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Rethinking Multiculturalism in Africa and Diaspora : A Tussle with Biblical Perspectives

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8 Rethinking Multiculturalism in Africa and Diaspora

A Tussle with Biblical Perspectives

Abstract

The advocacy in Western nations of embracing all the new cultures that have moved into Western countries in recent decades (defined here as multiculturalism) is not just a Western phenomenon but is what actually underpins African philosophy expressed in the Zulu maxim “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (“a person is a person through other persons”). In recent years, however, a number of world leaders have come to speak out against multiculturalism, expressing concerns about integrating immigrants through multiculturalist policies. Africa too, has not been left out; the eruption of xenophobic attacks in South Africa is enough proof that multiculturalism is also failing even on the African continent. What boggles my mind is what to say of multiculturalism, has it really failed, can it be regarded as not divinely willed? That multiculturalism appears not to be God’s design for humanity finds support in some biblical passages: God confusing people’s languages (Gen. 11:1–9) and Acts 17:26 which says God “has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings” (Acts 17:26). But can one really conclude that it is God’s intention that different ethnic groups should not stay together? Concluding so, however, appears to militate against the other biblically accepted position that “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:54). Paul in Eph. 2:14–17 talks of Christ’s death as a unifying element between Jews and gentiles. It is against these vexing positions that this article, using a cosmopolitan approach, seeks to interrogate the relevance of multiculturalism in this contemporary age.

Key Words: *Africa, Diaspora, God, Immigrants, Multiculturalism, Western world*

1. Introduction

It is a bone of contention as to whether multiculturalism is still relevant or not. A strong argument that has been echoed across Western countries is that multiculturalism undermines national unity, hinders cultural assimilation as well as leads to the fragmentation of society into several ethnic factions. Whilst the advocacy for multiculturalist policies had been strong following the devastating World Wars I and II, most Western nations have remained in their protectorate mode of keeping their boundaries of power. In the case of Africa, though multiculturalism had often found support as a result of the *Ubuntu* philosophy, the xenophobic killings that have been going on leave one with the burning question: “Is multiculturalism still relevant?” To foreground the study, I begin by providing a conceptual mapping to the discussion as well as a brief background to multiculturalism. The second part first looks at the shortcomings of multiculturalism from a Western perspective context and then goes on to examine the weaknesses of the same phenomenon in an African context. In speaking of Africa, I shall limit myself mainly to examples from Zimbabwe and South Africa. It is my assumption, however, that what is obtaining in these two countries is also happening in other parts of the African continent. The third part of the discussion is a tussle with biblical narratives hovering around the aspect of multiculturalism followed by discussions on the way forward.

2. Conceptualization of Terms

2.1 Multiculturalism

In the first place, it is important to note that multiculturalism is a subject of diverse geographical interpretations. According to Clayton, it may refer to the existence of differences among a population in terms of racial, ethnic, religious and other cultural characteristics (Clayton, 2009). Equally, it may be seen as a version of political integration which acknowledges the rights and needs of minority groups within the political mainstream. A working definition, therefore, that is used in this study is one given by Ivison who says multiculturalism refers to “(1) the state of a society or the world in which there exists numerous distinct ethnic and cultural groups

seen to be politically relevant; and (2) a program or policy promoting such a society.” (Iverson, 2015, p. 1) Since a multicultural state might entail one in which different forms of recognition are granted to cultural groups to secure valuable goods, cultural membership provides equally and avoids unfairly privileging dominant groups so that there is a “genuine connection with, and respect and space for the cultural other” (Sandercock, 2003). In such a society, people work together on matters of common and intertwined goals. It is in this context that I endeavour to discuss the relevance and existence of this theory beyond geographical boundaries of mixed race.

2.2 Cosmopolitanism as the Epistemological Lens

Graness defines cosmopolitanism as an inclusive normative theory that refers to a mode of thought where all people are seen as members of a single human community and all people are held to the same moral standards, not just their fellow countrymen or citizens (Graness, 2018, p. 1). Seen from this angle, therefore, borders between countries and between racial, religious, and cultural groupings are viewed as morally meaningless. The cosmopolitan approach finds support from Pogge, who asserts that all cosmopolitan viewpoints share three characteristics: universality (everyone matters equally, regardless of distance or lack of a shared community), individualism (every human being is ultimately what matters), and generality (every human being is the ultimate concern for everyone) (Pogge, 1994, p. 89). Conceptually, the relationship between the individual and the community from a cosmopolitan approach is also a central point of the African philosophy of *ubuntu*. Having shared the epistemological lens guiding this study, I now discuss the contentious issue of multiculturalism in our contemporary times.

3. Multiculturalism in Europe

By the 1930s, Europe was made up of many nations, each one with its own separate cultural and ethnic identity. A major problem for Europe involved overlaps – minority ethnic groups living within a different majority ethnic nation. This included Germans in both Czechoslovakia and Poland,

providing Hitler with an excuse to invade these countries and plunge Europe into war (Waxman, 2019). The Holocaust perpetrated against the Jews, a long-established minority in many countries, was the most disturbing example of ethnic cleansing in history and a total reversal of multicultural integrations.

After the two World Wars devastated Europe, there was a widespread desire to minimize ethnic conflict and this has, at length, led to the formation of the European Union (EU). The desire to form “an ever-closer union” of European nations was a direct consequence of Europe’s nationalistic conflicts (Bellamy, 2013). The EU is intended to surmount all of this, to unite the various European countries in a supranational federal system. Such a “closer union” was not meant to completely override the independence of member states. As reflected in Article 4 of the Post-Lisbon Consolidated Treaty of the European Union, “The Union shall respect the equality of Member States before the Treaties as well as their national identities, inherent in their fundamental structures, political and constitutional, inclusive of regional and local-government” (Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2020).

However, the ethnic landscape of Europe has become much more varied. Due to the enormous death toll from World War II, European nations – whose populations had drastically declined – were in dire need of labour, and immigrants were welcomed to work in industries. The majority of these immigrants originated from colonies ruled by European countries. Furthermore, several of the colonies had a fall in their national economies after gaining independence, but despite this, their populations increased significantly as a result of better access to healthcare. As a result, there was a population surplus, with many relocating to Europe.

It was mistakenly assumed that the immigrants would all successfully integrate into their various countries and become more of Englishmen, Frenchmen, or Germans. However, the truth is that many have wished to maintain their cultural identity, which has caused a great deal of conflict and anxiety. National governments and their people are putting pressure on one another to stop the further eroding of national identity and sovereignty. The rise of more subtle and xenophobic nationalisms and racisms is suggested for example by the Danish rejection of the Euro and the election success of extreme right-wing political parties in nations like Austria,

Belgium, and France. Furthermore, as the 1990s events in the Caucasus and the Balkans tragically demonstrated, there are powerful pressures from “suppressed nations” demanding their own national states, so that territory matches with identity (Hudson, 2001).

The failure of assimilation led to the promotion of multiculturalism. The objective was that ethnicities would dwell among one another while remaining culturally distinct through maintaining their various traditions, customs and ways of thinking. This concept has been promoted in mass media right across the cultural spectrum. Be that as it may, it has led not to societal union but to fragmentation.

It is against the foregoing issue of fragmentation that in 2011 during a security conference in Munich, the then-British Prime Minister David Cameron boldly entered a conversation about multiculturalism’s failure – one that many politicians would prefer to avoid. He maintained that in order to keep people from becoming radicalized in any way, the United Kingdom (UK) needed to forge a stronger sense of national identity. He also claimed that active liberalism was needed in place of the passive tolerance of previous years (Cabinet Office, Prime Minister’s Office & Cameron, 2011; Burns, 2011). Thus, Cameroon made it quite apparent that, in his opinion, multiculturalism had failed.

Some Muslim groups were incensed by Cameron's address, as was to be expected, but others questioned the timing. Dr. Faisal Hanjra, assistant secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain, called Mr. Cameron’s address “disappointing”. Another sharp critique on Cameroon’s message came from the Islamic Society of Britain’s Ajmal Masroor who thought Cameron was not comprehending the gravity of the matter. Masroor contended that the prime minister was conflating a few unrelated topics, such as extremism and multiculturalism, with national identity (BBC, 2011).

While the Muslim world in particular responded sharply to Cameron’s message, a number of international politicians have come out also against multiculturalism. Concerns over the integration of immigrants under multiculturalist policies were voiced by former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, former Australian Prime Minister John Howard, former Spanish Premier Jose Maria Aznar, and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel (News Wires, 2011). Cameron and others claim that multiculturalism’s failure is multifaceted: first, by pushing minority populations to live in

isolation from the mainstream and encouraging exclusion rather than inclusion, multiculturalism has fostered lifestyles; second, minorities maintain their ethnic customs and traditions, which are at odds with society at large; third, these scattered communities serve as a breeding ground for radicalization (Tarifa & Di Monte, 2016). As evidently clear, the critique against multiculturalism from these leaders was loud and clear. Can it be concluded that it was a matter of sheer insensitivity on the part of these European leaders towards the plight of foreigners in their midst? What about in Africa, do bonds of our motherland still hold? It is this issue of shared spaces by different nationalities and ethnic groupings in Africa that I now turn my focus on.

4. Multiculturalism in Africa

The advocacy of multiculturalist policies in Western nations since the 1960s, as pointed out earlier, is not just a Western phenomenon but is what actually underpins the African philosophy expressed in the Zulu maxim “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,” (“a person is a person through other persons”), also common in Shona as “*munhu munhu nekuda kwevanhu*” meaning the same thing: “a person is a person because of others.” This philosophy also has since found expression in the words of John Mbiti, who coined the famous dictum: “I am because we are, since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 106).

In Africa, *ubuntu/unhu* is the cog around which life revolves. What is enshrined in the *ubuntu* philosophy finds expression in the words of Ngwane who argues:

“The world of MUNTU is a vision of the world whereby Man is driven to create sustainable societies where the verbs to be and to become take primary place over the verb to have, and where everyone’s work, more than simply a means to a financial end, contributes towards building a better, more sustainable world for our children.” (Ngwane, 2018, p. 30)

What is quite disturbing, however, is the fact that Africa is fast degenerating into a society that no longer upholds what it has long been known for, namely, mutual recognition of and respect for each people and culture. In Zimbabwe, for example, the current times, in which we are living, show that it is no longer a place where the verbs “to be” and “to become” take

primary place over the verb “to have,” but rather an inversion of the said verbs. A cartel wants to keep oiling its pockets regardless of the suffering majority. Instead of everyone’s work being more than simply a means to a financial end and contributing towards building a better and more sustainable world for our children, financial gains are driving people’s mentality. From a vegetable seller to a heavy machinery marketer, focus is now on outwitting the buyer. Writing on poverty as a result of economic globalisation, Joachim Kügler captures so well this global trend when he says:

“The gap between those who are well off and those who suffer is getting wider and wider and additional threats like HIV/AIDS contribute to the ‘shadow of death’ which many people are living in. This process can be seen in the Western countries, but is much more dramatic in the global South, that is, in the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America.” (Kügler, 2012, p. 1)

One wonders then, what shall our children hang onto when our generation is gone? In Zimbabwe, it is not just the issue of the prioritization of “to have” which is a problem, lack of mutual recognition of and respect for other people and their cultures may be said to date back to the colonial times. We have, for example, Malawian descendants who first came to Zimbabwe as labour migrants during the period of colonial labour migration (Chibaro/Mthandizi), between the 1890s and the 1970s (Bhanye, 2023). These people have suffered stigmatisation of various sorts from the Zimbabwean people. Among the demeaning forms, one finds the use of the derogatory label “*MaBwidi*,” in reference to them, a term that characterises one as a halfwit. After independence in 1980, the government used to carry out raids in townships to flush out Malawians and other foreign nationals so as to deport them or force them into refugee camps. As for those who had managed to secure a Zimbabwean citizenship, they were not allowed to vote as their identity documents were engraved with the label “A” meaning “Aliens” (Manyowa, 2022). On several occasions, the then President, Robert Mugabe derogatorily referred to Zimbabweans of foreign descent as “*vanhu vasina mitupo*” (totemless people). Their denial of an opportunity to vote remained until Mugabe was removed from power. The same kind of ill-treatment towards people of Malawian origins happened to Mozambicans during the protracted war between Frelimo and Renamo rebels. Mozambicans who sought refuge in Zimbabwe were

either deported back or forced into refugee camps. A few who managed to evade arrests worked in rural areas and were mostly known by the derogatory terms “*Makarushu*,” “*Moscan*” or “*Bherebhedha*.” Even up to the time of writing, in and around townships, derogatory jokes about Malawians, Zambians and Mozambicans continue to be exchanged in beerhalls, barbecues and even in homes. Manyowa was thus right to remark, “Zimbabwe is not an ‘innocent’ country when it comes to xenophobia” (Manyowa, 2022).

Looking beyond the borders of Zimbabwe, the not-fully resolved conflicts which characterize the Great Lakes Region, for example, the armed conflict in Darfur, are also obtaining in the southern region of Africa. According to Ebegebulem, the Dafur crisis which started in 2003 is not a recent development but is rooted in ages of resources and racial conflict between Durfurians of Arab and African descent (Ebegebulem, 2012).

In South Africa, for example, while there is need to give credit to the great role played by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as it promoted relative peace and co-existence in the country, it failed to bridge the gap between black South Africans and their white counterparts. Some Afrikaner/Boer communities continue to cling to their old mentality that blacks are the cursed sons of Ham and, hence, should continue under the subjugation of the whites. The whites in South Africa have indeed remained in control of the economy as they continue to own vast tracts of land and other key economic structures such as the mining industry. This surely remains a time bomb as some revolutionary minded people like Julius Malema continue to call for the indigenization of the economy. While the ruling ANC party continues to take a kid-glove approach to the matter, the pent-up disgruntlement of the general public over such an imbalance of the economy has often been projected on the foreigners who are accused of taking over jobs and, hence, the xenophobic attacks as the result.

While South Africa prides itself as a rainbow nation, xenophobic attacks have been a longstanding phenomenon in post-Apartheid South Africa. Dating back to 1994, tens of thousands of foreigners have been killed and their businesses destroyed mainly as a result of their status as *makwerekwere* – a derogatory term for foreigners (Onu & Ngwube, 2022). Continual manifestations of xenophobia-fueled vigilante movements

such as Operation Dudula fly in the face of multiculturalism. Though perceived as an attempt to control rampant problems such as drugs, murder, crime and so on which are believed to be caused by out-of-control migration into South Africa, the bloody trail associated with it completely disfigures the rainbowness of the nation. The rhetoric peddled by some public officials, politicians and anti-migrant groups has helped fuel the myth that South Africa has been overrun by foreign nationals. Since these migrants are seen as having brought the country into a mess, the only way to rescue it, as believed, is by enforcing a *dudula* on them, meaning “to force out” as the word implies in Zulu (Charlie & Ford, 2023).

It is against this background of worldwide and unceasing racial conflicts that one can question the relevance of multiculturalism not only in the Western world but especially here in Africa. Do we really need multiculturalism, or it is just an advocacy devoid of any real substance? If it is God who created humanity, what are his intentions for humanity, does he intend different ethnic groups to live side by side or every nation to have boundaries of their dwellings as alluded in the book of Acts (Acts 17:26)? To find God’s possible intentions for humanity, an appeal perhaps to the Biblical texts may help throw some light into this dilemma.

5. The Tower of Babel

The first text that is of interest in this chapter is Gen. 11:1–9. Here is a recount of how God confused the languages of all the earth; and from there scattered humanity over the face of all the earth. The tower of Babel story has an *etiological* element in that the author tries to account for the origin of different languages as well as the etymology of “Babylon” and thus the Babylonian empire which caused havoc on Israel in the early sixth century B.C.E (Jursa, 2023). However, the etiological element is overshadowed by the theological impact of the story, namely, disobedience to God and the spread of sin upon the face of the earth.

Behind the story, one is able to see that since time immemorial different ethnic groups have been scattered all over the face of the earth and speak unique languages which makes it impossible, thus, for them to understand each other let alone work together. The story may, thus, be viewed as a critic as well as a warning to the challenges of trying to bring people

of different ethnic backgrounds to live and work together which, in other words, spells nothing other than the failure of multiculturalism.

That multiculturalism appears not to be God's design tends to find support in other biblical texts. We hear from the book of Acts that God "has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings" (Acts 17:26). Here, the author makes it plainly clear that each nation, each people upon the face of the earth has been allotted a portion of the earth's surface to call its own. It is against these premises that it becomes unjustifiable for one nation to invade the territory of another or for individuals to encroach and dwell in other people's territories without them being welcomed.

Equally interesting is what Jesus has to say when asked, "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matt. 24:3). He warned that "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Matt. 24:7). The word "nation" here is translated from the Greek word *ethnos*, from which we get the words *ethnic* and *ethnicity*. What Jesus is basically saying here is that prior to the parousia, his second coming, there would be a time of great ethnic conflict which basically is one of the inevitable results of mingling diverse people or groups together.

Can one, therefore, conclude and say it is God's intention that different ethnic groups should not stay together? Is multiculturalism really a failure? Concluding that God does not intend ethnic groups to stay together militates against the other biblically accepted position that "God shows no partiality" which is alluded in Acts 10:44–48. The pericope as a whole stand as one of the turning points in the history of the early Church. Before the Gentile community, represented here by Cornelius, could be members of the Christian community, Peter had to unlearn something. As pointed out in the Barclay's Commentary, strict Jews were of the opinion that God had no use for the Gentiles to the length even of saying that help should not be given to a Gentile woman at childbirth, because that would only be to bring another Gentile into the world (Barclay, 1956–1959). The lesson that even Jewish Christians could not argue as they listened to Peter as he gave his account was that God shows no partiality as he had given his Spirit to the Gentiles, too. Prior to this incident, Peter was already on the way to unlearning some of the rigidity in which he

had been brought up as he had found his feet in the house of a man named Simon, who was a tanner (Acts 9:43), an unclean profession in Jewish eyes. Later, when the emissaries of Cornelius came to knock at his door, they came no farther than the door knowing the Jewish outlook but Peter showed them hospitality by letting them in (Acts 10:23). These events speak to the biblical foundations of multiculturalism.

Paul in Eph. 2:14–17 talks of Christ’s death as a unifying element between Jews and Gentiles. He says:

“For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity... so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near.” (Eph. 2:14–17)

Commenting on this passage, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops brings to light that the Gentiles lacked Israel’s messianic expectation, lacked hope for salvation and knowledge of the true God but through Jesus all these religious barriers between Jews and Gentiles had been transcended and now Jews and Gentiles were united into a single community imbued with the same Holy Spirit and worshiping the same Father (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019–2024). In short, what the text shows is that it is part of God’s plan to bring peoples of different nationalities together irrespective of what appears irreconcilable between them. The enmity, xenophobic tendencies, racist attitudes and all other forms of hatred among different groups were all atoned for by Christ on the cross. Out of evil, therefore, God created the best for humanity. This has been and remains part of God’s ways to bring good out of evil.

6. Challenges as Opportunities for Improvement

Indeed, concerns over the integration of immigrants under multiculturalist policies by international world leaders have been loud and clear in as much as concerns are being raised against those labelled *makwerekwere*,

but should we sacrifice all that is *unhu* in us because of the said challenges? No matter what it takes, *Ubuntu* calls us to believe and feel “your pain is my pain, your wealth is my wealth and your salvation is my salvation” (Ngwane, 2018, p. 30). Without *Ubuntu*, in other words, humankind is enveloped by greed, selfishness, immorality, pride and other vices (Kelly, 2015).

Alongside the issue of drugs and other crimes being blamed on the foreigners, a fact which cannot be denied when one considers the number of foreigners in South African jails – in 2017, for example, there were 11, 842 foreigners in South African prisons, 918 for murder and 454 for rape (Manyowa, 2022) – the issue of limited resources often comes up. Not to say the law should not take its course when it comes to critical issues, but there is perhaps still need to awaken the spirit of African brother- and sisterhood in us. As Africans, I believe we are stronger when we are together. Painful though it may look when we consider what is in us as human but we should not allow ourselves to feel at home when a brother/sister next door is dying of hunger even if we feel the only reserves remaining are for us. We may not all be saints but Mother Theresa’s words must ring a bell in us when she says, “A life not lived for others is not a life,” and, “Love to be real, it must cost – it must hurt – it must empty us of self” (Turnbull High School). Immigrants themselves should not take this as open licence to expect showers of love flowing only their direction, they too need to reciprocate. They too need to feel for the people whose daughters are being raped, dear ones being robbed or murdered and work to promote the welfare of every person in their neighborhood regardless of race, color or origin.

Even the biblical texts referred to above, when interpreted from a cosmopolitan perspective, they do actually complement each other. Save for administrative purposes, borders between countries do not serve any other high purpose. Seen from this angle, borders between countries and between racial, religious, and cultural groupings need to be viewed as morally meaningless. Challenges, therefore, that arise as a result of multiculturalism should not be viewed as an evil in themselves that validate the relegation of this noble pursuit. What is perhaps of importance is to look at these challenges as opportunities to improve our relations as humanity as well as work for the good of our Mother Earth. As noted above, out of

evil (cross) God created the best for humanity. This has been and remains part of God's ways to bring good out of evil. Instead, therefore, of seeing our diversity as a source of conflict, we need rather to remodel our diversity by working for justice as one so that no group or leader takes advantage over others.

7. Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion, I attempted to understand the challenges associated with the advocacy in Western nations of embracing all the new cultures that have moved into Western countries in recent decades. I have also noted that though multiculturalism underpins the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, the philosophy has now been put to test as several African nations have a record of different ethnic groups butchering each other in xenophobic and genocide attacks. The record of killings both in Europe and Africa appeared to spell none other than the failure of multiculturalism. To find a way forward in dealing with the challenges associated with multiculturalism, I have probed what the Creator's intentions could be for humanity. Two vexing positions have been discussed, on one side is the allusion in Acts 17:26 that God intends each nation to stay within its given boundaries and the other position finds expression in Eph. 2:14–17 which talks of Christ's death as a unifying element between people of different backgrounds. While on the surface the positions may look opposed to the other, the moment we bring the Christ figure into context we would find that boundaries were just meant for administrative purposes. Through the unifying element of Christ's death, it is possible for different ethnic groups to live side by side. Through Jesus, all ethnic, religious, political and social barriers between peoples of nationalities have been transcended and now all have been united into a single community imbued with the same Holy Spirit and worshipping the same Father. Even for nations which do not bow to the God of the Christian world, religious pluralism teaches us that every individual in a religious diverse society has the rights, freedoms, and safety to worship or not to, according to their conscience. Just as individuals have those given rights, they should always remember that they also have a duty to respect and promote the rights of other people different from them. Seen from that angle, therefore, one

can be able to say that instead of looking at the challenges that arise as a result multiculturalism as an evil in themselves that validate the abandonment of a multiculturalist advocacy, there is need perhaps to look at them as opportunities to improve relations between humankind and change the face of our planet Earth for the better.

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