the loved and the lover.² This point is Christianized by Thomas Aquinas, who argues that in Christian charity, the object of love is God himself. True friendship, for Aristotle, is possible only among equals.³ Aquinas circumvents this Aristotelian position by showing that the very act of God's communication with humanity is itself grounds for friendship. Rather than mutual equality being the grounds for Aristotelian friendship, for Aquinas, the basis for Christian friendship is the corresponding human response to the primal communication of God's happiness to humanity. Reciprocity in divine friendship, argues Aquinas, is possible because of God's benevolent gesture that has graced humanity with the ability to reciprocate virtuous acts.⁴

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (London: Penguin Books, 1953), 205–206.

³ *ibid.*, 211.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2.1.109.2, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2109.htm> (accessed August 23, 2012).

Although Martin Buber, a twentieth century Jewish philosopher, did not write specifically on friendship, his contribution on the discourse of the relationality between the subject and the other is of paramount importance to our friendship discourse. The actual title of his work, *I and Thou*, reflects not a special and secluded type of relationality, but the normal relational contacts that exist among persons familiar with each other in a friendly and non-pretentious manner.⁵ Friendship is essentially a relational reality. Buber gives a descriptive detail of both the relational process and the persons actually involved in that process. He affirms the relational process as the place for constructing identity and, in doing so, focuses on otherness as the locus for identity.⁶

Buber accepts the Aristotelian hypothesis, which states that human nature is essentially rooted in relationality. He constructs two types of relationality, the *I-It* and the *I-Thou*. He affirms the relevance of both, but focuses more on the latter, since it reveals the depth of what it means to be human. While the former glorifies subjectivity over otherness and is not free from a utilitarian construct, the latter involves distancing the other and the recognition of otherness as a legitimate claim in relational encounters.

In the *I-Thou* relationship, Buber emphasizes the place and role of distancing as a precondition for encounters.

⁵ See Hilary Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), 61.

⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 54–55.

Distancing involves a total existential recognition of otherness as the source of recognition of one's subjectivity. In other words, a subject owes the consciousness of her subjectivity to the affirmation of the other. This is possible through two processes: first is the presence of the other, and second is the movement of the other toward the nameless subject. In the *I-Thou* relationship, the hermeneutical movement begins with the other. This is quite different from the general approach adopted by many Western philosophical traditions, which most often affirm the primal place of the subject as the determiner of meaning and identity. By affirming otherness, Buber helps not only the philosophical traditions, but also the Christian tradition, to situate the otherness of God as an example of the authentic definer of identity and meaning. His approach helps to deconstruct the elevation of the self to the pedestal of a false god that has become so common in the consciousness of many in modern society. This nuance that Buber has called for an awareness of can serve the Nigerian religiously pluralistic context. Many attempts have been made by the two major religions in the country (Islam and Christianity) to define the other in negative terms and present their own reality as the only valid way of celebrating God's communicative presence in the world. Even when attempts have been made to encounter the religious other, such attempts have been clouded by religious biases and myths that lead the encounters to become monologues rather than dialogues.

Buber's approach robs the self of the urge to hold onto power and subjugate the other. Relationality in *I-Thou* relationships becomes what is truly intended by God for the

human race. It is about being in the moment and enjoying the presence of the other who transcends all forms of conceptualization or reduction. In the Nigerian context, there is the urgent need to take seriously a critique of generational biases against people of other faiths. Religious traditions have come to be viewed negatively by those of other religions. Attitudes toward indigenous religions have been shaped by the negative hermeneutics on these religions perpetuated by both Muslim and Christian Missionaries.⁷ These missionary agents were able to construct a negative perception of the indigenous religions which has endured to this day. These religions, along with their adherents, are typically viewed as uncivilized, barbaric, and worshipping of the devil. A classic rendition of this view is found in W. H. T. Gairdner's work concerning African Traditional Religions. He writes; "the religious beliefs of more or less backward and degraded peoples all over the world."⁸ For these missionaries, the justification of their missionary cause is

⁷ For a brief treatment of the Muslim jihadist policies toward the African Traditional Religions in the nineteenth century, see John Alembillah Azumah, *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa: A quest for Inter-religious Dialogue* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 94–100. The attitude of many Christian missionaries toward the indigenous religions is reflected in how some of the early Capuchin missionaries to the Kingdom of Benin described those who professed faith in their indigenous religions. Rather than blame their poor strategy of evangelizing the people of the Kingdom of Benin, the head of the Capuchin mission to the kingdom described the people as "obstinate in their errors and worshippers of the devil." See Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 51.

⁸ See Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and The Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 21.

hinged on the idea that African religiosity is incapable of grasping the truths of salvation. Their religious beliefs are simply manifestations of demonic possessions. Unfortunately, there has never been any serious attempt to engage these religions on an equal footing. The rich heritages of these indigenous religions have been mostly rejected by followers of Christianity and Islam. The negative biases have been sustained by its citizens who have embraced either Islam or Christianity. Tensions have sometimes erupted among members of the indigenous religions, Christians, and Muslims, especially when the Muslims and Christians have trivialized the core beliefs and practices of these indigenous religions. The majority of Nigerians demonstrate gross ignorance on the true beliefs of these indigenous religions. Their biases against these religions have mostly been shaped by unfounded myths that were inherited from the missionary agents of Islam and Christianity who did not understand the vibrant and rich heritage found in the indigenous religions.

Furthermore, growing tensions continue to shape the relationship between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria. While Muslims are generally viewed as backward and satanic by many Christians, especially those who have not made any serious effort to understand the inner dynamics of Islam, Christians are viewed by their Muslim neighbors as arrogant and with an agenda to Christianize the communities where Islam was first introduced in the country. Over the years, several governments have capitalized on these religious tensions to push forward a religious agenda that benefits the

religious sects of members of the government.⁹ For the most part, Nigerians have not had the opportunity to engage in serious dialogue and create an atmosphere for interreligious engagement where objective criticism of the *status quo* is fostered. Buber's approach to relational encounters can help correct current negative trends in the Nigerian context. His approach challenges Nigeria's religious communities to abandon these negative and unfounded myths of the religious other. It is an invitation for a new beginning, which can only occur when there is a deliberate attempt to be contrite and to pray as one people serving the mysterious

⁹ During the military rule of General Yakubu Gowon, Nigeria applied to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as an observer without full-membership. This was never put in a national referendum, considering the fact that Nigeria's constitution clearly states that the country is a secular state which respects freedom of religion. Nigeria applied for full membership under the military rule of Major General Muhammadu Buhari, again without the knowledge of the citizens. It was approved under the rule of General Ibrahim B. Babangida and became the organization's 46th member. This led to series of demonstrations by Nigerians opposed to such membership. Again, on April 11, 2009, during the presidency of late Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, Nigeria rejoined the OIC without seeking the views and opinions of the citizens. See Matthew Uzukwu, "The Coming Context for the Nigerian Presidency in 2011 Between Jonathan and Buhari: The Choice before the Igbo People," (December 17, 2010), <http://nigeriaworld.com/articles/2010/dec/171.html> (accessed August 25, 2012). See also NEXT, "Nigeria Rejoins OIC," May 14, 2009, http://www.elombah.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=786:nigeria-rejoins-oic&catid=25:politics&Itemid=92 (accessed August 25, 2012). For a list of current Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) members see Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, "Member States," http://www.oic-oci.org/member_states.asp (accessed August 25, 2012).

God, that invites all of humanity to embrace the path of peace.

A new way of engagement is urgently needed today in Nigeria; one that reflects the ideals of encounter that Buber is inviting humanity to embrace. Negative polemics continue to shape the message of the major religious traditions in the country. Muslims who have never studied Christianity yet have profoundly negative views about it. Christians who have never made an effort to engage Muslims and their rich tradition view Islam and its adherents as violent. These views serve to frustrate attempts being made by the very few people who advocate constructive dialogical encounters.

Another of Buber's works, *Between Man and Man*, is relevant here. In this book, Buber shows that authentic relationality is revealed by the *between*. That is, it is within the interstitial space that true encounter occurs and identity is constructed. In such a relational locus, identity is neither static nor possessed; rather, it is gifted within the encounter.¹⁰ To meet the other in encounter is to meet mystery. The other, as mystery, is the source of en-fleshing the curiosity to want to engage since the other draws the partner in the encounter to new epistemic realities and borders. The other is the condition for sight. Without the other, one cannot truly see who one is, and one's place in the community of relational beings. Just as Buber reminds his readers of the advantages of relational encounters and this being the source for true construction of identity, religious

¹⁰ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 7.

traditions in Nigeria can begin to make an effort to see the religious other as a relevant source of God's grace to their own religious traditions. Muslims, Christians, and traditionalists in Nigeria can arrive at this awareness by doing a critical study of the histories of their respective religions. By going through this process, they will discover concrete and relevant examples of religious tolerance and respect that shaped such religiously pluralistic societies as Spain and the Ottoman-Byzantine Empire during the Middle Ages. Even the sacred texts of these religions in Nigeria have concrete and legitimate teachings on religious tolerance of those considered different from the dominant religions. Perhaps, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria need this advice more since they have been the major actors engaging in negative polemics aimed at proselytizing.

The cordial relationship between the Prophet Mohammed and the *Negus* (king) of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), a Christian sovereign, had a great impact in shaping the Prophet's tolerant approach toward Jews and Christians during his lifetime.¹¹ His instruction to his followers not to spread Islam in the territories ruled over by the *Negus* of Abyssinia was based on the understanding that the Christian religion was to be considered as a legitimate way of worshipping Allah. Also, the practice of *Jizya* by Muslim rulers during and after the death of the Prophet Mohammed, though not perfect, was a concrete example of some form of religious tolerance at a time when religious freedom, as a

¹¹ Clinton Bennett, *Understanding Christian-Muslim Relations: Past and Present* (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 141–142.

fundamental human right, was regarded as an abomination by society.¹² *Jizya* was a per capita tax levied on adult male members of other religions living in Muslim territories. It was a pragmatic way of fulfilling the Islamic requirement for citizens submitting to the tenets of Islam in a Muslim controlled territory.¹³ Those who paid this tax were allowed to practice their religion without being persecuted by their Muslim rulers. Furthermore, Islam's open engagement was not restricted to Christians. A rich and harmonious exchange occurred in the early beginnings of Islam with Judaism. This exchange of ideas helped to enrich the theological, spiritual/mystical, legal, moral, and pastoral traditions in Islam. This deliberate attempt to engage Judaism has come to be known in Islam as *Isra'iliyyat*.¹⁴ Muslims and Christians in Nigeria can draw from these and many instances lessons on how to proceed in engaging members of other religions while also being faithful to their own religious traditions. It should be pointed out that it is erroneous to assume that religious freedom leads to religious relativism. Rather, the opposite is the case. Religions flourish when they interact

¹² For a detailed treatment of *Jizya* as the guiding policy that shaped Islam's treatment of non-Muslims in lands governed by Muslims during the early era of Islam, see Douglas Pratt, *The Challenge of Islam: Encounters in Interfaith Dialogue* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2005), 101–118.

¹³ See Clinton Bennett, p. 144.

¹⁴ See Ronald L. Nettler, "Early Islam and Judaism: The *Isra'iliyyat* in Modern Islamic Thought," in *Muslim-Jewish Encounters: Intellectual Traditions and Modern Politics*, eds. Ronald L. Nettler and Suha Taji-Faouki (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 3.

with each other and come to a broader understanding of their mission and uniqueness.

Buber is quick at making sure that the subject is not robbed completely of its own uniqueness in the relational encounter with the other, for to do so would be to commit a grave injustice toward the subject and making the other a lonely supreme one. Rather, mutuality and reciprocity are the grounds for the legitimacy of both the other and the subject. In the *I-Thou* relationship, the desire to want to engage is not the sole privilege of the other. Though the primal initiator for engaging is initiated by the other, distancing and the reciprocal movement toward each other is the shared action and aspiration of both the subject and the other. This is unlike the Aristotelian position which equates true friendship with the eradication of difference and forms a unity of both purpose and being.

The many constitutions that have been written by the different legislative bodies of the Federal Government of Nigeria have always maintained that Nigeria is a secular state which respects the rights of all its citizens to practice whatever religion they so wish. Many Nigerians, since the nineteen eighties, have feared that there is a hidden agenda to Islamize the country, perpetrated by many of the Muslim military leaders who overthrew the democratically elected government in 1983, and who kept overthrowing each other in order to gain power while deceiving the people by telling them they intended to stamp out corruption.¹⁵ This suspicion

¹⁵ Etim Ekpimah, "Withdraw Nigeria's Membership of OIC to Curtail Violence," *The Punch*, August 13, 2012,

<http://www.punchng.com/news/withdraw-nigerias-membership-of-oic->

became confirmed when the northern state of Zamfara, in January 2000, became the first among other Northern states in Nigeria to officially adopt *Sharia Law* as the only legal code in their territories, a breach of the Nigerian constitution that has always accommodated *Sharia Law* along with Customary Law and Civil Law as the three legal codes valid in the country, each having jurisdiction over certain matters in the country. The introduction of *Sharia Law* in the Muslim dominated states in northern Nigeria has led to a radical push to reject anything alien to Islam and has also led to violence against Christians and traditional worshippers by some fundamentalist Muslims.¹⁶ Reciprocally, many Christians in the Christian dominated southern Nigeria have had reprisal killings of Muslims to avenge the killing of Christians in northern Nigeria, especially when these Christians being killed in the north are members of the tribes in southern Nigeria who migrated to the north for financial reasons.¹⁷

to-curtail-violence/ (accessed August 26, 2012). See also Akpokona Omafuaire, "CAN Condemns Introduction of Islamic Banking," *Vanguard Newspapers*, June 27, 2011, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/06/can-condemns-introduction-of-islamic-banking/> (accessed August 26, 2012); Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, "The Catholic Bishops' Stand on the OIC Issue," Press Release, February 22, 1986, http://www.loyolajesuit.org/peter_schineller/resources/Voice%20of%20the%20Voiceless.doc (accessed August 26, 2012).

¹⁶ BBC World Edition, "Analysis: Nigeria's Sharia Split," January 7, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2632939.stm> (accessed August 26, 2012).

¹⁷ For statistical information on the number of religiously motivated violence in Nigeria since the eighties see Isaac Terwase Sampson, "Religious Violence in Nigeria: Causal Diagnoses and Strategic

The inability of the Federal Government to handle these religious tensions has been seen as a silent cooperation on the part of the federal government that has, in the past, supported a primarily Islamic agenda in the country.

Buber's insight into relationality can become a means of engagement for the Nigerian situation. Islam, like Christianity and the indigenous religions in Nigeria, is essentially a religion of peace. Peace can become a truly noble virtue worth aspiring toward when persons, whether individual or collective, begin to understand that they have a moral obligation to foster harmony among themselves and within the community they inhabit. The current push for *Sharia Law* as the only legitimate legal code in parts of Nigeria only buttresses the argument that some Muslims in Nigeria are unwilling to see the religious other as a legitimate partner in nation-building. In the history of Nigeria, Muslims, Traditionalists, and Christians have worked together in the past to fight for the end of colonial rule, building the financial, civil, and intellectual life of the country. Hundreds of thousands of families profess more than one religion. As noted already, Islam has a very rich tradition of healthy dialogical engagements beginning with the holy Prophet Mohammed. Christianity has many examples of women and men who have and continue to make serious efforts to engage the religious other and foster peace in their societies. Many, if not all, of the indigenous religions practiced in

Nigeria have within them a strong commitment to communal peace.

The history and growth of Islam and Christianity is characterized by their deliberate attempts to engage the religious other. The Renaissance period in Europe, which led to the modernization of Christendom, the re-discovery of Greek philosophies, and the growth of science and the humanities happened when Christians opened up toward Muslim and Jewish scholars, who were previously regarded as second-class citizens. The same can be said of the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Granada. The decline of Christendom is tied to the fear of anything that was regarded as unorthodox by the Christian leaders during the post-Reformation era. This led to the enactment of laws that barred Jews, Muslims, and Protestant Christians from holding offices in lands ruled by Catholics.¹⁸ In Protestant controlled territories, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims were also barred from the civic life.¹⁹ Also, the eventual collapse of the Ottoman Empire is tied to, among other things, the intolerant

¹⁸ See Carlton J. H. Hayes, Marshall Whithed Baldwin, and Charles Woolsey Cole, *History of Europe* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), 534–550; Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 238–241, for a brief treatment of the Peace of Westphalia and the other treaties leading to it, which legitimized the protection of the dominant Christian denominations at the expense of other religions and Christian denominations in the territories in Christian Europe.

¹⁹ See Carlton J. H. Hayes, Marshall Whithed Baldwin, and Charles Woolsey Cole, eds., 587–588, 592, for the parliamentary acts of the unified kingdoms of England and Scotland barring Calvinists and Catholics from holding public offices.

attitude of the Ottoman rulers toward non-Muslims living in their territories. While fundamentalist religious exclusivism may sound politically appealing for the majority religion in a given territory, it is always strategically harmful in the long-run, simply because it harms the very survival of healthy critique and advancement of knowledge in any religious tradition advocating it.

A Cultural Practice of Friendship among the Ihievbe of Nigeria

In May of 2011, I set out to investigate the religious dynamics among the religiously pluralistic people of Ihievbe in mid-Western Nigeria. While many parts of the country are plagued by religious violence, this community has enjoyed relative peace, and there has not been any recorded violence instigated by religious differences. To better understand the operative dynamics in the culture and society, I conducted extensive interviews, and survey questionnaires were administered to three religious groups in the town: Islam, Christianity, and the Ihievbe Traditional Religion. Below is a summary of my findings.

In their collective memory, the sense of friendship plays a prominent role among the Ihievbe people. The history of the founding of the town by Obo shows the relevance of friendship in the life of the community. Though the different religions in their society advocate different religious truths, for the Ihievbe people, the central bond is the communal unity. All religious truths have legitimacy only if they are able to foster the communal bond.

For the Ihievbe people, friendship is not abstract, and nor is it a philosophical construct that is reserved for the elite few. For this community, it is characterized by concrete expressions of love among the people. The fact that their founder cultivated the bonds of friendship with a community he sojourned before founding the town in the fifteenth century makes friendship both a way of being and the strategic bond of preserving communal unity.

Friendship, as an existential reality, is celebrated by members of Ihievbe when gathered with their neighbors from other towns and villages. The historical bond of friendship among the villages is celebrated ritualistically through the breaking, sharing, and eating of kola nut.²⁰ In this, each one is called to honor the sacred covenant of love that existed among their respective founders and make this bond real and relevant in the current dispensation. By participating in this ritual meal, each one, along with their families, celebrates, commemorates, and enters into an ever-new bond of friendship. Friendship for this community attains a covenantal status.

When asked whether members of other religions can be friends with one, those interviewed and surveyed among the religions present in the town (Christianity, Islam, and Ihievbe Traditional Religion) gave positive responses. Repeatedly, they called attention to the proverbial statement in their culture that a tree cannot express the totality of the reality of

²⁰ During my interactions with the people of the town I observed the ritual of kola nut breaking and its symbolic gesture was explained to me by the Priest of *Akakamiya* Shrine during one of my visits to the shrine on May 22, 2011.

a forest. This approach is fundamental not just for understanding the cultural dynamics, but also the attitude that ought to play out in interreligious friendship. The respondents appreciate the uniqueness of their respective religions, but are quick to affirm the point that the religious other is as convinced of her religious truths, and is also able to draw from her religion those helpful means needed to address her condition. Furthermore, their anthropological sense of communitarian identity, which does not negate the place and role of the individual, supports the need to engage in friendly relations with the religious other.

For the Ihievbe people, friendship is tied to life. Hence, every three years, the town celebrates the bonds of friendship that exist among its members. The *Ugoghon Festival* marks the coming of age of the members of the community who have attained adulthood, and their entrance into the age-grade system. The age-grade system is the celebration of new bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood. The members of a particular age group are considered friends by blood. Thus, the restrictions of consanguinity apply to them²¹, and the trust and love of friendship must be what constitutes and sustains their new bond.²²

The reality of the practice of interreligious friendship among the Ihievbe people of mid-Western Nigeria can serve

²¹ Members of an age group are forbidden to marry each other. They cannot marry each other's children.

²² In a telephone conversation with me on July 1, 2011, Samson Aihokhai, the current head of the Aihokhai family in Ihievbe gave me the data on *Ugoghon Festival*.

as a framework for constructing deliberate programs that foster communal peace in Nigeria. During my meetings with members of the different religions present in Ihievbe, I was made to know that the members of the different religions meet with their counterparts in other nearby towns on a monthly basis in order to discuss their religions and educate each other. By doing this, they have been able to attain good knowledge of the religions, know what they share in common, and understand what makes each of them unique. Religious leaders in Nigeria can call for a week long meeting of dialogue among all the religions as the first stages of fraternal dialogue. For this to be effective, the leaders of the respective religions must make a deliberate effort to educate themselves on the importance of religious tolerance as a fundamental human right in contemporary world order. The problem of religious violence in Nigeria is fostered by many unscrupulous religious leaders who preach hate and violence as the only way to bring about the reign of God. Many of these religious leaders see themselves as the final authority even if they align themselves to a broader religious tradition. Examples abound of many Christian leaders and Muslim Imams teaching non-tolerant views and advocating for the eradication of the religious other.²³ Offensive and aggressive

²³ See SimonMary Asele Ahiokhai, "Pentecostalism and Political Empowerment: The Nigerian Phenomenon," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. 45: 2 (Spring 2010): 255. See also Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Historical Overview of Pentecostalism in Nigeria," <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Evangelical-Protestant-Churches/Historical-Overview-of-Pentecostalism-in-Nigeria.aspx> (accessed August 29, 2012). The political and religious message of Sheikh Abubakar Gumi showed an open bias for Islam at the expense of other religions present in Nigeria. In 2001, the President of Pentecostal

missionary strategies are implemented by these fundamentalist leaders who incite their followers to adopt violence as a way of relating to members of the religions they consider a threat to their agenda.²⁴ By having regular meetings with religious leaders open to interreligious dialogue, Nigerians will be more disposed to critiquing their negative assumptions toward the religious other.

Nigerians in general have a high regard for structures of authority, and persons occupying positions of authority are also held in high regard. This can become a means of fostering interreligious friendship in country. It will be of great significance for the symbolic head of Islam in the country, the Sultan of Sokoto, to engage in dialogue with the head of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and a prominent traditional leader (since most of the traditional leaders are the custodians of the indigenous religions of their tribes); such friendships will serve as credible examples for the way forward in the country.

Fellowship of Nigeria, Plateau State Chapter, Rev. Bright O. Ndu called for Christians to carry out reprisal killings against Muslims who attack Christians in Nigeria.

²⁴ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 240. The unscrupulous evangelizing strategy of the Pentecostal pastor, Rev. Reinhard Bonnke in 1990, during his religious crusade in the city of Kano, led to riots and the death of hundreds of Christians and Muslims in the city.

Jesus Christ on Friendship

Since Jesus Christ serves as the corrective measure to sinful humanity in the Christian religion, it is most appropriate to investigate the bonds of friendship and teachings on friendship by Jesus Christ. The Christian tradition sees charity as the concrete bond of love that Jesus reveals to humanity. This type of love is corrective of the propensity to exult oneself at the expense of the other. Charity is seen as rooted in the manifestation of God's glory. It elevates the divine and rejects the worldly. The holy is that which is ordered toward the divine. While there is evidence in the Christian Scripture for a rejection of sin and occasions of sin, there is no basis for equating all that is non-Christian with sinfulness as it has played itself out in Christian history. The animosity historically shown toward Jews by Christians cannot be justified through Scripture, since Jesus' teachings expressly demonstrate the need to extend the bonds of love to all, irrespective of their religious affiliations.

One can find multiple instances of Jesus teaching a form of universal friendship as reflective of the divine. To situate his teaching concretely, I intend to explore here an exegetical interpretation of the discourse on love as a new commandment in John 13:34-35: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."²⁵ The novel content of Jesus' teaching is the openness of divine

²⁵ All biblical references are based on *New American Bible* (Wichita, Kansas: Fireside Bible Publishers, 1998).

love. The common practice among the Jewish people during the time of Jesus was to embrace divine love at the expense of the human other. Jesus challenged the pharisaic practice that demonstrated holiness through ostentatious rejection of those considered unholy. Jesus extends the hermeneutics on divine love to include universal humanity. It is in this general context that the above passage is to be understood. This pericope is situated between two passages that present the prophetic declaration of Jesus concerning betrayal by those among his trusted circle of friends. The first is the betrayal by Judas Iscariot and the second is that of Peter. Though these two will eventually betray Jesus, leading to his suffering and his death, Jesus introduces his listeners and his circle of friends to the central message of his ministry: that his followers are to love God and all humanity irrespective of their state in life. This call to unconditional love for the other is already a given, beginning from the salvific accounts of the relationship between Yahweh and the Jewish people contained in the Torah. The importance of his message lies in eradicating the contradiction that exists between loving God and loving one's neighbors. The new commandment that Jesus gives to his followers and friends must be understood in light of the great commandment contained in the Torah (Deut. 6:4-9). Matthew's gospel succinctly demonstrates the unity between love of God and love of neighbor by recording Jesus himself stating that this unity is the foundation of the Mosaic law (Matt. 22:34-40). Just as the great commandment enjoins Israel to love God unreservedly, the new commandment from Jesus enjoins his followers and friends to love all humanity unreservedly. The understanding of love

to be exclusive to God and fellow citizens is abandoned by Jesus.

The placement of this pericope seems to be a strategic move by the gospel writer. To demonstrate the type of love Jesus is speaking about, even traitors and betrayers are to be included in the new type of love. To remove any doubt, Jesus conditions this new type of love to be reflective of how he himself has loved his friends throughout his ministry. His love for his followers is not abstract or one between a superior and an inferior. Rather, Jesus' love for his followers is to be understood as one of equality--that which exists among friends. To demonstrate the unreserved nature of the new type of love Jesus advocates for one's neighbors, he reminds his audience that he is to lay down his life for them, as a friend ought to do, and he has been transparent to them throughout his relational encounters with them (Jn. 15:9-17). To put it simply, the new type of love advocated by Jesus proceeds from the type of love God has for all humanity. Jesus demonstrates this universal friendship between God and humanity by repeatedly going against the common practice of restricting God's grace to the chosen people. If Jesus' followers are to understand the new type of love God is calling them to practice, they need to reflect on how he performed his ministry by establishing relational contacts with those at the margins of the Israelite society of his time.

Characteristics of Interreligious Friendship

Understanding the ministry of Jesus as one of entering into friendship bonds with humanity is necessary in order to

help Christians recognize the legitimate significance of other religious traditions. Friendship is a sure way to help eradicate stereotypes that are most often created due to a lack of true awareness of the other. In interreligious encounters, we should take seriously the words of J. Cuoq who, in his capacity as member of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, presented the Catholic magisterial greetings to Muslims during the celebration of the end Ramadan in 1971. He writes, "We are called... to be humble witnesses of the Transcendent greatness of God and his merciful tenderness for humanity... the sign of this witness is our friendship... and by living it very simply, we can find again new trust in man [humanity] and a renewed faith in God."²⁶

Though some Christian leaders in Nigeria have made efforts to encourage dialogue between Christians and Muslims, there is a noticeable lack of policy on the part of Christians to make interreligious dialogue and engagement a part of Christian identity in their dealings with non-Christians. While Christians expect Muslims and Traditionalists to respect them and treat them as legitimate partners in the country, many Christians are unwilling to critique and engage their own traditions, or to speak words of truth to their leaders and their traditions when these fail to fully represent what Christ expects of them. Again, the Ihievbe Catholic community's example of deliberately choosing to engage the other religions in the town on a formal level, and fostering bonds of friendship among members of the different

²⁶ J. Cuoq, "Meeting in Friendship: Messages to Muslims for the End of Ramadan (1967-2002)," *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* (Vatican City, 2003), 14–15.

religions, can become an example for members of the different religions in Nigeria. Christian, Muslim, and traditional leaders can begin by encouraging their members to deliberately engage members of other religions and make it a point of duty to participate in the religious worship of their religious neighbors. This seems to be the practice in Ihievbe town. The people participate in the religious worship of their religious neighbors and experience firsthand the spirituality, commitment, and sincerity of the followers of these religions. This practice can make Nigerians begin to appreciate the fact that members of other religions have the same passion, commitment, and conviction in their religions, and as such, they need to be respected and appreciated instead of being castigated and described as infidels or unorthodox. When bonds of friendship exist among members of the different religions, then it will make it more credible on the part of the religious women and men to want to know and participate in the different aspects of the religious lives of their neighbors, who are now their friends.

At this point, it is appropriate to articulate the effects and nature of interreligious friendship in the Nigerian context. The first point the Christian churches must keep in mind is the central role Jesus plays in their religious consciousness. This does not mean using Jesus to justify theological positions, but seriously beginning with Jesus as the guide for Christian encounters with the religious other. If this is done, then the life and ministry of Jesus will have to be understood through a salubrious hermeneutics that does not see Jesus as a source of division among humanity. The

history of Christianity demonstrates how theological positions have so often led to violence against the religious other.

Second, without denying the singular ministry of Jesus, divine operative grace in the world does not begin or end with the historical reality of the incarnation. Interreligious friendship demonstrates a justification of the freedom of God to engage in friendship with all of humanity. The example of Jesus rejecting the institutionalized biases against those at the margins of society demonstrates a fundamental quality of God's relational encounters with humanity in general. It shows that God calls all of humankind to constantly break down barriers that legitimize discriminatory perceptions of those who are different.

Third, by encountering another in concrete situations, innate biases against the other tend to be dispelled. The other stops being the dangerous stranger and becomes truly human--not by the recognition of the subject--but because the other stands her ground to be recognized as one possessing otherness. When religions do not engage each other, the tendency to view the other as inferior is high. By bridging the gap of ignorance, members of one religion are faced with the religious other who is devout and takes seriously her own religious commitment.

Authentic relational encounter transcends any form of foreknowledge or preconceived biases. The content of the dialogue is shaped by the actual encounter itself. In the context of interreligious dialogue in Nigeria, for Christians, the religious other must be encountered as a gift from God that transcends any idolization. The other is the mystery that

stands before us and invites Christians to take seriously the divine injunction to love one another. This approach seems to be operative among the religious people of Ihievbe in mid-Western Nigeria. Through authentic friendship among them, they have come to understand, collectively, the divine injunction to love the other who carries within her the face of the divine. Love of the other is a common religious demand among the three religions present in Ihievbe. Ihievbe Traditional Religion demands that its adherents express the love of God, as contained in their ancestral examples, for their love of their neighbors. Hence, holiness in this religion is measured not by a reclusive love of God, but rather by a participative and active love of God through love of neighbor.²⁷ Islam calls its adherents to love universally and even enjoins Muslims to "love an enemy first before loving a friend" (Quran 60.7).²⁸ Christianity has at its core the demand to love God and neighbor. By taking seriously the religious obligation to engage the religious other, Christians can begin to understand that authentic piety is not restricted to the Christian religion. By establishing bonds of friendship, Christians can actively demonstrate not just faithfulness to the injunctions of their founder, but also show they are convinced that God's salvific presence in the world transcends their own hermeneutics on salvation history.

²⁷ This view was expressed by the forty-five persons I interviewed during my visit to the town in May 2011 who belong to the three religions (Islam, Christianity, and Ihievbe Traditional Religion).

²⁸ Excerpts taken from Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur'an with English Translation and Commentary* (Dublin, Ohio: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam Lahore Inc., U.S.A., 2002).

Fourth, the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition shows the creation of humanity that evokes a sense of communion as an essential aspect of human identity (Gen. 2:20-24). And, in the Christian discourse on God, God is essentially Trinitarian. As Aelred of Rievaulx argues, God, as Trinity, can best be understood as divine friendship.²⁹ This notion of divine friendship has also been argued for by Buber, who reminds his readers that the nature of divine friendship is constituted by the absolute and total openness of God to creation.

Through the bonds of friendship in the context of interreligious dialogue, Christians in Nigeria can concretize the realization that the God that is encountered in other religions and within the Christian religion is a God that transcends pre-conceptualizations. The God that has spoken to Christians in Christ is a God that transcends human epistemic finality. In Islam, Allah is a God that is absolutely other and any form of remembering is considered idolatrous. Allah is a God of the present, always encountered in the moment. Borrowing Friedman's words, "The God that speaks here is the God one meets only when one has put aside everything one thinks one knows of God and is plunged into the darkness, when the 'moment Gods' fuse into the 'Lord of the Voice.'" Furthermore, "This 'Lord of the Voice' does not speak to us apart from creation but right through it."³⁰

²⁹ Aelred of Rievaulx, "*Spiritual Friendship (De Spiritali Amicitia)*." Book I in *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, ed. Michael Pakaluk (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1991), 137.

³⁰ Maurice Friedman, introduction to *Between Man and Man*, by Martin Buber, xvii.

The above quotation shows the central role God has placed in otherness as a medium of encounter. There can be no abstract encounter with God that is other-negating. To encounter God, one must seek out one's neighbor, for in her lies the true face of God. In the Christian scriptures, love as proceeding from the other is accounted for by demonstrating that primordial love for humanity proceeds first from God, and Christians are called to respond adequately to God's love by also taking seriously the love of the neighbor (1Jn. 4:7-12).

Buber reminds his readers that the revealed Word of God is never encountered except within community. In his words, "We expect a theophany of which we know nothing but the place, and the place is called community."³¹ In other words, alterity is the condition for communion. This position recognizes that the fullness of God's self-communication to humanity, even in a particular religious tradition, is not fully known unless in the context of the broader communion one shares with the other, who can be a religious person or an entire religious tradition. Furthermore, the revelation of God's word, either as Jesus Christ himself or as contained in the sacred books of other religions, is not to be understood in an isolated way by the reclusive individual or religious community, but rather within the context of the deliberative encounter with the word as a community that is aware of its essential connection with other religious communities. Simply put, God's word has its full meaning within the context of human encounters that reflect our collective encounter with God. As a concrete way of making this knowledge of

³¹ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 7.

relationality the place of encountering the divine, I will recommend that all religions in Nigeria adopt what I call *collaborative worship*. This entails recognizing the religious other as a graced gift from God within the religious rituals of the respective religions.

During my stay in Ihievbe town in 2011, while I was involved in studying the relational dynamics among the different religions present in the town, I noticed that the high priest of *Akakamiya* shrine, one of the shrines that constitutes part of the places of worship for members of Ihievbe Traditional Religion, was very comfortable inviting me to join him and some of his fellow worshippers. During the prayers, he invoked the blessings of the ancestors to guide me in my project and to help me to come to a full understanding of my own Catholic faith. His simple prayer was an eye-opener for me. I left the meeting asking myself if such a generous gesture can be found among Christians. However, even if it has not been the norm among the Christian churches, it can from now on become part of the Christian way of praying if Christians worldwide, and in Nigeria in particular, begin to see the fact that God continues to grace human society with many valid ways of encountering the divine. *Collaborative worship* entails celebrating the religious other and all that her religion stands for as a credible partner in the journey of life, and having a legitimate right to be an instrument of the divine. A concrete example for the practice of this type of worship will be praying to God in thanksgiving for the presence of non-Catholics in the community during the prayers of the faithful at the Eucharistic celebration. One may wonder how such a simple

gesture will help to resolve the religious tensions in Nigeria. Again, the appreciation of such a positive outlook toward the religious other was made possible by the simple and yet profound gesture of the high priest of a little known religious group in the town of Ihievbe. This, for me, justifies the claim that the religious other always has something unique to offer and ought to be appreciated completely.

Alterity offers more than just the grounds for communion – it also lays the foundation for singularity. It is in the affirmation of the religious other through the bonds of friendship that a religious tradition can affirm its own peculiar nature. All the religions cannot be reduced to one religious tradition. What is worth noting is the place and role alterity plays in this process of recognizing the uniqueness of each religious tradition. By reclaiming the paradoxical tension of alterity and singularity in the context of communion, one is able to appreciate the beauty of friendship. The temptation to reduce friendship to a simple eradication of difference must be avoided. God has gifted humanity with many religious ways. These are to be appreciated for their uniqueness. Just as "creation is not a hurdle on the road to God, but the road itself", other religions are not obstacles to divine encounter, but are the actual means of encountering a God who is actively present in and involved with humanity's quest for the holy.³²

Finally, interreligious friendship is one of possibilities. It will be erroneous to argue that all interreligious encounters will ultimately lead to friendship or mutual affirmation. Some

³² *ibid.*, 52.

encounters may lead to further distancing and a clear awareness of irreconcilable differences. Others may lead to closer bonds and a collaborative commitment to working toward the human good and mutual affirmation of the workings of God in respective religious traditions. What is of utmost importance here is that one cannot make such conclusions outside of encounter. It is within encounter that one comes to understand oneself better in relation to the other. For the Catholic Church that has been shaped mostly by one epistemological tradition, it is relevant to begin to understand that identity is never constructed in isolation of the other. What we are as Christians, Muslims, or Traditional Religionists is never complete unless such an identity is constructed through encounter with the other. It is a false assumption to think that collective individualism is possible if we simply focus on God. God is actively present in his own creation. To encounter God, each religious tradition in Nigeria must be active and recognize that God, though distant, is always near as a neighbor. Among the different religions present in Ihievbe, encountering one another has led to the possibility of fostering bonds of friendship that express their common desire to be faithful to God's command to love one another without reserve. A new sense of evangelization has also developed among them, which reflects their interreligious bond of friendship. Rather than justify evangelization by using apologetic strategies that present other religions as evil and inauthentic, evangelization and conversion has taken a more personalistic approach. One has the freedom to reflect upon the different religions in the context of one's experiences, needs, and urges. At the end of the day, conversion occurs not based on the rhetorical style

of the evangelizer, but rather on the authentic desire of one to experience God in a particular religious tradition one considers most appropriate to answering one's religious needs. The respective religions present in Nigeria are still relevant to the people because they are constantly having new converts. The bonds of friendship can lead to mutual respect and recognition of the sacredness of the different religions.

While the leaders of the religions present in Nigeria have a religious and moral obligation to become agents of peace, and work toward educating their followers to embrace peace as a way of being and engagement, civil leaders have an urgent duty to join in this venture. They cannot take advantage of the violence that has continued to plague the nation to advance their own political agenda. If they continue this exploitative approach, it will lead to further violence and the eventual collapse of order in society. Without embracing the cause of any particular religious tradition in the country, civil leaders can help by inviting the religious leaders to engage in dialogue. They can call for a conference of truth and reconciliation where aggrieved religious groups can have the opportunity to speak out and state their grievances, as well as work toward some form of reconciliation. Anytime someone loses her/his life because of religious violence, those related to the victim will want to avenge their loss, thus leading to further violence. The federal, state, and local governments can begin a new era in the country, one that aims to educate the people on what it means to be a nation of many religions, cultures, and tribes. Such a project is not new to the Nigerian consciousness. The

deliberate effort by the federal government after the Civil War of 1967-1972 to “reconcile, rebuild, and reconstruct” the country has yielded very positive results. Millions of Nigerians were able to move forward and move back to their old neighborhoods, jobs, and cities without the fear of being discriminated against.³³ The different levels of government can work together to establish centers of dialogue where trained personnel direct the program at the local, state, and federal levels. These centers should be free from government control except for the initial budgets to get them started. However, the government should appoint representatives and make sure that all the religions are properly and proportionately represented. These centers can serve as resource points for communities, as well as host monthly meetings on different levels to allow members of the respective religions to have access to proper information as they learn how to engage in healthy interreligious dialogue without being tempted to proselytize. It is important that all religions have the opportunity to speak up and establish friendly connections with one another.

³³ Decree no. 24 of May 22, 1973 established the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). This was one of the ways the Military Government of General Yakubu Gowon used to pacify the country after the Civil War. College graduates were made to spend one year of service in any part of the country the Federal Government sent them. This practice continues to help the young adults in the country to construct healthy views of the many cultures in the country. See National Youth Service Corps, “Historical Background of the NYSC,” <http://nysc.gov.ng/history.php> (accessed August 31, 2012).

Conclusion

The current dispensation in the world today calls for appropriating different ways of fostering bonds of friendship. The reality of globalization has made it virtually impossible for religions to be isolated. Rather than continue to pretend that only one's own religion has legitimacy, the religions present in Nigeria must seize the moment and read the signs of the time as God's invitation for all people to build strong communities where friendship and harmony prevail. Religious violence only leads to idolatry and the destruction of society. To think that only one's religion has a legitimate claim to truth is to restrict God's workings in human salvific history. History has shown us that exclusive claims to truth have sometimes led to unimaginable crimes against members of other religions. The violence between Muslims and Christians in many parts of Nigeria is a clear indication of the product of fundamentalist attitude.

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