

Christentum und Islam im Dialog Christian – Muslim Relations

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PARTICULARISM INFLUENCE IN THEOLOGICAL SEARCH: IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE

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Introduction

Particularism according to Webster Dictionary¹ means exclusive or special devotion to a cause. It has political as well as theological significations both of which have similar connotations. As a political concept it is a theory or practice advocating a right or freedom for each politically conscious or organised group to promote its own interest without regard for the interest of the larger group. In Dopamu's view particularism is the absolute claim of faith; it is an exclusive claim to revelation; it is a weapon used by the exclusivists to see their own faith as the only faith, the one and the only to salvation.²

In Christian theology particularism signifies that redemption through Christ is provided only for the elect. The concept has often encouraged many theologians in their search to resort to apologetics, the branch of theology devoted to defence of a religious faith and addressed primarily to criticism originating from outside the religious tradition.³ The concept as a theological doctrine is therefore not peculiar to Christianity. Viewing it from this perspective, it is the aim of this paper to examine the scriptural basis for particularism as a theological concept, the effect of the concept on theological search and the implications for Muslim-Christian dialogue especially in multi-faith Nigeria.

¹ See Webster's Encyclopaedic Dictionary of English Language.

² Dopamu 1984: 211.

³ See Webster's Encyclopaedic Dictionary of English Language.

The Scriptural Basis for Particularism

Particularism or exclusivism as a theological concept is Biblical as well as Qur'anic. The Biblical passages in which the doctrine is entrenched include Jn. 14:6, Jn. 10:7-16, Jn. 3:5, Mt. 16:18-19, Mt. 15:26 and Act 4:12. I will make brief comments on three of them which seem most relevant. The first is Jn. 14:6, which reads:

I am the way the truth and the life, no man comes to the father but by me

According to the Christian belief, Jesus is the way to God because he is the truth, that is, the personal self-revelation of God. He is also considered to be the life which is the vital energy that sustains men on their way to him. Jesus is believed to be the way that leads to the only knowledge of God and so alone leads to life.⁴

The second passage John 10:7-16 is longer as it reads:

Truly, truly I say to you, I am the door of the sheep... I am the good Shepherd, I know my own and my own know me... I lay down my life for the sheep... and I have other sheep that are not of this fold, I must bring them also and they will heed my voice, so there shall be one flock, one shepherd.

What this passage makes us to understand according to Hunter⁵ is that Jesus is the door of the fold and it is by this door alone that men enter the fold. The good shepherd according to the passage is he who lays down his life for the sheep, he does not abandon the sheep when there is danger. Jesus fitness for the work of his father in the Christian understanding is shown by his readiness to die for the flock. As evident in the above passage, Jesus looks beyond the fold of Judaism to the wider world and sees other sheep of his waiting to be gathered in. He thinks of his mission to the Gentiles after he is glorified. When the vision is fully realised there will then be one flock one shepherd.

⁴ Hunter 1978: 141, *ibid.* 102f

⁵ Hunter 1978: 102f.

The third passage is Mt.16:18-19 which reads:

And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the key of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in the heaven and whatever you lose on earth shall be lost in heaven.

The key of authority entrusted with Peter by his master as we read in this passage is an index of particularism. It is because Jesus recognises Peter's faith that it makes it the rock upon which the church was to be built, the church of living God which the forces of death would never be able to overcome. The key of authority gives Peter the power of binding and losing i.e. the power of saying what conduct was and what conduct was not worthy of those who were subject to the rule of God and the law of Christ and his decisions would carry a divine sanction.⁶

Turning to the Qur'an we find particularism enshrined in Surat al-Imran verses 19, 85 and 102, which read:

Surely the (true) religion with Allah is Islam. And those who were given the book differed only after knowledge had come to them out of envy among themselves (Q.3:19).

And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him and in the hereafter he will be one of the losers (Q.3:85).

O ye who believe, keep your duty to Allah as it ought to be kept and die not unless you are Muslims (Q. 3:102).

In the above passage the Muslims are made to believe that in the sight of Allah there is only one belief system and one right way of life which is Islam. The implication of this is that man should not invent his own way of worship but should faithfully follow that guidance alone which Allah has revealed through his messengers. According to the passage any one who accepts any other religion apart from Islam would unfaithfully forfeit salvation.

Islam as discussed in the above passage is not to be understood in the narrow sense of the religion propagated only by prophet Muhammad. The Qur'an teaches that Islam which is submission to the will of Allah is the religion

⁶Tasker 1978: 162

preached by all the prophets including Abraham, Moses, Jesus etc. The Muslims believe that originally Islam and Islam alone was professed and preached by every messenger who was sent by Allah at different times and ages. However, due to subsequent human distortion other belief systems emerged.⁷

The cosmopolitan nature of Islam as seen in the above definition of the religion conforms with the Islamic particularism concept. This is evident in Surah 2:111-112 which is a response to the Judeo-Christian particularistic claim. The passage reads:

And they say none shall enter paradise except he who is a Jew or a Christian, these are their vain desires. Say bring your proof if you are truthful. Nay whoever submits himself entirely to Allah and he is the doer of good (to others) he has his reward from his Lord and there is no fear for such nor shall they grieve.

Accommodating as this passage may be, it is still a particularistic claim that sets aside only the Muslims for salvation.

The Effect of Particularism on Theological Search

Particularism effect on theological search can be positive or negative depending on the search objective and who the searcher is. The concept would propel a theologian who is an internal witness (i.e. one writing within the tradition) to defend the doctrines of his faith by presenting the facts as contained in the scriptures without distortion or subjectivity. This is known as apologetics as earlier noted. This is positive particularism because it allows for appreciation of the true teachings of the tradition in question by the searcher.

This is the approach adopted by Wilbur O' Donovan⁸ in a study entitled *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* in which the doctrine of trinity is treated. He considers it worthwhile to explain the trinity doctrine to counter the Muslims' assertion that Christians believe in three Gods.

See notes on Surah 3:19, 85 and 102 in Abul A'la Maududi's *Meaning of the Qur'an*, volume 1.

⁸O'Donovan 1996: 43f.

According to Donovan, it is never in doubt that the Christian scriptures teach oneness of God as supported by Deuteronomy 6:4 and Isaiah 45:5. However, despite the monotheistic teaching, the Bible reveals that God has three distinct persons; God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Roman 1:7 teaches that Father is God; Hebrew 1:8 asserts that the Son is God while Acts 5:3-4 presents the Holy Spirit as God.

Other passages cited by Donovan as lending support to trinity (or more appropriately triunity) include Isaiah 9:6 and Matthew 28:19. The former passage reads:

For us a child is born to us a son is given... he will be called Wonderful Counsellor,⁹ Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

In this passage, the name Counsellor, God, Father and Prince of Peace are all applied to the child who would be born. According to Matthew 1:21, the son to be born was Jesus the Saviour.

The latter passage (Mathew 28:19) is where Jesus commands that men be baptized in the name (not names) of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this name (singular form) is used, yet three persons are mentioned.

Donovan explains further that each person of the triunity does different work. God the Father rules the universe and makes final decision about all things as evident in Acts 1:7. God the Son is the one through whom the universe was made. It is he who humbled himself and came to earth to accomplish man's salvation through his death on the cross as we read in Colossians 1:9-20. The Holy Spirit is the active person of God at work today as revealed in John 16:7-14.

Some Christian theologians acknowledge the problem inherent in understanding the doctrine of triunity. However, due to particularism influence, they are of the view that the doctrine should be accepted rather than rationalised. According to Moshey¹⁰, it is pride and arrogance for man to insist he must have to understand everything before accepting its reality. To

⁹ Wonderful Counsellor is a name of the Holy Spirit in John 14:21

¹⁰ Moshay 1990: 53

him it is when the Christians believe the scriptural truth by simple faith that they begin to have a revelation of that truth in their spirit.

The Muslim theologians' approach to theological search shows more intense particularism influence. This is why in explaining for instance the theological concept tawhid (oneness of God) emphasis has always been to critique the Christian concept of God. This has root in the Qur'anic approach and it may be appropriate to illustrate with Surat al ikhlas (chapter 114), a Surah wholly devoted to affirmation of tawhid as it reads:

Say He is God the one and Only God, the Eternal and Absolute. He begets not nor is He begotten, And there is none like unto Him.

This passage presents Islam as having as its foundation a vigorous and uncompromising concept of the oneness of God which precludes any division of Godhead in actual or metaphorical terms.¹¹ In two other passages viz: Surats 21:22-23 and 23:91, Qur'an in critiquing the doctrine of triunity draws attention to what it considers implications of existence of multiple Gods. According to the former passage, if there were in the heavens and on the earth, other gods besides Allah there would have been confusion in both as one might act contrary to the will of the others.

The latter passage in the same vein asserts that if there were other gods besides Allah, each god would have taken away what he had created while some would have lorded it over others. It is in response to these Qur'anic assertions that the Muslim theologians irrespective of secretarian affiliation maintain that God is one in His essence (dhat) without division; He is one in the eternity of His attributes (sifat) without a like, and He is also one in His actions (af'al) without associate.

The Mu'tazilites in their bid to formulate a concept of God in His absolute oneness, far away from any taint of duality that may lead to incarnationism or anthropomorphization reached the point of being accused by the Sunni heresiographers as a group of people denying the divine attributes.¹² Though this looks like an extreme particularism influence, it is not out of tune with the Mutazilites tendencies for extremism.

¹¹ Ali 1997: 25.

¹² Bin Stapa 1996: 37.

We can now examine particularism in its negative form. This is the form that propels the external witness (writing from outside the tradition) to go beyond defence of his tradition and tries to critique (more often destructively) the other tradition. This we shall discuss within the context of the claim of divine authority for the Christian and Muslim scriptures.

In II Timothy 3:16 we read: "All scripture is God breathed". This statement implies that the Bible is inspired word of God. The Biblical inspiration indicates the principal method by which God has chosen to reveal Himself through the process of verbal communication with the men he has chosen as prophets.

In discussing the authority (inspiration) of the Bible, John R.W. Stott¹³ makes certain clarifications. The first deals with the process of inspiration which according to him was not a mechanical process as God did not treat the human authors of the scripture as dictating machine or recorders. Saint Luke's gospel well illustrates this point. With Luke divine inspiration is compatible with human research when we consider what he says in the preface of his gospel about the painstaking enquiries he had to pursue before writing. This therefore shows that though God spoke to men, it never obliterated their own personality, hence as they wrote, their literary style and language were retained.

The second clarification is that although the scripture as God's word is true but that does not mean that every word of it is literally true. The word of the Bible according to him is true only in its context, but when isolated from its context, it may be quite untrue. The example given for illustration is the book of Job, the bulk of which is a dialogue between grief-stricken Job and his four comforters contained in chapters 1-37. In chapters 38-42 where God revealed Himself to Job, he was made to declare: I have uttered what I did not understand and God said to his comforters "you have not spoken of me what is right".¹⁴ It would be quite impossible therefore to take any verse from the book of Job and say "this is the word of God" for it may not be.¹⁵

¹³ Stott 1997: 184

¹⁴ Job 42:3,7.

¹⁵ Here and other similar passages the prophet would introduce their oracles with the expression: "Thus says the Lord".

The argument usually advanced by the Christian theologians to prove the divine authority of the Bible include:

- i. the claim of the inspired writers themselves as evident in I Thess.2:13.
- ii. the phenomenon of fulfilled prophecies.
- iii. the unity and coherence of the Biblical books in spite of diversity of the human authorship.
- iv. the inward witness of the holy spirit.
- v. Jesus endorsement of the authority of the scripture.

Stott draws two conclusions¹⁶ from the Christian teachings about the truth of the Bible which I consider illuminating.

First, he reasons that to accept the authority of the Bible is a Christian thing to do, it is neither a religious eccentricity, nor a case of discreditable obscurantism, but the good sense Christian faith and humility. It is considered Christian because Jesus requires it.

Secondly, he opines that to accept the divine origin of the Bible is not to pretend that there are no problems. Some of the problems are literary, historical, theological and moral. There are problems of apparent discrepancies or question of literary criticism. However, these do not undermine the Christian belief in the word of God. This second conclusion, critical as it appears shows that particularism in the perception of some Christian theologians is not averse to objectivity which is an index of scholarship.

These inherent problems of the Bible as acknowledged by many Christian theologians are what have prompted Muslim theologians like Ahmad Deedat to take interest in the critique of the Christian scripture. This to us is a negative effect of particularism. Such critique is a theological venture influenced by the attachment to one's tradition to destroy the traditions of the others. We consider it negative because it does not promote inter-religious harmony preached by all monotheistic faiths. In a publication entitled: *Is the Bible God's Word?*, Ahmad Deedat's aim¹⁷ is to critique the

¹⁶ Stott 1997: 201

¹⁷ Deedat n.d.: 6f.

Christian scripture with a view to undermining its divine authority. To this end, he has argued that:

- i. the scripture which contains motley type of literature which comprises the embarrassing kind, the sordid and the obscene cannot be of divine origin.
- ii. the scripture being full of serious discrepancies and inaccuracies could not have emanated from God.
- iii. the numerous editions of the Bible and the distinction between the catholic and protestant versions of the scripture undermines its divine authority.

Similarly, in another publication entitled: *The God That Never Was*,¹⁸ Ahmad Deedat tries to critique the Christian belief that Jesus is God arguing that Jesus neither shares God's nature nor is he in any way like God and therefore could not be God.

Deedat might be said to have been influenced in his action by the Qur'anic critique of the Christian scripture as evident in passages such as Surah 2:79 and Surah 5:72-73, but he should have realized that Surah 6:108 warns the believers against that tendency as it reads:

Revile not ye those whom they call upon besides God lest, they out of spite revile God in their ignorance.

To examine the Islamic concept of revelation is to focus on the Qur'an, the sacred book of the Muslims which they believe embodies not only the word but also the text and words of Allah communicated to Muhammad over a period of 23 years through Angel Gabriel.

Of the three modes of revelation recognized in Islamic tradition, the recited form of revelation (*Wahyun Matluwun*) is ranked highest. It is important to note as rightly observed by Ausaf Ali¹⁹ that the sort of textual criticism that has been made of the Judeo-Christian scriptures has not been made of the Qur'an. This is because of the Muslims ardent belief through the ages that

¹⁸ Deedat n.d.: n.p

¹⁹ Ali 1997: 26.

every word of the Qur'an is from Allah's own revelation to Prophet Muhammad and has remained free from any interpolation till date. Passages of the Qur'an such as Surahs 4:82, 17:88 and 41:42 assure the Muslims that the Qur'an could not have come from other than Allah.

It is in the absolute and unquestioned belief in the view that the Qur'an contains words of Allah that the cultural epistemological certainty of the Muslims lies. It is little wonder that they regard the Qur'an as Allah's greatest miracle.

Even though to the Muslims the Qur'an may be perfect, this is not necessarily so to the Christians who for different motives have cause to critique the scripture. This study would be interested in Moshey's study which is a critique of Islam made in response to the Muslim's critique of Christianity. This therefore could be seen as a justifiable critique when viewed within the context of Surah 6:108 cited above.

G.T.O. Moshey²⁰ in his book entitled *Who Is This Allah?* states his reason for embarking on his study as follows:

We have read several books written by the Muslims undermining the authority of the Bible as the word of God. Publications of such books has been on the increase in the last decade with Ahmad Deedat based in South Africa as a key author... What Christian write now is an attempt to respond to these recent Islamic attack on the Bible and the exaltation of the Qur'an above the holy writ.

Writing with this objective in view, it is natural for the author to show bitterness for Islam and resentment against its adherents. This can be seen in his perception of the basic Islamic teachings concerning the being of Allah, prophethood of Muhammad and Qur'an as a revealed book.

In Moshey's view the Muslims' God is radically different from the Christian God. The God of the Muslims in his estimation is a spiteful, selfish autocrat who must be placated with a monotonous routine of body motions.²¹

²⁰ Moshey 1990: 78.

²¹ Ibid: 105.

Similarly, Muhammad in his view, was a false prophet because any spiritual experience that does not come from the holy spirit of the Bible is from the father of lies as taught by John 16:13. While he does not deny that Muhammad was a prophet, since a prophet is one who speaks for or in place of a power higher than him, he sees Muhammad as a prophet whose claim to inspiration derives from a false authority.²²

Qur'an in his opinion is a bundle of repetitions, a glorified package of myths, most of which were taken from the Judeo-Christian scriptures and traditions and then perverted. The writer did a good job anthologizing apocryphal stories, tautologies and contradictions which make it a book big enough to serve as a religious book.²³

Islam in Moshey's opinion is a religion of disobedience and a religion of rebellion against the word of God because it is associated with Adam.²⁴ He describes Islamic monotheism as an organized monotheistic idolatry. The religion to him is a religion of violence arguing that religious tolerance is alien to the Qur'anic teaching. Jihad is seen as a profitable commerce in which Muslims must mandatorily engage.²⁵

The foregoing constitutes Moshey's views of Islam and its teachings. It is needless to say that they are blasphemous and obnoxious. They are discussed not for the purpose of making any defence but to highlight how negative particularism effect can be on theologians writing outside their tradition. Such an approach to theological search can only hamper inter-religious relation rather than bring about harmony.

²² Ibid: 107

²³ Ibid: 78.

²⁴ Ibid: 73.

²⁵ Ibid: 61.

Implications of Particularism in Theological Search for Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Religious dialogue is a concept well enshrined in the Qur'an and this is evident in Surah 3:64 which declares:

Say "O people of the Book come to common terms as between us and you, that we worship none but Allah, that we associate no partner with Him..."

The Biblical hint on the subject albeit farfetched is contained in Isaiah 1:18 which reads:

"Come now let us reason together."

Dialogue are of three dimensions as observed by Archbishop Onaiyekan.²⁶ The first is 'dialogue in spite of faith'. This type of dialogue takes place where members of the same family or community, business colleagues, citizens of the same nation, etc., come together to share common interests and relate with one another in a variety of ways in spite of their different religious beliefs.

The second is 'dialogue in faith'. This form of dialogue takes place when people of different religious affiliations meet to discuss issues of national interests within the context of religious principles. Dialogue in this regard would be efforts geared towards promotion of justice, alleviation of suffering, provision of social welfare facilities, promotion of peace etc. This is quite possible since those values are well entrenched in all revealed religions.

The third is 'dialogue of faith'. This form of dialogue has to do with discussion of theological doctrines and practices from different religious perspectives. It is the form that is of direct relevance to our study in view of the fact that it engages more the attention of the theologians whose search objective is to promote understanding of religious precepts through dialogue.

²⁶ Onaiyekan n.d

The objective therefore would be to:

- i. amplify areas of convergence;
- ii. **explain one another's faith position;**
- iii. correct misconceptions; and
- iv. **appreciate one another's view point.**

The particularism influence has implications for each of these four objectives. Its implication on the first is that particularism should not deter the searcher from recognizing what the different faiths have in common just as it should not encourage playing down on their points of similarities. In other words, the searcher should not adopt Moshey's type of position which presents God of Islam and Christianity as different Gods. Kenneth Cragg's view²⁷ in this regard commends itself to us as it reads:

Those who say that Allah is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ are right if they mean God is not so described by Muslims. They are wrong if they mean that Allah is other than the God of the Christian faith.

Cragg's view corroborates the Qur'anic statement in Surah 29:46 which declares:

... We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which has come down to you. Our God and your God is one and it is to Him we bow in Islam.

The point being made therefore is that if our traditions have common tenets they should be of research interest to our theologians as that would help to promote interfaith dialogue and enhance religious harmony.

This is precisely why the present writer has developed special interest in this area of research leading to studies in the common Biblical and Qur'anic themes as published in various learned journals.²⁸

²⁷ Cragg 1985: 30

²⁸ Opeloye's publication in this area of study include:

- (i) Unity and Trinity of God, published in *Islamic Quarterly*, London, 1988.
- (ii) Confluence and Conflict in the Qur'anic and Biblical Accounts Prophet Musa published in *Islam-Christianity*, Rome 1990.

Explanation of one another's faith position on religious doctrines which is the second objective has implication especially for the theologian whose search interest is in the area of comparative religion. He requires the will to resist the temptation to be biased against the other tradition. In other words he should as much as possible maintain objectivity, state the facts as they are for each tradition to ensure balanced presentation.

One of the negative effects of particularism is the theologians' tendency for deliberate misconception of the tenets of the other faiths. Islam is particularly a victim of such misconceptions. Jihad is a good example of misconstrued Islamic concepts. We can see this from Sale's interpretation of Surah 22:39 of the Qur'an which permits Muslims to fight for self defence.²⁹ His interpretation which is misleading is given thus: "Permission is given to those who take up arms against unbelievers..." The correct interpretation should be "For those against whom war is made, permission is given (to fight)" Sale's interpretation has failed to take cognizance of the passive form of the verb used in the text (i.e. *alladhina yuqataluna*). What he has translated is the active form (*alladhina yuqatiluna*) which is a distortion of what is contained in the text. The impression one would have in Sale's interpretation is that the Muslims were the ones in the offensive and anxious to fight which is contrary to the provision in the passage.

Theologians who are in academic search for dialogue should not only avoid such misconception, they must refocus their search to correct such misconceptions as this is the only way to get at the truth enshrined in our traditions.

Lastly, particularism should not prevent the theologians who are interested in search for the promotion of religious harmony through dialogue from appreciating one another's view point as demonstrated on the issue of Shari'ah in Nigeria. It is a common knowledge that Nigerian Muslims and Christians are sharply divided over full implementation of the Shari'ah legal system in the country while the controversy arising from it has led to inter-religious violence that has claimed thousands of lives. The dimension of the

(iii) Theology of God's Word in the Bible and Qur'an, published in *Islamic Culture* Hyderabad, Vol. LXIX, No.1, Jan. 1995.

²⁹ Compare Yusuf Ali's translation of the passage with Sale's or Picktall's translation. See the Conference Proceeding entitled: *Yakubu* 2001: 195.

controversy which puzzles this writer is the fact that the Christian theologians who should show understanding because of their professed commitment to dialogue have not played the role expected of them. This is clearly evident in John Onaiyekan's submission at the National Seminar on Shari'ah organized by the Jama'atu Nasrul Islam on 12th February 2000 which partly reads:

Although it is good and useful to have this kind of seminars it would be futile for anyone to hope that after a lot of explanations, Christians will finally settle for and agree to the Shari'ah. Indeed, when they say No, it is a position taken out of full knowledge and after bitter experience of the implications on the Christians... If we continue indefinitely dissipating our energies in this kind of debate we would not even see clearly enough to be able to take the great task of clearing up our public life system.³⁰

This type of submission is not in the spirit of dialogue. In a theological search that is dialogue motivated the searcher does not approach his study with his mind sealed against what the outcome of the dialogue would be. Particularism should not deter the searcher from considering the viewpoint of the opponent in dialogue to determine its reasonability if dialogue should achieve its purpose. The implication of this is that the searcher should be receptive and accommodating in his views. On the issue of Shari'ah the opposition should not have been based on sentiment, rather enquiry should have been made on:

- i. Why Muslims want Shari'ah.
- ii. Whether Shari'ah can be of any benefit to the society.
- iii. Whether Shari'ah actually affects the non-Muslims negatively.

If such questions are raised with good intention and answers are given with sincerity of purpose the outcome of the dialogue would be in the overall interest of the country.

³⁰See the Conference Proceeding entitled: *Understanding Shari'ah in Nigeria*, edited by A.M. Yakubu et.al. (Spectrum Books Limited, Ibadan 2001) p. 195.

Conclusion

Three key issues are discussed in this study viz. particularism, search and dialogue, the main objective being to examine the relationship between theological search and religious dialogue. The study has been able to establish that the searcher's attitude to particularism has a major role to play in the type of relationship that exists between the two. The study reveals that particularism can be viewed positively or negatively. Negative particularism affects theological search negatively and it has adverse implication for dialogue while positive particularism affects theological search positively and its implication can be rewarding. The study offers suggestions on how to engage in positive theological search as a means of promoting purposeful dialogue.

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