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Appreciation of Difference and Hospitality in Intercultural and New Testament Perspectives

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13 Appreciation of Difference and Hospitality in Intercultural and New Testament Perspectives

Abstract

In Early Christianity, the meaning of Gospel fundamentally implied the belief that the God of Israel extended his grace, mercy and justice to peoples across cultures, religions, and regions. On the social plane, the necessary consequence of this belief in the significance of the Christ event, was the creation of cross-cultural communities. Everyone, regardless of status, place of origin, gender and religio-cultural heritage was welcomed in these faith- und living-communities. The members were all regarded as children of God and therefore as brothers and sisters of an equal standing. Joining these communities did not require one to leave his/her culture behind but only those cultural aspects or attitudes that aim at disrespecting or hurting others. The hospitality extended to potential new members in the Christ believing communities included an appreciation of difference. At the same time, the ethos of these communities did not allow for any claims of superiority.

Keywords: *Hospitality, Difference, Intercultural, Human Dignity, Communal*

1. Introduction

Under the direction and mentorship of Joachim Kügler, dozens of theologians from sub-Saharan Africa, hailing especially from Southern African countries, developed and completed their PhD studies or post-doctoral projects at Bayreuth University and Bamberg University. The projects that took shape in Bamberg were usually concerned with creating an interface

between a critical study of New Testament texts and their possible meanings, on the one hand, and the development of biblical interpretations that were relevant in particular societal contexts in sub-Saharan Africa, on the other hand. At the same time, Joachim Kügler provided space for intercultural exchange between young scholars from various African countries amongst one another and with German colleagues, especially at international conferences held in Bamberg. Presupposed here was a general attitude marked by the appreciation of difference informed by the conviction of a shared humanity. Such an attitude is, of course, at the heart of what Gospel meant in Early Christianity as is evident in the writings of the New Testament. In accordance with these witnesses, I define Gospel in the following way:

It is the good news about the salvific, i.e., life boosting turn of the God of justice and mercy towards the world, indiscriminately appreciating each and every one regardless of origin or status and integrating all into one community of God. This became a reality in and through Jesus Christ. The community of those who believe in this significance of Christ, is supposed – and enabled – to make Gospel transparent by living according to its integrative values of justice and mercy.

According to this Gospel, dignity is extended to each and everyone. Early Christianity used to operate with family metaphors to express the experience of a shared dignity across cultural, gender or status related divides. In this contribution, I will first connect the concepts of communal belongingness and dignity to experiences and conceptualizations within West African cultures before I will discuss some New Testament passages in this respect. I will conclude with some observations on the reflection of New Testament insights pertaining to the relevance of an inclusive community in the context of an emerging nation state, in the songs of Ephraim Amu. The particular focus on Ghana is due to my own research and life experience in that West African country (Kahl, 2007).

2. The Communalistic Concept of Human Dignity in West-Africa

To live in communities seems to be an all-pervasive feature in West-African cultures. This phenomenon comes into sharp focus especially when

seen from a Western perspective, and it has been described by a number of African philosophers and theologians (Gyekye, 1996). In order to illustrate this point, I would like to share but two experiences of intercultural *misunderstanding* that I observed in Ghana on trips that I took there with students from Germany:

- After a few days in Ghana some of the students would typically withdraw from the group, and they would just want to rest, to think, and to regain their strength. And they would insist to be left alone in their room. The typical reaction of our Ghanaian guests would be: Why, is she sick?
- Once, I had sent my students ahead from Accra to a village close to Mankessim where they were to stay overnight. At about midnight I received a phone-call from the group. They were bitterly complaining that I had put them into a dangerous situation. What happened? When the students got to the house I had rented for them, there was light-off in the whole village and it was pitch dark. The family staying there tried to help them in carrying the luggage into the house; the students however were afraid that their suit-cases would be stolen. Inside the house, the family would not leave the students alone but was getting ready to sleep together with them in the huge hall. The family was just expressing hospitality, meanwhile the students were fearing for their very lives.

What comes to expression in these two examples is a clash of individualistic and communalistic values. When discussing the concept of human dignity in West-African contexts it is essential to take note of the communalistic organization and understanding of life. This knowledge system, which is informed by communal life experiences, also comes to expression in the grammatical structure of West-African languages. I give an example from the Akan language family: The question “What is your name?” is rendered in Twi: Yɛfrɛ wo sɛn? This literally translates: They call you how? The answer is accordingly: Yɛfrɛ me XYZ – They call me XYZ. Compare the German: Wie heißt du? The expected answer is: Ich heiÙe XYZ. In the Twi version, the pronoun “they” constitutes the grammatical subject of the act of naming, and this personal pronoun stands at the very beginning of the sentence. In telling your name in this way, one brings to expression that you are related to a group of people by means of which you give respect to those before you, i.e. those who named you. This

aspect is neither denoted or connoted in the German example which puts the personal pronoun of the first person singular at the beginning of the sentence, in conjunction with heißen, i.e. a verbum intransitivum, which by definition excludes the involvement of another active subject and which therefore can also not be used in the passive voice.¹ In my understanding, these differences at the level of utterance are not accidental or peripheral as might be suggested from a structuralist perspective. These differences are significant because they point to rather different ways to construct and perceive of reality.

The Ghanaian exegete John Pobee has suggested that the organization and communication of reality in West-Africa, at least for the traditional experience of life, is informed, and gives expression to a communalistic ontology. A West-African equivalent of Descartes' well-known formula should be cognatus ergo sum, i.e. I am related by birth, therefore I am (Pobee, 1979, p. 197). This means, people understand themselves on a fundamental level as being part of, and actually as being dependent on a network of relationships, and that at different levels.

Synchronically, i.e. in a relationship within an extended family. Within this setting I have to play the role expected of me: to be respectful and obedient to those older than I, to take care of those younger than I, the same way those ahead of me have taken care of me. The communalistic understanding of life is however not limited to the extended family. It also comes to expression by addressing one another as brother or sister when belonging roughly to the same age group. This address can also be extended to visitors from foreign countries.

Diachronically, in two directions: first, with respect to the ancestors, and second, with respect to those yet unborn, connected with the responsibility to continue the family line into the future.

Spiritually: The observable world is considered as being embedded in a wider spiritual realm. Spiritual forces, both life enhancing and life threatening, are potentially at work in every aspect of the life of an individual as well as of the community or society, i.e., the causes of a predicament could be traced to the activity of a spirit.

¹ Therefore, the German "heißen" is also not functionally identically with the English verbum transitivum to call/to be called.

Within this framework of relationships the concept of human dignity in West-Africa is to be understood. A precise description of the concept of human dignity within this context is given by the well-known Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye whose insights are quoted here at length:

“A conception of human dignity and the sanctity of human life is explicit in the Akan maxim:

All human beings are children of God; no one is a child of the earth.

This insistent claim that every human being is a child of God has moral overtones or relevance, grounded as it is in the conviction that there must be something intrinsically valuable in God. Human beings, as children of God, by reason of their having been created by God, and possessing, in the Akan belief, a divine element called soul, ought to be held as of intrinsic value, as ends in themselves, worthy of respect. A concept of human dignity can be linked with – or derived from – the concepts of intrinsic value and respect. Also implicit in the maxim is the equality of the moral worth of *all* human beings – of all the children of God.

Concepts of human dignity, intrinsic value, and equal moral worth generate a notion of moral rights that, as deriving ultimately from God or as belonging fundamentally to every human being as creature of God, could be linked with the notion of innate rights. Such rights would belong to every human being by nature. Thus, to the extent that what are called human rights, they can be derived from conceptions of human dignity. That is to say, a human rights concept can certainly be said to be already involved in conceptions of human dignity. The conception of human dignity compels the recognition of rights – some rights – not only in an individualistic but also in a communal context. In other words, the derivation of human (individual) rights from supernaturalism cannot be confined to an individualistic context. [...]

Individuality [...] is not incompatible with communalism. Communalism as understood and practiced in the traditional African society does not, on [sic.] my interpretation, absorb individuality, but accommodate it and make it coexist with individuality. The significant implication of this accommodation or coexistence is that communalism is not at variance with the concept of individual right – that is, human rights. It is indeed the exercise of individual rights – which include the right of the individual to

exercise his or her unique qualities, talents, and dispositions – that enhance cultural development and insure the material and political success of the community.” (Gyekye, 1996, pp. 150–151).

This concept of human dignity is inherent in traditional culture, regardless if Akan, Ewe, or Ga. The right to individual freedom and development is not denied but related to the rights and needs of the wider community. It is expected of the individual to show some degree of responsibility for the community. In this context there are also instances where human dignity is being threatened. These instances, however, need close attention and careful examination, especially when the Western or modern perspective comes in, due to unavoidable and instant intercultural misunderstandings.

For example, in Northern Ghana we encounter the phenomenon of so-called witch-camps which, from a Western perspective, might be quite irritating. Some Western NGOs have campaigned for the dissolution of these camps, and in the West people would readily give their support. Amongst Europeans typically the atrocities committed against so many women during the witch-hunts in European history would come to mind immediately coupled with the conviction that evil witches do not exist. In West-Africa, however, it is a fact that the belief in the existence of witches is widespread. The so-called witch-camps in the rural areas of the North in Ghana are very often the only places where individuals branded as witches can find refuge. To just dissolve these camps would not solve the problem but would in fact aggravate the situation for the inhabitants who have no other place to go. It seems to me that the solution of the problem is quite complex, and it involves social, educational, and last but by no means least, spiritual strategies, e.g. involving traditional priests, malams or pastors to pray for the well-being of those residing in the camps (Kirby, 2015; Kahl & Lademann-Priemer, 2020).

3. A New Testament Perspective on Human Dignity and Communal Integration

In theology, the concept of universal human dignity is traditionally being linked to the *imago dei* concept as it is presupposed in the first creation narrative (Gen 1:26–27). And the Old Testament is replete with examples

of abuses of human dignity, like the narrative of Tamar being raped by Amnon (2Sam 13:1–22). In this paper, however, I would like to draw our attention to the New Testament which has been somewhat neglected in this respect.

First of all, I would like to point out Paul's understanding of the Christ event, at its most fundamental level. Here I can draw on the Pauline studies of the South-African born New Testament scholar Hendrikus Boers (Boers, 1971; Boers, 1994). Boers shows that Paul was fundamentally concerned with refuting claims to religious exclusivism by interpreting salvation through Christ in a universalistic manner: Christ has died for all to partake in divine grace. This egalitarian dimension of Paul's reasoning comes to expression in Gal 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Taken out of context, this verse could be misunderstood as denying or erasing difference, as if there were no more Jews or Greeks, no more slaves or free persons, no more women and men in Christ or among the believers. In the Christ believing communities founded by Paul there continued to be a variety of people with distinct religious, cultural and status backgrounds. In Early Christianity, the communication of Gospel aimed at the creation of cross-cultural faith and living communities that were prepared to invite and appreciate people from all walks of life. In order to understand appropriately what Paul wanted to communicate, I render the verse in the following way, connecting it to the immediate context:

"You all are sons (i.e. children) of God through the faith that you have in Christ Jesus. As such as you have been baptized into Christ, you have put on Christ (like a dress), regardless of (you) being a Jew or gentile, a slave or a free person, male or female, for you all have been joint together as one in Christ Jesus. But if you belong to Christ, then it follows that you are offspring of Abraham, i.e. heirs according to the promise." (Gal 3:26–29).

In Paul's writings we have evidence that in his understanding of the Christ event, God is particularly concerned with bestowing his grace and justice on those whose dignity has been undermined in society by those claiming religious and social privileges. God balances former imbalances and he restores dignity and equality. Typically in 1 Cor 1, Paul emphasizes that those who do not count in this world are the privileged addressees of God's salvific activity:

“Brothers (and sisters), think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.” (1Cor 1:26–29).

On the surface level of his expressions or in concrete situations, however, Paul constantly compromises his theological insight. When dealing with the question of the role of women in the congregations (1Cor 12 and 14) or of the status of slaves (1Cor 7; Philemon) we see him struggling to doing justice to his fundamental belief and to the solution of burning problems, at the same time.

Now it is remarkable that the Pauline understanding of salvation also comes to expression in the narratives of the Synoptic Gospels; most clearly in the Gospel of Luke (only the Magnificat of Marie in 1:46–55, esp. 52: “He pushes the mighty ones from the thrones and he lifts up the low ones”; and his version of the beatitudes in conjunction with the following condemnations of the rich in 6:20–26). God here, as in 1Cor 1, shows a clear predilection for the poor, the oppressed and disregarded ones, aiming at a reversal of societal power-relations. However, not only in the sayings-material of the Synoptic Gospels, but also in the very narratives about Jesus’ activities is communicated what seems to be at the heart of the Gospel: Jesus extends the blessing and salvation of God especially to those who are being disregarded in society or actually regarded as devoid of human dignity and who are excluded from community – the sick, the demon possessed, the sinners, the unclean ones, the foreigners. Against this background it also makes sense that in the Gospel narratives a particular emphasis is laid on Jesus’ concern for children and on the commitment to Jesus by women which exceeds that of his male followers.

It is quite revealing to read the Gospel of Mark from the perspective of human dignity. In fact, Mark should be read as a narrative about the affirmation of human dignity on both a fundamental level and on a structural level for those who read and understand.

Fundamentally, the Markan narrative in chapters 1–15 describes the ironic unfolding of the plan of Jesus’ enemies to get rid of him. His shameful

death on the cross serves as a gross expression of the negation of his human dignity. However, the Gospel of Mark does not end there. It continues in 16:1–8 with the miraculous restoration of Jesus' life which indicates the divine affirmation of his dignity. As miracle this event presupposes God's intervention, and it is the shortest miracle narrative in the New Testament, encapsulated in just one Greek word describing as one narrative move the transformation of a certain situation into its very opposite by means of just one action:² *ēgerthē* – He has been resurrected. This word in the aorist passive voice is a *passivum divinum* and should be understood as saying: God has resurrected him (from the dead). By means of this act, God has inverted the verdict of the Roman and Jewish authorities.

Now interestingly, within the Gospel narrative Jesus basically emulates God's salvific activity when he restores people from sickness to health, from death to life, from insanity to sanity, from social exclusion to inclusion. These are paradigmatic restoration stories which bring to expression what the Gospel about the unfolding Kingdom of God (Mk 1:14–15) is all about: the restoration of a dignified life. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the ultimate and fundamental miracle story of Early Christianity and it serves as the model for the other miracle stories. It is therefore no coincidence, that in a number of these stories the verb *egeirein* (to raise, to wake up) occurs indicating restoration (Mk 1:31; 2:9.11.13; 3:5; 5:41; 9:27; 10:49). These restorations are not only according to the will of God, they also need divine power. Therefore, right at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is bestowed with the divine spirit (Mk 1:10–11) which allows him to overpower Satan (Mk 1:12–13) and by implication all demonic, i.e. life threatening and dignity undermining evil spirits.

Interestingly it is especially the miracle healing stories which communicate the affirmation of human dignity and the re-integration into the community. I would like to point out some relevant motifs in the first three miracle healing stories in the first chapter of Mark (Kahl, 1994).

² Cf. the definitions of "Récit" and "Programme narratif" in Greimas & Courtés, 1993, p. 307: The simplest form of a narrative – récit simple – could be described as "le passage d'un état antérieur (...) à un état ultérieur opéré à l'aide d'un faire (...). Dans cette perspective, le récit simple se rapproche du concept de programme narratif."

3.1 The Healing Stories in Mk 1

3.1.1 Mk 1:21–28: Jesus Delivers a Man from an Unclean Spirit

Jesus teaches in the synagogue at Capernaum. The people witnessing the event are utterly astonished about the authority (*exousia*) with which Jesus teaches (v. 22). The reader, however, will not be astonished since s/he knows from Mk 1,1ff who Jesus is! Up to this point within the narrative it is only the unclean spirit residing in a man who knows about Jesus' identity. And he also knows that the presence of the "holy one of God" means destruction for the unclean spirit (v. 24). Consequently, Jesus rebukes (*epitimaō*: *terminus technicus* in exorcism stories) the spirit, commanding him to shut up and move out: *phimōthēti kai exelthe ex autou* (v. 25). The spirit acts accordingly (v. 26). Again the people are surprised and filled with fear; sensing Jesus' power they wonder what this means (v. 27).

In this story comes to expression the Early Christian conviction that Jesus is able to overpower spirits that take possession of people making them unclean. It should also be noted that this incidence takes place in a synagogue, a place where it was expected of people to come before God in a purified state. The exorcism at this very location implies that Jesus is able to restore the purity of the possessed man by driving out the unclean spirit. The reader understands: Jesus' purity is more contagious than the impurity of spirits.

The dimension of a spiritual power struggle between divine and Satanic powers is fundamentally presupposed in the Gospel of Mark. To listeners and readers in antiquity, this was nothing strange but expected. From the short temptation story in Mk 1:12–13 – in narrative function a test after Jesus, the hero of the story, has been bestowed with the divine spirit – it can be concluded right at the opening of the Gospel that this power struggle has been ultimately decided in favor of Jesus.

3.1.2 Mk 1:29–31: Jesus Delivers Peter's Mother-in-law from Fever

The fever of the sick woman is most likely conceived of as a spirit, for the fever is portrayed as active subject of the performance bringing about the dissociation of fever and woman. The fever engages in this action after Jesus establishes a physical contact with the woman while grasping her hand. Clearly Luke has understood this episode as a spiritual deliverance

incident, for according to his version Jesus rebukes (*epitimaō*) the fever. The activity of rebuking is typical for ancient including New Testament exorcism practices.

It is also significant that Jesus touches the woman supposed to be infected with a fever spirit, i.e. he does not shy away from having physical contact with a person considered as spiritually contagious. He takes her serious as fellow human being who is in need not only of healing but also of relationships expressing love and compassion. It should also be noted that Jesus raises her up, which is rendered by the Greek word *egeirein*, which of course is the same verb used in 16:4 indicating Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The miracle healing story in 1:29–31 functions as a minor resurrection story reflecting the fundamental miracle story of the New Testament, i.e. Jesus' resurrection.

Hermeneutically we can say: The will of God is manifest, whenever people are being lifted up, when they can walk upright again, when broken communal relationships are healed and re-established. In V. 31 it is communicated that the women served them. According to the form-critical analysis of miracle stories this signifies the successful restoration of the woman: Now she can take up again her function in the household. In a semantic universe, however, where illness can be attributed to the activity of evil or unclean spirits, the concluding sentence of the episode takes on an additional function which might be well appreciated in a West-African perspective: Her serving the guests with food is indicative of a social reintegration in the sense that the guests accept her services, i.e. they are not afraid of being infected by a spirit dwelling in her. They trust the effectiveness of Jesus' deliverance and they accept the woman.

3.1.3 Mk 1:39–44: Jesus Delivers a Man from Leprosy

A person with leprosy approaches Jesus begging him for healing, i.e. purification (*katharisai*). He presupposes that Jesus has the ability to bring about purity and appeals to his will. Jesus is deeply moved by the request (*splagchnistheis* – Matthew and Luke omit this emotional motif since it does not fit their conceptions of Jesus who is, especially in Luke, supposed to be in control of himself) and he agrees to engage in the required act: He touches the leper with his hand, i.e. Jesus establishes physical contact

with a person who in antiquity was stigmatized and isolated from relationships. Jesus commands healing and the leprosy as active subject leaves the person. Again, it is presupposed that a sickness causing spirit was responsible for the predicament rendering the person unclean. Therefore, in this episode the verb “to cleanse”, “to purify” occurs three times and the noun purity/purification once. The purity of Jesus, due to his indwelling spirit from above, overrides the impurity caused by the leprosy spirit. In order for the man to be accepted into society, Jesus sends him to the priest to declare him clean, and to bring the necessary offerings.

The miracle healing stories in Mark, and the same holds true for the other Synoptic Gospels, exhibit a common structure:

1. Jesus establishes a relationship to those excluded from society or regarded devoid of human dignity.
2. He removes the spiritual cause of the exclusion by means of a stronger spiritual antidote.
3. He prepares the formerly excluded person for re-inclusion into the community.

It should also be noted that in these narratives, those stigmatized and excluded from relationships are being usually put at center stage (clearly Mk 2:1–12; 3:3; 9:36).

3.2 Spiritual and Social Dimensions of Sickness and Healing

A close and contextual reading of the miracle healing episodes in the Gospel of Mark reveals two essential aspects which usually go unnoticed in a Western exegetical perspective:

3.2.1 The Spiritual Aspect of Sickness and Healing

Very often it is presupposed that the sickness has a spiritual cause. In many cases this is attributed to the activity of a so-called unclean spirit. Within the semantic universe of the ancient Mediterranean world in general and within Early Christianity in particular this was nothing strange but rather self-evident. Therefore, we should reckon with the possibility that the involvement of a spiritual agent in causing a sickness might be presupposed in a given story even though this might not be explicitly stated. There, however, might be hints within a story which are indicative

of such an involvement. This is particularly the case when a sickness occurs grammatically as the active subject of a clause, as in Mk 1:31: “And the fever left her”, or as in Mk 1:42: “And immediately the leprosy went away from him.” In such cases, a stronger power is required to overcome the unclean spirits, i.e. the spirit from above (cf. Mk 1:10–11).

3.2.2 The Social Dimension of Sickness and Healing

It is no coincidence, that the spirits causing sickness and/or strange behavior, are usually qualified as unclean or impure. If a person in Jewish antiquity was regarded as impure, this not only affected negatively his or her access to the temple, it also meant constant social stigmatisation bringing to expression the fear of infection, not just with sickness but with the spirit of the sickness. Within this semantic universe the proclamation of the advent of the Kingdom of God – the new, just, salvific, reconciled, and all-inclusive divine society – only made sense when it included the deliverance from unclean spirits. Therefore, miracle healing stories in the New Testament are usually concluded by the description of an activity indicating social inclusion and the restoration of relationships.

Kingdom is a term denoting a particular form of socio-political organisation widespread and taken for granted in antiquity. The Kingdom of God, as proclaimed by Jesus, is unique since it means the inclusion of everyone with an emphasis on those whose dignity was disregarded in society. Despite the fact that Mark portrays Jesus as successful miracle worker – and he does so in order to communicate his conviction that this Jesus who died at the cross, is the Son of God – it would be problematic to over-emphasize miraculous healings at the expense of the significance of the inclusive character of the Kingdom of God. According to the faith and the experiences within Early Christianity as witnessed to by the New Testament writings, healing was always regarded as a free gift from God; it never was regarded as precondition for the entry into God’s Kingdom. The latter would actually contradict the teaching of Jesus and the experiences of his followers many of whom suffered persecution, sickness and premature death (cf. only the Beatitudes in Mt 5 and Lk 6). In the Synoptic Gospels, the miracle healing stories have the basic function of signifying the advent of the all-inclusive Kingdom of God (cf. Mt 12:28 par. Lk 11:20). As such, they foreshadow the expected ultimate salvation.

The last miracle healing story in the Gospel of Mark occurs in Mk 10:46–52. Formerly blind Bartimaeus decides to follow Jesus on his way into Jerusalem. Following Jesus is the appeal of Mark to his readers. The disciples of Jesus in Mark, however, are those who never fully understand who Jesus is. They function as example for those who have not yet understood the implication of the miracles of Jesus nor their own mission! The readers are expected to understand and act accordingly. They are called to emulate the example of Jesus.

Mk 12:28–34 – the so-called double commandment of love – gives a summary of Jesus’s teaching: The respect, and we can say the human dignity that I expect granted me, I should also grant others. The individual is seen here in a net of respectful relationships between God, others and oneself. When these relationships get imbalanced, human dignity is potentially being threatened, e.g. in the case of an extreme individualism in the modern world. In the Western world this individualism is increasingly coupled with a loss of faith that God has bestowed us with his grace and dignity.

Communicating the Gospel in Early Christianity meant giving witness to others of its integrative meaning and significance, aiming at the possible inclusion of each and everyone into one faith and living community of brothers and sisters across cultures. The narrative of Acts of the Apostles is Luke’s version of this witnessing process that led to the transgression of boundaries and to the creation of cross-cultural faith and living communities (Acts 1:8; Acts 11:19–26). Peter is led by divine revelation to the fundamental insight of the meaning of Gospel: “In truth I understand that God is not partial, but in every nation the one who fears him and does justice, s/he is pleasant to God.” (Acts 10:34–35; cf. Rom 2:11).

As recent research has shown, this is also the meaning of the last verses of the Gospel of Matthew (28:18b–20). This passage has, however, been severely misconstrued in mission history up till present times as implying a forceful conversion of others into the Christian faith. The meaning of the passage as the conclusion of the trajectory of Matthew’s Gospel narrative is: The disciples of Jesus should now that Jesus has been rejected in much of Judaism, go forth and include people of every nation as possible addressees of the Gospel. Everyone is invited to listen to the good news of the divine inclusion of all into God’s people as one community of brothers

and sisters (Reinbold, 2012, pp. 176–205). This universal extension of divine grace and justice is at the heart of Gospel as it had been experienced and communicated in Early Christianity.

4. Ephraim Amu: *Yen ara asase ni & Biakoye*

Ephraim Amu, a child of Peki and the outstanding Ghanaian musician of the 20th century, has pointed out the danger of modern individualism for society. In his famous Twi song *Yen ara asase ni*, originally written in 1929 in Peki-Ewe, he has this to say – I present the English translation by Philip Laryea of Akrofi-Christaller-Memorial Centre in Akropong.³

Yen ara asase ni / This is our own land

This is our own land, it is precious to us,
 Blood did our forefathers shed to obtain it for us.
 It is the turn of me and you to continue.
 Unproductive knowledge, cunning and selfishness
 Have destroyed our life
 And have affected our love for our land.
 Whether our nation will prosper
 Or whether it will not prosper
 It is an established fact that this depends on
 The conduct of her people.
 Book knowledge that is vain
 Or property acquired without toil,
 And dishonesty, destroy a nation and defame it.
 Obedience and respect, wishing your fellows well always,
 Unlimited dedication to everyone's needs,
 These bring peace and progress to a nation.
 Whether a nation prospers
 Or whether it does not prosper
 It is an established fact that this depends on the
 Conduct of her people. (Laryea, 2008, 43–44)

³ I have adjusted the English translation at a few places for better clarity.

Amu's song brings to expression the insight that an undue concern with one's own affairs at the cost of caring for the needy, is a threat to the peace and progress of a nation. The Biblical concept of the love of the neighbour is clearly present in the song, cf. the lines "Obedience and respect, wishing your fellows well always, unlimited dedication to everyone's needs, these bring peace and progress to a nation". In a sermon Amu delivered around 1970 in the chapel at Peki Training College, he complains "that we are being inspired by a vision of our own selfish ends" (Laryea, 2008, p. 48). Amu, however, integrates New Testament values with African traditional values such as neighbourly love and unity which to him serve as the foundation for building a lasting and socially progressing nation. In his song *Biakoɛ* of 1933 which has become "the union song for all Singing Bands in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana" (Laryea, 2008, p. 50), Amu explicitly refers to the teachings of Jesus concerning unity:

Biakoɛ / Unity

With our minds and deeds,
 Our way of life and zeal
 We show that oneness is proper and worthy.
 It is a command of Jesus,
 We shall live it today and forever.
 Neighbourly love is good, unity is good.
 It refreshes us, it encourages us,
 It makes us mature and progressive,
 It transforms us through and through
 And so let us hold on to it at all times. (Laryea 2008, p. 51).

Philip Laryea has shown that Amu's lyrics at this point have been informed by the double-commandment of love as presented in Lk 10:25–27. Jesus' values coincide with traditional African values concerning community life in rejecting an individualistic self-understanding and conception of life as it dominates Western thinking and existence.

5. Conclusion

The Gospel is not a matter beyond culture. The Gospel becomes alive within distinct cultures and concrete life situations. It both challenges certain aspects of our cultures, and supports others. As we have seen, at the

heart of the Gospel lies the insight that each and everyone is bestowed with divine grace and dignity from above. The church, called to emulate the example of Jesus, should also be with those whose dignity is being undermined in our societies. The church should be a place where everybody is somebody.

An undue emphasis on individual as well as on communal rights paves the ground for abuses of human dignity. What is needed in the church, is a Christ centered balance of both, the individual and communal dimensions of human existence, which is to be realized always in relation to particular situations in culture and context.

Identifying abuses of human dignity and strategies to be employed in preserving or restoring human dignity is a matter of ongoing intercultural debate. Since cultural strangers will have difficulties understanding matters in a different culture at depth, they should refrain from passing premature judgment. However, we in the one Church of the Gospel should not get tired to remind one another of our special service towards those whose human dignity is threatened of being undermined. And we should assist one another in devising programs aimed at the implementation of strategies to overcome unbearable situations, making use of our diverse resources.

Our common theological ancestor Dietrich Bonhoeffer claimed during the Nazi era that the church should not continue chanting Gregorian hymns, unless the church stands with the Jews who were severely persecuted at that time. This might serve as a call onto us to stand united as brothers and sisters, trying to have the Gospel become transparent in our activities for, and together with those whose human dignity is being disregarded.

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