Interreligious voicelessness.
As our ancestors said:

Begged water does not quench thirst – an African proverb

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Abstract

The advent of Christianity in Africa changed a lot of beliefs and practices; it is possible that the spirituality of the African Traditional Religion (ATR) made Christianity acceptable to the masses in Africa. Westernization of Christianity which was new to Africa, has become part of mainstream Christianity today.

God gave us diversity; therefore diversity in religion should be embraced. Our innate religiosity makes us know and accept that there is a higher power. Multifaith issues can be put to the fore to enable us to work together to gain a voice. Is the Church today ready and prepared to listen?

Introduction

The advent of Christianity on the continent of Africa changed a lot of beliefs and practices; however, it is my belief that because of the spirituality of the African people, accepting Christianity was easy for the masses in Africa. For example, certain cultural norms in Ghana did not come from Christianity but were part of their African Traditional religion (ATR). Some of the basic concepts that Jesus preached were already being practiced in Africa through ATR and so were not new to them. What was new was the westernisation, the Europeanisation, of Christianity that has become part of Christianity today. The concept of community-based societies is not foreign to Africans in the way it is to those in the West: for Africans, loving your neighbour as yourself comes easily because, when a stranger comes to your house, you do not turn him away but you offer him a drink.

Even though history tells us that Christianity was given birth in Africa, the Christianity subsequently brought back to Africa was totally westernised. Thus, it created tensions between the religions that were already in existence and the “New World”. There is interreligious voicelessness within Africa because western Christianity has taken hold and has judged ATR as being “of the devil”. With the widespread and increasing popularity of Christianity and Islam on the continent of Africa, attention seems to have shifted to what may be called the “guest” religions and to the tremendous changes they have effected in African societies while ignoring the “host” ancestral religious traditions of Africa. This has happened on the sweeping and gratuitous assumption that the latter have been superseded by other “world religions”, or that they have been rendered irrelevant by their own inherent weaknesses and woeful spiritual inadequacy. These “failings” ensure that they are perceived as unsuited to life in the contemporary world and thus they are rendered voiceless.

According to historical accounts, Constantine—in making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire—had an ulterior motive. Religious unification was one of the strategies that Constantine pursued in order to unify the Roman Empire; it also became a major tool for eradicating local differences. The followers of other religions became known as heretics and were exiled. Prior to Christianity being made the “official” religion of the empire, Christians did not have a voice—the dominant and accepted religions had become more vocal and drowned out the other religions.

How many of us Christians know and understand other religions? Do we even understand our own? Before the advent of Christianity, what was in existence? How much do we know about our religion? Do we know how many religions there are in the world? According to the Big Religion Comparison Chart, there are 43 belief systems, but in truth, no-one knows and it would be impossible to infer accurately the number of religions in the world. Certainly, many small, isolated religions exist

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and groups living in areas that hinder communication and interaction often tend to be small, thus preventing diffusion from occurring. Do these other religions have a voice? How can they overcome their voicelessness? Even within Christianity there are 40,000 denominations – does each of these denominations have a voice?

I would like to highlight the stark voicelessness of a group in Ghana who consider themselves to be Hebrews. They were voiceless to me until a Jewish colleague conducted some research through Kulanu. She wanted to find out if there were any Jews living in Ghana she could get in touch with – and “break bread” with – during a trip to that country two years ago. Ghanaians I have spoken to since then are not aware of a Jewish community in Ghana. I wonder if that community is officially recognised in Ghana – after all, the dominant religions there are Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion.

How have these other religions gained their voice? Would the Jewish community my friend found be better off moving to Israel to gain a voice? Indeed, that is what the Ethiopian Jews did – but I am not entirely sure that, with the benefit of hindsight, all of them would have made that move. The number of people lost on the way and the number of families separated forever created a chasm that may never be bridged.

How do religious groups find a voice? Christianity, Islam and Judaism loom so large that – if there are other religions – where are they at the table? When we have religious conferences, do we try to invite everyone to the table? Is that even possible? Can we ever achieve that? Some say that there are seven religions in Africa others say 4,000 – how do we come together as one voice?

The Native American theologian, John Mohawk, wrote:

The reason that indigenous cultural values and religious traditions are devalued in the West is that they are not perceived to be part of the quest for a utopian future. They are not part of the discourse of the West, and do not qualify for serious consideration. These are distinct, unrelated narratives, and, as such, are classified somewhat disparagingly as “folk traditions”, not philosophy. They are thought to arise from superstitious, such as the kind Socrates ridiculed. They cannot achieve value because they are structurally devalued in the context of a meta-narrative that seeks to rationalise expansion, hierarchy, colonisation, and the objectification of nature, patriarchy, and a long list of other characteristics that define Western culture. Since these indigenous traditions do not support, enhance, or otherwise further the projects of Western domination, they are treated as though they are of no value at all.

But the fate of our invaluable religious traditions cannot be allowed to be determined solely by Western attitudes and interests. These are traditions of inestimable and sacred value, not only to indigenous peoples, but also to the whole world. It is the inescapable responsibility of indigenous peoples themselves to derive meaning and significance from their inherited traditions and to take charge of their own destinies by reconstructing value systems for their societies.

The dominance of some religions is total – especially when they affect the economic situation of society. Interreligious voicelessness has grown to the point where, for economic survival, some people have had to lie or hide their religion. In this way they have become voiceless. Some of the faith-based organisations that want to “save the world” ask job applicants to make a statement on their employment application forms about their relationship with Christ and about their spiritual journey. What happens, then, to those who are not Christian? Does this mean they cannot get a job with that particular organisation? What happens is that they end up being voiceless if they want to be able to feed their families. You find Muslims, to cite one example, applying to such organisations, claiming to have a relationship with God and putting forth a statement so eloquent and spiritual, that they end up getting the job. But in getting the job they have become voiceless. Is the Church today ready and prepared to listen? As the African proverb goes: “One must come out of one’s house to begin learning.” Put another way, one begins to learn about everything because one has a basis for comparison – one’s own house.

The changing views of the Vatican

6 www.jewishvirtuallibrary.com – Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews (IAEJ
As the largest denomination of the Christian Church, and the first, the Catholic Church is changing its views about the recognition of indigenous religions. (Discussion in this article concerning the views of the Catholic Church is not intended to be interpreted as a view from the Roman Catholic perspective. Rather, it is intended to show that even the Roman Catholic establishment is now realising that the world is not only about the Catholic Church and that all the other small religions should be recognised too.

The Catholic Church is encouraging all Jesuits to move beyond prejudice and bias, be it historical, cultural, social or theological, in order to cooperate wholeheartedly with all men and women of goodwill in promoting peace, justice, harmony, human rights and respect for all of God's creation. This is to be done especially through dialogue with those inspired by religious commitment, or who share a sense of transcendence that opens them to universal values.

Even the Vatican recognises the need for dialogue with other religions. Vatican II has urged all Catholics to a dialogue which will “acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found in other religions, and the values in their society and culture” in order to “join hands with them to work towards a world of peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.” The Holy Father has repeatedly asked Jesuits to make interreligious dialogue an apostolic priority for the third millennium.

Given that Christians comprise less than 35% of the world’s population, it is imperative that we collaborate with others to achieve common goals. In the context of the divisive, exploitative and conflicting roles that religions, including Christianity, have played in history, dialogue seeks to develop the unifying and liberating potential of all religions, thus showing the relevance of religion for human well-being, justice and world peace.

Above all we need to relate positively to believers of other religions because they are our neighbours; the common elements of our religious heritages and our human concerns force us to establish ever-closer ties based on universally accepted ethical values. Dialogue is “an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity” and it should “never be made a strategy to elicit conversions”.

To be religious today is to be interreligious in the sense that a positive relationship with believers of other faiths is a requirement in a world of religious pluralism. According to the following report presented by the Vatican Council,

The world Society must foster the four-fold dialogue recommended by the Church:

1. The dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
2. The dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
3. The dialogue of religious experience, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.
4. The dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values. This dialogue of theological exchange can more easily be carried on with religions that have a written tradition. However, the dialogue with indigenous religions is equally important. These religions express a sense of the divine and the transcendent which must be “approached with great sensitivity, on account of the spiritual and human values enshrined in them”. They play an important role in creating ecological harmony and human equality and have developed a great variety of expression and ways of

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9 2 Vatican Council II, Nostra Aetate nn. 2, 3.
12 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter Redemptoris Missio, n.56.
communicating religious experience through devotional practices, ritual, dance and song, which are a true source of blessings.\textsuperscript{14}

As Companions of Jesus sent into today's world, a world characterised by religious pluralism, we have a special responsibility to promote interreligious dialogue. The Ignatian vision of reality provides the spiritual inspiration and ministerial grounding for this urgent task. It opens our eyes to the incomprehensible mystery of God's salvific presence (\textit{Deus semper major}) in the world. It makes us sensitive to the sacred space of God's direct dealing with human persons in history.

The contemplation of God labouring in all things helps us to discern the divine spirit in religions and cultures. The Kingdom meditation enables us to understand history as God's history with us. The Jesuit heritage of creative response to the call of the Spirit in concrete situations of life is an incentive to develop a culture of dialogue in our approach to believers of other religions. This culture of dialogue should become a distinctive characteristic of our society, sent into the whole world to labour for the greater glory of God and the help of human persons.\textsuperscript{15}

There were several recommendations made to the Pontiff to explore:

\begin{itemize}
  \item The feasibility of setting up a Secretariat for Interreligious Dialogue to promote and coordinate Jesuit initiatives in this area. The secretary could help to ensure that training programmes for Jesuits are organised in view of a wider involvement in dialogue. He could publish a Bulletin for the exchange of Jesuit experiences and theological reflections in the area of dialogue.
  \item The possibility of establishing a Department for the Study of Religions at the Gregorian University. This Department could offer academic courses on Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions, as well as on the Theology of Religions. It could establish academic rapport with other universities and centres for religious studies in various parts of the world.
  \item The possibility of expanding the scope of the apostolate of the Jesuit Community of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Jerusalem so that, in dialogue and in concert with other Christian centres in Jerusalem, the Jesuits there might explore programmes in interreligious dialogue among Jews.
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However, the dialogue with indigenous religions is equally important. These religions express a sense of the divine and the transcendent which must be “approached with great sensitivity, on account of the spiritual and human values enshrined in them”. They play an important role in creating ecological harmony and human equality and have developed a great variety of expression and ways of communicating religious experience through devotional practices, ritual, dance and song, which are a true source of blessings.

**African Traditional Religion as practiced in the Eastern Region of Ghana**

I believe that the indigenous religions that the Pontiff was referring to are the African Traditional Religions. ATR is still being practiced in Ghana today because it is part of the Ghanaian culture. There is a ritual – the Asafosa Peace Ritual – that takes place at the end of every year during the Odwira festival of the Akuapem people. I make reference to this ritual because of the similarities it has with the Christian communion and confession as recorded in Matthew 5:23-26.

*The Asafosa Peace Ritual*

The Asafosa Peace Ritual is closely tied to the history of Mamfe Township in the Akuapem District in the Eastern Region of Ghana. According to oral tradition, the people of Mamfe used to live at Damurukoso, located near present-day Obosomase in the Akuapem District. In those days – circa 1511 – the people of Mamfe were farmers who lived in the forest and could easily be killed by wild animals. There was lack of water where they lived and the hunters of the tribe would go far and wide to search


for water because, though they would sometimes bring in a kill, they did not have water with which to cook it.¹⁶

The Asamoah family were said to be expert hunters, and it was during one of their hunting expeditions from Damurukuso that they saw rivers and streams flowing from a big rock – water in abundance – in the area. They returned often and soon realised that the rivers and streams in the area flowed continuously. They discovered other sources of water not far from the original and, when they realised that the soil was good for farming, they decided to inform the other four families about what they had found. The heads of the other families, namely Kwadwo Toku, Abe, Agyarko and Akote decided to go and see the land for themselves prior to making the decision to move. After visiting the location, they agreed with Asamoah that it would be better to relocate.¹⁷

After some discussion, five of the families decided to move and make a home at the new location. The five families that settled at the present-day Mamfe Township were Kwadwo Toku, Abe, Asamoah, Agyarko and Akote. They never went back to Damurukuso. The five families parcelled out land for each other, settling not too far from each other, but far enough to feel separate. Each farmer and his family lived in a particular area and farmed the land, but they shared the use of essentials such as water and grazing land. By the end of the first year, they realised that they had made a good choice, and called the area Kwaade, and the name has remained till today.¹⁸

In order to ensure that they would live in harmony, the heads of the five families decided to set aside a specific time to settle disputes that had arisen between individuals and families during the first year of their settlement.

On an appointed day, the head of each family was requested to bring a pot of palm wine to a meeting for sharing. To demonstrate that no-one bore any ill will towards anyone else, they poured the drinks they had brought in one common pot and each of the five family heads drank portions of the mixed wine. The remainder was then shared among the members of the five families, accompanied by merry making, to symbolise the togetherness of the families. Every year thereafter they met to socialise and discuss what had happened to their families within the past year, to settle any disputes between clans, to share sympathy with those who had lost members of their families, and to celebrate any good news. Every clan head would bring palm wine – a local wine made from the sap of the palm nut tree. After all disputes had been settled, everyone would share the drinks they had brought and would celebrate the festivities together. This demonstration of togetherness was called “ASAFOSA NOM DA”. The name means clan drinking day, or the day of communal drinking.¹⁹

This tradition continued for several years. At every meeting, some of the hunters began to report seeing an apparition: a very tall man with a big white dog standing in front of him. The man held a staff in his hand, but did not harm the people. Several hunters reported seeing this apparition at many meetings, until a daughter of one of the families became possessed by the spirit of the apparition. The spirit said that his name was Kwadwo Toprë, and that he was a spirit, not a god. He desired peace and justice, and did not like blood. If the people who had settled on his land kept the peace, he would protect them and make sure no harm came to them. It was said that when someone became very ill, Toprë would appear and put his hand on the person, who would then immediately recover. They began to revere him. Those who became possessed by the spirit of Toprë were called Akomfo, and they lived to serve him. The people also built a house for the priest of Toprë.²⁰

The priest of Toprë would take the palm wine from the heads of the clans and pour it into the communal pot. The priest would then mix the drinks together and, taking the first cup of the mixed palm wine, he would pray to Onyankopong – God – and through Toprë, ask for protection for the people, as well as for peace, prosperity, happiness, long life and good health. After the prayers, the priest would put the mixed wine in the pots of the different clan heads and every member of the clan was to take a drink. This would go on until all the wine was finished.²¹

Through the obosom, Toprë would warn the people of misfortune, and tell them how to prevent it, so the people of Mamfe grew prosperous. There was much intermarriage between the original five families, and the community grew. There was a yearly ritual for Toprë as well. Prior to the

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¹⁸ Ibid.
¹⁹ The brochure of the Mamfe Ohum Festival 2007 & the 10th Anniversary of the Enstoolment of Osabarima Ansah Sasraku III, p.23
²⁰ Ibid., p.24.
Asafosa Peace Ritual, the elders of the town would go to the farm to prepare special wine, and they would bring offerings of yams, cocoyam, plantains, tomatoes, drinks, and firewood to Topré.22

The Topré Okomfo would perform the necessary rites before the Asafosa Peace Ritual and in so doing, they would be silent participants during the ritual. Every year, the ritual would conclude the celebration. (The festival continues to this day, and as the community has grown, so has the community pot, which is now similar to a large cauldron.) A clan that had not been able to settle all disputes within its family could not partake of the Asafosa Peace Ritual unless it was understood that, by participating in the Peace Ritual, the dispute was at an end, and could never be discussed again. Partaking in the ritual meant that all had been forgotten and forgiven.23

Prior to the Peace Ritual, there were certain other rituals that had to be performed by Topré’s priest. For three weeks before the ritual, there was to be no drumming, no unnecessary noise and no misbehaving. The priest and his elders would go to the farm and, as they went, they would form a line that no-one was permitted to cross. If you happened to be going to the farm around the same time, you would have to wait until the entire entourage had passed. When they were returning to the village they also formed one line, led by the priest of Topré. No one was allowed to look back; anyone who did ran the risk of not living to see the next year.24

From there, they went directly to Topré’s house to meet and to receive gifts. After receiving the gifts, they went to their homes to bathe and then returned to the house to begin the ritual. The sub-chiefs would meet first and wait for the chief, who is called Osabarima. When Osabarima was seated, the peace ritual would begin and Osabarima would call the heads of the families to pour their wine into the cauldron. The order of the families was as follows:

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
The Osabarima was the last to bring his wine to the pot. The Asamoah family did not participate in the bringing of the wine, but they did participate in the drinking thereof because they were seen as the ones who had brought the Mamfe family to the settlement. The Osabarima mixed the drink and gave it to the heads of the families from the communal pot. After the priest had prayed for the township, everyone drank the wine, just as it is done in Holy Communion. The priests of Toprē became the chiefs (or Osabarima) of Mamfe because they understood the spirit of the community and its protector. This is similar to the part played by church ministers today. If a clan could not resolve an issue prior to the peace ritual, they would go to the priests for resolution. It was a disgrace to the clan and the families involved if they could not participate in the peace ritual, and so the heads of the families would make sure that their disputes were resolved beforehand. Everyone was invited to take part in the ritual, including the children.

The current celebration of the Asafosa Peace Ritual

The starts on a Sunday, and continues for the rest of the week.

Monday: A day of mourning for the dearly departed of the previous year. Visits are made to all who have experienced death in their families.
Tuesday: A day for feasting. Each family cooks meals and shares them with friends and relatives.
Wednesday: A day for discussing developmental issues
Thursday: A day for discussing developmental issues that will enhance the well-being of all families. The discussions take place while the merry-making continues.
Friday: A day of communal labour.
Saturday: The chief and elders sit in state at the durbar.
Sunday: A day for a non-denominational thanksgiving service.26

According to the present-day Chief (Osabarima), the Asafosa Peace Ritual started in the 1600s – before the arrival of Christianity in Africa, and is still celebrated today. Ordained Christian ministers are invited to the peace ritual and, although some ministers, due to their personal beliefs, choose not to attend, there is always a minister who is ready and willing to participate. No one has said that Christians are not welcome to participate in the Asafosa Peace Ritual. To the Mamfe people, Toprē was a manifestation of the power of God. Toprē cannot be used for evil, and can never be used to curse anyone. The festivities surrounding the Asafosa Peace Ritual are known as the OHUM Festival of Mamfe, Akuapem.27

The Mamfe are made up of the following clans:

- Descendants of Agyarko – Awurade Kese – Chiefs of Mamfe
- Descendants of Kwadwo Toku – Awurade Ketewa – Chiefs of Gyase
- Descendants of Akote – Pone – Chiefs of Mankrado
- Descendants of Abe – Enyiresi – Chiefs of Enyiresi
- Descendants of Asamoah – Akyeremade – Chiefs of Kwahu

The Asafosa Peace Ritual is specific to the Mamfe Township and is not very well known in the rest of the country and only those who come from the region are likely to be aware of the festival. However, it the humble opinion of the author that this peace ritual – and the significance it carries – is important enough to be celebrated by all the people of Ghana.

Religious pluralism

25 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
According to Adherents.com, there are about 22 major religions that are recognised in the world. Each of these has several denominations leading to a figure of almost 4000. There is an understanding and acceptance that with these religions, there should be communication and relationships formed to work together on issues where they can find a common ground. In interfaith movements, many religions work together towards common goals such as social justice and in support of anti-war and anti-poverty movements.

It is also important to realise that no one religion holds the answer to every issue in the world – and that no one religion is the sole source of truth – and thus that at least some truths and true values exist in other religions. There should, therefore, be an acceptance of the concept that two or more religions with mutually exclusive claims on “the truth” can be equally valid. This point of view emphasises the common aspects of all religions. The proper attitude in religious pluralism is to recognise and to accept the uniqueness and meaning of every religion, to recognise that each can learn from the other.

There is both a Christian movement promoting unity among Christian Churches or denominations and this kind of movement. The latter can be referred to as religious pluralism (or as ecumenism). It represents the promotion of some level of unity, co-operation, and improved understanding between different religions – or different denominations within a single religion, such as the different denominations within Christianity. (Religious pluralism is also a term for the condition of harmonious co-existence between adherents of different religions or religious denominations.)

**Conclusion**

The voicelessness of other religions may not be critical to some. To this author, however, it is important. The voices of the other religions are not kept aloof. There is a difference between knowing that someone is there and choosing to ignore that person and not knowing that the person exists. This author, though not a Roman Catholic, wants to emphasise the fact that the Vatican has now seen the light and that it recognises that indigenous religions also have a contribution to make in this world. However, this realisation does not make the Roman Catholic Church a vocal representative of ATR.

African Traditional Religion – like all other world religions – is on a quest for the ultimate meaning of human existence and it is on that quest in order that man’s life may be made more comprehensible, tolerable and endurable. The context of interpretation of life, which must invariably relate to the cultural setting of a particular religious group, has been responsible for many different modes of religious expression and understanding of the objective of human existence.

These various modes of religious expression have produced diversity in religious phenomena and this, coupled with a lack of understanding of ATR, has given rise to the steadfast conviction of the scriptural religions that they are in possession of the absolute truth. Christianity believes that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. Similarly, Islam professes that Mohammed is the only true prophet of God, the last of the great revelations of God to mankind. African Traditional Religion does not seek to challenge or question the validity of either of these claims. It seeks, rather, to ensure freedom of religion based on the underlying principle that “truth is like a baobab tree, and no one person’s arms can go around it”. Therefore, in the traditional African religious view, the truth is not a monopoly of any single individual; rather it is a universal phenomenon that must be shared.

In Africa, there is a diversity of ethnic groups with traditional cultures that differ considerably in many respects from each other. Each ethnic group has a religion that is bound by particular historical experiences and traditions and is thus restricted to the people among whom it has evolved. There are many differences in the cultures and traditions of African peoples yet, in all of this, there are underlying similarities running through African Traditional Cultures and these have produced a general pattern of religious beliefs among Africans.

African Traditional Religion has neither a universal founder nor propaganda machinery. The beliefs of the people – which have evolved over time – have not been written down or codified as a coherent doctrine, yet neither do they exist in a chaotic state. African religious beliefs and practices are systematically embodied in the form of myths, proverbs, gestures, symbols, art, music and dance and they are transmitted orally from older to younger generations. Contrary to the popular belief that the

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31 Ibid
32 Sackey, African Traditional Religions, 124.
33 Ibid.,125.
practitioners of African Traditional Religion believe in deities, there is rather the belief that God is the Supreme Being whose name is “Onyame”. There is no plural version of this word because the African does not believe that there is more than one Supreme Being. He is almighty, all powerful, dependable and eternal. The Supreme Being is an invisible spirit whose imminence and presence can be felt everywhere. Non-adherents of ATR especially Europeans, have held the erroneous belief that the concept of God in Africa was a borrowed idea.34

African Traditional Religion, as observed, is built on the concepts of tolerance and flexibility. This is seen in the plethora of diverse religious beliefs and practices of African peoples. Adherence to one traditional cult, group or organisation does not prohibit a person from joining another.35 This accommodative behaviour, according to Brigid Sackey, has rather contributed to a positive religious growth, and to the potential growth of Christianity, Islam and other foreign religions in Africa. Christianity, on the other hand, is not accommodating in the same sense. A Christian is expected to renounce membership of all religions, as well as all practices associated with non-Christian beliefs.36

However, despite its flexibility, ATR is − because of the very nature of African culture − unyielding to total submission to the invading religions. African traditional institutions never existed or functioned as distinct separate entities, but they are irrevocably and intricately interwoven into one another. Traditional religion, for example, never operates independently of the kinship structure or the system of moral values. Therefore encroachment on any aspect of the culture is bound to affect others. This fundamental characteristic of African Culture was recognised by Christian Missionaries who thus directed their attacks on crucial aspects of African life. The question is this: why does African Traditional Religion persist and thrive, even after missionaries have set out to cause its collapse?37

Religious Studies seem to be marginalised now with many universities seeming to be having issues recruiting and retaining students. Why is that? How do we as academicians and theologians make religion relevant to society today? How do we make religious studies important? I believe we need to look to the spirituality of people and focus on the development of that spirituality − as opposed to concentrating on one particular religion to the exclusion of all others.

Excluding other religions makes them more attractive, especially to the youth. The youth do not see any merit in taking Religious Studies in school when the subject will not lead to a well-paying job. With the present economy, signing up for Religious Studies will lead to a teaching profession or to the priesthood − alternatives that may or may not be attractive to the youth. Religious Studies will have to be repackaged and reintroduced to the masses. As Walter Brueggemann stated in The Prophetic Imagination:

The contemporary American Church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act …
The internal cause of such enculturation is our loss of identity through the abandonment of the faith tradition.
Our consumer culture is organised against history.
There is a depreciation of memory and ridicule of hope, which means everything must be held in the now, either an urgent now or an eternal now.38

Religious Studies cannot and should not be kept in the past. We need to bring it into the present to make it relevant and interesting.

Interreligious voicelessness becomes an issue when certain judgments are made with regard to religions other than our own. Like the tower of Babel, God gave us diversity in all shapes and forms, and so the diversity in religion should be embraced. All religions should have a voice because we all worship God Almighty. In Ghana, there is a saying that “No one teaches a child who God is.” It is our innate religiosity that makes us know and accept that there is a higher power − one greater than all of us, one who shares a connection with us that no one can take away from us.

Interreligious voicelessness can be overcome, with the respect of space and other attributes of other religions that will enable us to come together and speak with one voice. Multifaith issues can be put to the fore to enable us to work together to gain a voice.

As Christians, we tend to be very focused on our religion and sometimes do not feel the need to learn about other religions. When we get into dialogue with people of other faiths we are sometimes surprised to find out how much more they know about our religion than we know about theirs. It is

34 Ibid., 126.
35 Ibid., 130.
36 Sackey, African Traditional Religions, 130.
37 Ibid.,
about time that we found out about other faiths and other religions because that knowledge will either strengthen our faith and belief – or it will create a change in us.

There are many aspects of the Bible that we do not know or understand. Many of us do not put Bible passages into context and into perspective so as to try to understand the world we live in. We in Ghana believe that, before the advent of Christianity, we had “Onyamesom”. This is the belief in a Supreme Being – a God similar to the God described in the Old Testament. Our social mores and customs were not established by Christianity and the customs being practiced today were in existence prior to the advent of Christianity.

The focus of this article has been to discuss the fact that this is a diverse world with diverse religions – some of them better known than others. My contention is that these other religions tend to be voiceless on the world stage. This voicelessness could lead to a loss of followers for such religions because of policies that are not favourable to them, or due the emigration of these peoples to parts of the world that practice the same religion. This was the case for the Ethiopian Jews. Such a move does not guarantee these groups a voice.

To some, not having a voice may not be important. To the author, however, it is important to have a voice and to be present at the table when issues that will affect you and the members of your community are being discussed. It is only when you have a voice that your views can be heard. No one can speak on behalf of these other religions. They have to speak for themselves because they are the only ones able to articulate what is best for them.
Works consulted


