

October 8th 2019, Salzburg

Laudatio for Dr. Gideon Pwakim

Distinguished guests of the 2019 Erwin Kräutler Award for Contextual Theology, Interreligious Dialogue, and Liberation Theology Research,

In the name of the jury I am here to give praises to the work of excellence performed by Rev. Fr. Dr. Gideon Pwakim in the doctoral dissertation "The Persistence of Religious Violence in Northern Nigeria and the Search for Peaceful Co-Existence. A Theological Perspective."

The topic of investigation is of the greatest urgency. Nigeria has been a world victim of economic exploitation, climate change, and the war industry. Religion has become a point of contention, and thousands of people have been injured and displaced. How are we part of the war?

Dr. Pwakim dedicated years of doctoral studies to investigating the "underlying factors" behind the war between groups of Christians and groups of Muslims in the Northern Nigerian context. Pwakim asks about the reasons behind the recurring violent encounters between Christians and Muslims in the region. Without religion, would violence occur less? If religion inspires acts of violence, may it also help foster peaceful coexistence?

I) Dr. Pwakim tells us that since the early 1980s the region of Northern Nigeria has found itself in a series of violent episodes of interreligious character. Nowhere in Africa has there been "recorded more conflicts over religion" (Abiodun Alao *apud* Pwakim, p. 6).

The challenge of underdevelopment, in Pwakim's words, "breeds deprivation, hunger, poverty, disease and anger," and that is "a context in which people readily resort to violence" (p. 19). There are various "socioeconomic, political and other conditions under which religion is implicated in violence" (p. 31). Nonetheless, Pwakim holds it to be difficult to exonerate religion from the accusation of instigating violence. "Conflicts are multidimensional" (p. 31). Religion is, along other factors, a determinant reason as well.

II) What is it about religions that places them at the root of violence? Several scholarly responses are mapped out by Pwakim:

- Religions claim to hold truths of a divine nature, not leaving much room for dissension;
- Religions make a dichotomy between adherents and outsiders;
- Religions promise eternal life to those who die faithfully;
- Religions are manipulated by people in positions of power;
- Christianity's and Islam's sacred texts are filled with violent passages, which, when read by someone with intolerant and hateful views, may be interpreted as authorization for violence.

"African traditional religions are not exclusivist in their worldviews" (p. 42) nor missionary. The conditions that gave rise to a legacy of religious violence in Northern Nigeria go back to the violent British conquest of the 19th century, so Falola, quoted by Pwakim (p. 43-44). Religious groups have been benefited unfairly in political decisions. Over time, many adherents have become inclined to intolerant and fundamentalistic views. The fear that grows along ethnic and religious dichotomies is reflex of an elite dominating society. The State does not plan organized actions of intervention. Political parties make agreements with religious leaders. Lack of justice, marginalization, and religious preferentialism have, I quote,

“resulted in those affected resorting to violence as a way of expressing their displeasure with the system that is biased towards them” (p. 48).

“Most often the foot soldiers” come from “a huge mass of unemployed youths” (p. 48). The rich only go to war to plan and lead it; not to die in it. In face of poverty and unemployment, there are not that many options left. Wars need killers and people that carry weapons. As many industries, I here hear that the weapons’ industry, too, lives out of poverty.

The media sensationalizes in order to sell; the implicated parties are not given a chance of reconciling themselves; rich foreign groups have been known to support armed groups in Nigeria; ethnicity rivalry deepens itself across religious borders; Christians and Muslims are equally found guilty of not teaching about their neighbor’s beliefs; the practice of preaching about the other in a stereotyping manner does not help build relationships but animosity. The problems are many. What can be done to overcome the situation of war?

- Religious people could embrace pluralism, believing that they all worship after all the same God;
- “Military approaches are never a solution to the problem of religious violence.” (p. 53). More constructive strategies ought to be privileged;
- Religious people are expected to tolerate and respect other people’s beliefs;
- The core values of religions can help foster peaceful coexistence;
- People could engage more in interreligious dialogue;
- A genuine process of reconciliation is still lacking;
- Because poverty and illiteracy are some of the social conditions within which religious terrorism is hatched and nurtured,” scholars have suggested an economic solution to the problem. Pwakim alerts us of the risk of making the generalization that all poor people are inclined to becoming violent people. We should not forget that there are “various influences and motivations fuelling the violence in the region” (p. 55), what does not invalidate that “the most unstable parts of the world are those whose citizens are among the poorest” (p. 56);
- Advisory borders could help regulate religious practices. But this would need a deeper understanding of the causes behind the recurring violent incidents.

III) Nigeria is “the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world” (p. 60), and it has the “most significant populations of youths in the world” (p. 59). Rich in minerals and oil, Nigeria is a world oil exporter. The climate is dry. Hausa is the most commonly spoken language in Northern Nigeria. The people work mostly in farming, cattle rearing, and commerce. Several parts of the country are vulnerable to desertification.

Since 1980s, when the riots started taking place in Northern Nigeria, thousands of people have been victims of violence and have been displaced. According to Pwakim, “the persistence of violence in the region has created an atmosphere of bitterness, animosity and distrust across the religious divides [...]. It has considerably destroyed the relatively peaceful coexistence and the communal harmony which the Northern Nigerian society was hitherto known for.” (p. 87).

Societal efforts in interreligious dialogue and peaceful co-existence, governmental as well as religious and educational associations, are helping overcome the violence in Northern Nigeria. Pwakim believes that “people are ... gradually beginning to understand that irrespective of differences in beliefs, humankind shares certain things in common, like the universal ... [motherhood: a textual replacement that I would be afraid of making in the case of a physical war on God’s issues] of God.” (p. 94).

IV) Despite of religions’ role in violence, so Pwakim, they also give us strong theological foundations for interreligious dialogue. Dialogue has the aim of promoting deeper knowledge

between people of different religious traditions, and foster friendly relationships irrespective of religious affiliation.

As theological foundations for interreligious dialogue, Pwakim reminds us of the Christian Catholic views that humanity has the same one God “as their common origin and final goal” (p. 115); that the holy spirit may operate outside of the Church [it may even operate inside, some also say :)]; that other religions share elements of truth and goodness; and that there have taken place historical developments in the church towards interreligious dialogue. In Islam, the Qur’an does not forbid friendship with non-Muslims. Dialogue and cooperation so the conclusion, serve the purpose of fostering peaceful coexistence.

V) Combined with bibliographical research, Pwakim conducted qualitative empirical research. 20 people, Christians and Muslims, men and women, people “who have had a direct experience of the violence or [that] are still experiencing the violence in the area” (p. 134) were interviewed.

Prepared with questions and audiorecorder, Pwakim collected and later analysed the views of the research participants about why the religious war in Northern Nigeria has persisted.

VI) The research participants share the notions that “religion is a factor in the persistence of the violence” (p. 163) in Northern Nigeria through phenomena such as:

- religious fundamentalism;
- aggressive proselytization;
- provocative sermons;
- violent religious texts;
- religious politics, as “access to power and the desire to perpetuate oneself in power” has been a strong reason for “exploiting religious sentiments” (p. 168);
- economic instability and unemployment, as in extreme situations “people become ... ready to do anything to survive” (p. 171);
- religious ignorance and illiteracy;
- the lack of a genuine process of reconciliation;
- injustice, marginalization, and discrimination;
- absence of the State in matters of security;
- lack of healing and therapy;
- the existence of social groups profiteering from the social disorder of war.

“Suggestions towards peaceful co-existence and religious harmony in Northern Nigeria” among the research participants included:

- attending to unresolved grievances;
- strive for justice;
- punish the ones guilty;
- investigate the flow of money and its influence;
- overcome poverty,
- promote reconciliation,
- offer post-traumatic therapy for the victims of violence,
- eradicate hate speech,
- minimise Illiteracy,
- popularize comparative religious studies,
- rediscover the core values of religions,
- defend themselves [hopefully with books, not weapons],
- restore the family [hopefully without patriarchy],
- embrace interfaith dialogue,
- and cultivate religious ideas that are against violence.

VII) In the last chapter of the dissertation, Pwakim proposes reconciliation and hospitality as curative models and adequate responses to the persistence of violence in Northern Nigeria. Whereas reconciliation marks the restoration of friendly relations; hospitality consolidates the peace-building process by opening homes and hearts to the stranger.

Both Christianity and Islam offer scriptural and traditional sources that speak in favor of reconciliation and hospitality. Forgiveness is a central idea in both religions, calling people to not hold on to vengative thoughts against those who have done them wrong. Also African ancestral traditions aim at “healthy communal relationships” (p. 203) in which both victim and perpetrator are healed.

According to Pwakim, the process of reconciliation follows some elemental stages: there must be an acknowledgment of guilt by the perpetrator, who then asks for forgiveness. “The victim decides whether to forgive or not.” (p. 213) Forgiveness enables the victim “to let go of the past,” (210) which can be very difficult in cases. “The effect of living in a state of war and instability” (p. 213) leaves people in need of psychological care. And that is the case for both, victims and perpetrators: I quote: “In unleashing terror against another, ... [we who unleash terror are] also wounded; wounded by the acts of [our] very atrocities against another... No matter how justified a person might feel in carrying out atrocities against another, there are always psychological scars left after such actions” (p. 215). Once fair trials and punishments have been decided, and financial restitutions have been made, there can be a celebration with the promise of no more war.

Hospitality is a relationship between host and guest in which both sides relate to each other friendly, openly, engagingly, with love and affection (p. 224). Jewish people have been strangers in Egypt. Jesus was sympathetic to foreigners, and took them as examples of faith. The Christian tradition presents God as someone who reveals themselves in the stranger. The stranger is to be clothed, fed, and welcomed safely for the night. As the 6th century Benedict’s rule goes: “Let everyone that comes be received as Christ.”

There is an Arabic proverb which says: “Greet us and don’t feed us.” A warm heart means a lot, and so much more when it would like to share, but does not have the means. Love for neighbor is in Islam, as in Christianity, “an integral part of love for God” (p. 231).

We shall see how history unfolds, but as long as there is poverty, illiteracy, political exclusion, a sold-out media, the influence of people of power, and a failure to create spaces of reconciliation, what are our chances?

This is a work that deserves all of our praise. Thank you, Dr. Gideon Pwakim, for your research contributions towards peaceful coexistence in Northern Nigeria. May many be inspired by your steps.

I end my speech with a few toast wishes for the future:

A Pwakim Award to every outstanding work on the reasons of contemporary religious wars,

My wish for the end of wars,

For the end of all loud, gun violence as well as all the silenced violences,

family violences that also take place with the justification of religious teachings.

For the closure of gun factories as they, too, are a reason of gun attacks.

And, if nothing else works, despite of the ideological risks that come with institutionalized education, my wish for the creation of more theological seminaries, self-sustainable interreligious places where people can live, host friends and strangers, and become familiarized with the fun art of talking about theological differences without getting so overtaken as to the point of physical violence: the fun art of doing theology.

Dr. Pwakim: our thoughts will go back with you to the Northern Nigerian context, as they are now with our dear Erwin Kräutler against the capitalist war on the Amazon forest, its peoples, and animals.

Congratulations, and thank you all for having me.

Eneida Jacobsen