

Reflections on Cultural Diversity

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By popular definition, a human being is a rational biped. What this means is not that all human beings are actually rational all the time. That would be false, since many human beings are demonstrably irrational some of the time. What it means is only that a human being has the capacity to be rational. This minimal qualification, however, has tremendous implications. It implies, for example, that we (human beings) are capable of learning from our experience of the environment and of adjusting, or trying to adjust, our behavior to the constraints of that experience. Now the environment is of two basic types. There is a natural and there is a social environment. The constraints of the natural environment arise from our contact with physical objects and forces. In terms of detail, different peoples react differently to the environment, but in basic essentials, there is only one human way of doing this. And that is the pursuit of survival and well-being through action on the basis of perception and inference. From the standpoint of cognitive biology, then, there is a basic way of being in the world. That is to say, there is a basic culture common to all human beings.

There is another species-wide cultural commonality. It appertains to the conditions of the social environment. It is a necessary truth about human beings that they live in societies. But to live in a society is, in general, to have some conception of other selves in contrast to oneself. At the minimum, this involves having a sense of one's own interests in relation to the interests of others. It involves also, beyond this, some sense of the need to harmonize these interests, which, by any account, are apt frequently to conflict. This need is the root of all morality. The rules for securing that minimum of harmony required by the survival of human community constitute morality in the strictest sense. In this sense, morality is the same for all humans. This, then, is a second element of unity in human nature and culture.

It is because of these elements of cognitive and moral universality in human culture that human beings of different climes and cultures can communicate and interact peacefully. Unfortunately, it is because of this same universality that they can miscommunicate and fight among themselves. However, it is important to note

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that the diversity of human cultures is not the fundamental cause of the grievous discord that has too frequently marred intercultural relations. This is not to say that cultural diversity has no effect on the problem. It can, and sometimes does, aggravate it. I shall explain how and reflect on the possibility of a solution, from an African standpoint.

But first, let us return to what we (as human beings) have in common and its relation to good and evil. As noted above, one of the things we have in common is a sense of the necessity for the adjustment of interests among individuals in society. We have called this the sense of morality in the strictest sense. It is necessary in the philosophy of morals to specify the principle by which such an adjustment might be sought. It is not surprising that many, possibly all, cultures are known to settle for some such principle as what, in Western culture, is called the Golden Rule. It is, however, not at all easy to formulate it correctly. For example, at Matthew 7:12 Jesus Christ is represented as enunciating the principle as follows: '(Therefore) all things whatsoever that ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.' If this is taken literally, it is open to George Bernard Shaw's quip that this may not be helpful, since my taste may be different from that of the people concerned. The literal interpretation seems to commit us, moreover, to supposing that if you want someone to do something to you, then you should be prepared to do the same to him. This would lead to absurdity when the thing requires a skill that the other person has and you haven't.¹ It is highly unlikely that Jesus had such an interpretation in mind. Nor is it likely that other religious figures and leaders of thought have had the same interpretation in mind. Most likely what they have had in mind is something that, following Gensler, we may formulate as follows. 'You ought not to endeavor to act in a certain way without consenting to the idea of anyone acting in that same way *in an imagined relevantly reversed situation*.'² Certainly, this seems to be the thought that lies behind the varied formulations of the Golden Rule in many different cultures before and after Christ. And it seems also to be the essential content of that facet of the human psyche called *conscience*.

Barring a pathologically damaged mentality, every human being has some conscience, and it exercises some degree of influence by way of dissuasion, when an act of moral mischief is being contemplated, or by way of self-criticism, when the act has been perpetrated. But nothing is clearer in human affairs than that this influence is not strong enough in great enough numbers of people to ensure the universal reign of virtue in social life. The evils that result from such insufficiencies of conscience are widely spread out in the life of nations and cultures as well as in the relations among them. Greed, stealing, exploitation, prejudice, sexism, child abuse, intolerance, racism, dogmatism, aggression, oppression, slavery, murder, genocide, disrespect for persons and their mistreatment, trickery, insincerity – these are specific, though in some cases overlapping, transgressions of the Golden Rule. They are all variations on the excessive elevation of a person's interests or the interests of one's group in disregard of the interests of others. When such transgressions have occurred in international or intercultural relations the results have not infrequently been colonization, war and devastation.

The form of life in which such evils can occur is distinctively human; it is a mark of the unity of all cultures. But this is only one side of the human situation. If there

were no other, we would all have perished by now. Conscience, the sense of basic morality embedded in the human psyche, works, as we have seen, in imperfect ways, but it sometimes works well; and when it does so, it displays the bright side of the unity of human culture. It is because of this that one can hope at all that the undesirable states of affairs currently existing in, and among, so many nations and cultures can be rectified.

Consider the United Nations. It consists of officials from very many different parts of the world. But they regularly have debates, and they deliberate on both factual and moral issues. If, for instance, one country is accused of an unprovoked attack on another, the representatives of that country do not stand up before that assembly of nations and say, 'OK we did it, so what?' They either deny that the attack took place at all or argue that it was so provoked as to be justified. From an ethical standpoint, it is obvious that all parties concerned understand that it is wrong for a country, any country, to make an unprovoked attack on any other country. By implication, all acknowledge the Golden Rule as embodied in the following concrete imperative for nations: 'Do not act to carry out an unprovoked attack on another country without accepting that it would be alright for that country (or any other country) to carry out an unprovoked attack on you.' There is no doubt but that no country appreciates an unprovoked attack from another! Epistemically also, there is here the implied unanimity that if such an attack has been made, it is possible for there to be observable *evidence* of it that could possibly be brought to international light by, say, an independent commission. Here, then, are some basic universals of thought and action that relativist philosophers, those philosophers who think that cross-cultural evaluations of thought and action are always arbitrary, might be invited to take to heart.

Yet, cultural differences do exist, and they can make the resolution of some international differences extraordinarily hard. Cultures can differ in at least eight respects. They can differ with respect to language, worldview, religion, philosophy, science, technology, aesthetics and customs. These are, to be sure, interconnected in various clusters. For example, language often encapsulates the rudiments of a worldview, which may lead to a particular kind of philosophy or religion or both and then to certain customs of behavior. The relation of mutual reinforcement between science and technology is famous. Nor is the similar relation between philosophy and science any less well known. In this discussion, I will not deal with science and technology as features of culture, beyond noting that these are cognitive and applicative aspects of the human interaction with the environment, which are fated to become uniform for all humankind. The process of their universalization is one aspect of globalization, and it is going on at a considerable pace under our own eyes

Indeed, globalization, or if you like, attempted globalization, has long been going on in all the aspects of culture that we have mentioned above. The proselytizing religions of Christianity and Islam are prominent examples of globalizing forces. They are multi-faceted forces, carrying to their converts everywhere thick packages of cultural elements, including systems of metaphysics, ethics and aesthetics. Because they are in each case such powerful forces, it is not so very likely that any one of them will become universalized on this globe to the exclusion of the others, though already each has quite a global reach. One might mention also some systems

of spiritual life, such as Buddhism, emanating from the East, that are making progress in the Western world and in other parts of the world too; which suggests that not all globalization is a one-way process from the direction of the West.

In the abstract this variegation of spiritual options might seem replete with the blessings of pluralism. But there are two considerations that seem to suggest the need for some caution. First, religious globalization can do violence to local cultures and, second, international conflicts can be exacerbated by religious differences. In both cases I say only that these things *can* happen, not that they necessarily *must*. Let us take the first contingency. A religion or, to be more exact, an institutional religion, consists at least of a metaphysic, an ethic and a ceremonial. In terms of the relation between a religion and a culture, the ethical component is the most important. An ethic is a system of rules of conduct. These divide into two parts. The first consists of those rules that are entailed by the Golden Rule, as for example, the one previously noted, which enjoins, 'Do not act to carry out an unprovoked attack on another country without accepting that it would be alright for that country (or any other country) to carry out an unprovoked attack on you.' As previously noted, morality in the strictest, or most basic, sense consists of rules like this. But for the comprehensive regulation of human conduct we need more rules than these. For example, what system of rules shall we use for the purpose of an orderly institution of marriage? There are a number of alternative systems, none of which is ruled out by the Golden Rule. In one system one man can marry only one woman. This is monogamy, the system officially operated in the West and various other parts of the world. In another, one woman can marry more than one man. This is polyandry, practiced, for example, among some ethnic groups in the Himalayas. In a third, and quite widespread system, one man can marry more than one woman. This is, of course, polygamy, practiced officially by, for instance, traditional Arabs and Africans and unofficially by many more peoples. To verify that none of these alternatives, as officially practiced, is proscribed by the Golden Rule, first, take polygamy and consider, say, a man from my own country Ghana, ready to take a second wife under the traditional dispensation. Suppose we ask him whether he would accept that it would be all right, if he were a wife, for her husband to take a second wife or whether he would accept that it would be all right, if he were an unmarried woman, for a man to take her as a second wife, he should have no difficulty in sincerely answering in the affirmative. The same thought experiment is easily repeated in the other two cases. There is thus no trifling with the fundamental imperative of all morality.

This means, to pursue the case of polygamy a little further, that, whatever else might be said about it, it cannot be rightly condemned on strictly moral grounds. It might, of course, be criticized on pragmatic grounds. In contemporary social and economic conditions in Ghana, it would be highly unintelligent, in many cases, for a man to take two wives, supposing he can get them in the first place. On the other hand, in traditional times conditions may not have been antithetical to the institution. Yet the commandment of the Christian missionaries who, in historical times, came to save the people of Ghana from 'pagan darkness' was that polygamy, in itself, is immoral and sinful. The last description implies that the practice is directly contrary to the word of God, though no clear method seemed available for checking what God's standpoint really was. I shall take up this issue again in a generalized

form below. Here it suffices to note that, if a practice is compatible with the Golden Rule, then the mere fact that it does not conform to the dictates of a foreign religion does not, of itself, show that it is morally wrong. All that it might show, speaking almost tautologically, is that the foreign religion abides by a custom different from the Ghanaian one. And this need not necessarily be problematic for either side, since different customs may work well in different places.

What these considerations seem to suggest is that the Christian missionary enforcement of a moralizing proscription of polygamy, which was largely successful, albeit only superficially, constituted a cultural imposition. It has led to a certain measure of ethical dualism in the conduct of a significant section of our population, something that has not served us well at all. I will not, however, expatiate on this here, for my main point is a different one. It is that the inability to come to terms with what is perceived as strange in the customs of other peoples or the simple dislike of the unfamiliar is one of the prime causes of conflict among the different cultures of the world. The quintessence of this kind of attitude to the unfamiliar was exhibited by those early European travelers to Africa who considered African music, for instance, to be pure cacophony precipitated by an overflow of irrational exuberance. The point is not that it is always easy to come to terms with the unfamiliar, but rather that it is always too easy to be precipitately dismissive of it. Nothing is more familiar in the anthropological study of humankind than the great diversity of customs. Hence the magnitude of the problem.

It is apparent from these considerations that the second category of rules needed for the regulation of human conduct in addition to morality is custom. But, again, whereas morality in the strict sense is universal, custom is variable and contingent. It may differ from one culture to another, and even in the same culture from one point of space or time to another. Since morality – and I shall mean morality in the strict sense unless otherwise stipulated – is universal, it cannot individuate cultures. But custom can. Obviously, I here use the word ‘custom’ broadly. By it I refer to all the rules and habits of behavior that are outside of the sphere of morality. They include, as we have seen, the rules that govern the institution of marriage. But they also include a great assortment of rules that appertain to various circumstances of life in society, such as the manner of welcoming newborns into the community, of marking important transitions in life, and of dealing with the loss of life.

These are pretty obvious cases of custom. But, perhaps, the less obvious cases are the more numerous. Something like the music of a people is a matter of custom. It is just the contingent way in which they happen to stimulate their senses and, perhaps, elevate their souls. There is nothing humanly or morally necessary about the particular way a particular people choose to make music. The same is largely true, if you think a little about it, of various arrangements in politics, *mutatis mutandis*. Of course, all this is true within the limits of morality. Thus, for example, if a mode of politics or a manner of music or any practice, for that matter, contravenes a rule of morality, it is no longer just a matter of custom. It becomes a matter of immorality.

Thus, also, if a particular people happen to adopt a system in which one part of the population is enslaved for the convenience of the other half, that way of arranging public affairs would be a human rights abuse, and any such abuse is an affront to the Golden Rule. So there is something morally necessary about avoiding or preventing

such a dispensation. But in politics there are multiple polity options, which, whether practically effective or not, do not fall foul of morality. Certainly, some of the diverse systems of politics that various cultures have tried are of this character.

It is apparent, for example, that the cultures of Great Britain and the United States of America are comfortable with the adversarial procedures of majoritarian democracy. Such an approach to politics is certainly compatible with the Golden Rule. But an alternative approach based on a commitment to consensus rather than on the principle of majority rule is more in accordance with African traditional culture in many instances. And that too is not inconsistent with the requirements of morality.

Yet, in recent times, Africa has been under the stress of having Anglo-American majoritarianism forced on her. The assumption that seems to reign in the most influential circles in the West seems to be that democracy necessarily has to be of the multi-party majoritarian variety. This betrays too much partiality for a Western custom or, more strictly, for an Anglo-American custom. This qualification is necessary because this custom is not universal in the entire Western world. For example, tendencies towards consensus governance, as distinct from majoritarianism, are evident in some parts of Europe, such as Switzerland. Because of a peculiar ethnic stratification in most African countries and the equally peculiar legacy of a colonial history that bequeathed to Africa many states that were nothing but artificial aggregations of ethnic groups, the multi-party form of democracy has proved tragically disruptive in the past and seems likely to continue to be so in the future. Yet, in the single-minded belief that a democracy has, by all means, to be a majoritarian system based on the struggle of parties, Western helpers of Africa have been adamant about the multi-party, majoritarian 'conditionalities' for their programs of economic assistance.

Perhaps the atrocious history of one-party dictatorships in the early post-independence period in Africa has given any departure from the multi-party system a bad name. But the underlying reasoning would appear perilously close to 'All one-party systems are bad. All one-party systems are departures from the multi-party system. Therefore, all departures from the multi-party system are bad.' Any student beginning Critical Thinking could make short work of this piece of reasoning! I do not claim that anyone has been heard to hold forth in these exact words. But I fear that this sorry instance of an argument is operative in some recess of the consciousness of certain influential people both in and out of Africa.

One might be excused some sense of urgency in this matter, because measures like debt relief, of which much is heard nowadays, and which are certainly welcome, may not prove sufficient to bring salvation to Africa (and, perhaps, other parts of the Third World) unless our political house can be put in order. It seems to me likely that the system suitable to the circumstances of Africa will be one in which the winning group at elections does not appropriate governmental power to the exclusion of all other groups. It will have, on the contrary, to be an arrangement in which, as much as possible, all political tendencies and organizations are represented in government. Even more important, decisions will have to be taken by consensus. The probability seems to me to be that only a system such as this would stand the chance of bringing peace and stability to the troubled continent of Africa.³ In any case, it is one that reflects the best customs of governance in pre-colonial African history.

The intent of the preceding has been to illustrate how a political system can be a

matter of custom, though that is not the kind of thing that immediately comes to mind when one talks of custom. Since custom is crucial in individuating cultures, let me mention some further categories of custom. The very form of a country's social organization is determined by custom. African society is widely known to be communalistic. Communalism is, of course, to be distinguished from communism. The first is a cultural dispensation fully compatible with individual and 'family' ownership of the principal means of production, while the second is a political set-up involving state ownership of such resources. A communalistic society is one in which kinship relations have a very wide scope. In such a social formation an individual is brought up right from the beginning with a strong sense of solidarity with large kinship groups. This orientation entails a sense of obligation to those groups. In case one might suspect that an individual in such a society must be borne down with a multitude of obligations, it must be understood that all members of the groups in question bear corresponding obligations to the given individual. And, of course, other people's obligations to you are, in general, your rights which, therefore, are legion.

It is usual to contrast a communalistic society with an individualistic one. But no society is or can be completely individualistic. The proper contrast is merely one of degree. From a comparative standpoint, it may be said that the United States, for example, is a relatively individualistic society. However, what we have in this contrast of customs, is, by and large, a contrast of emphasis. For the present discussion, the important question is whether, perhaps, there is an ideal balance of the ideology of communalism with that of individualism that could bring the cultures of Africa and the West, and other places, closely together.

Custom is so comprehensive a feature of human life that we cannot hope to be comprehensive even in the mere listing of its varieties. Any listing of the customs of a people (in addition to what we have mentioned already) must include at least such things as their way of educating their members and dealing with crime and punishment; their manner of working out a livelihood; their games, entertainment, amusement, recreation; the food they eat and the drinks they drink; their style of dress; their approach to fighting among themselves or against others and to conflict resolution; their attitude to the mysteries of existence and their way of defining success or failure in life. The last category, notice, should bring us face to face with the characteristic values of the given society. (Note in this connection that not all values are moral values.)

Now here is the main point of this disquisition on custom. Even though, as noted earlier, customs are the surest indices of the differences between cultures, they are, or at least many of them are, extremely easy to import or export transculturally. And reviewing the categories of customs just listed should make this easy to appreciate. It will be noticed that many of them vary from one culture to another. Yet, some of them have become shared and many more are, in the modern world, becoming increasingly shared among the various cultures of the world. Think, for example, of food. Not only Chinese eat Chinese food. Many Americans eat Chinese food, and for many it is a real treat. The same is true of many Africans, including myself. Or take music, and consider Western classical music or American jazz. Don't be surprised to find some of the best exponents of these disciplines in Japan. Think how enjoyable a

concert featuring the music and dance of the different cultures of the world can be. What is the spice of such entertainment but its cultural variety? It is not necessary to go over all such cases of cultural sharing in order to appreciate its scale and scope; they become obvious as soon as you begin to think about them.

This process of what we might call transcultural acculturation will introduce more and more diversity and, by the same token, more and more unity and richness into the lives of all peoples, as the different cultures of the world get to know one another more and more. In other words, one can expect more and more cultural unity among humankind. Given the fast pace of developments in media technology, this process is going to escalate exponentially within our own lifetime. It is, however, not necessary to be over-enthusiastic about this. As with all things human, the bad comes with the good. And one bad thing is that because of the imbalance of media resources in favor of the United States, a lot more American culture gets exported than is, perhaps, ideal. Thus, for example, in at least some African countries some resident criminals are refining and expanding their crime techniques through the study of certain American films that display violence for entertainment.

Still one can be thankful for the good that comes from the globalization resulting from the intercultural sharing of customs. It is important to note that in many instances cultural globalization is a mutual process; it has a give-and-take character. For example, if Africans enjoy Western classical music, some Westerners, too, enjoy African music. Such cross-cultural acculturation does not harm either side. This is in sharp contrast with, say, those forms of commercial globalization that bring great profits to some Western companies but little to the Third World.

To elaborate a little on the benign character of some of the kinds of cultural globalization mentioned above, we note that they are at once compatible with both the diversification and preservation of cultures. Preservation here does not mean retention with absolutely no change. A culture can change some of its customs to its own advantage. Sometimes this comes from internal causes. But at other times they may be externally triggered. However, so long as the changes are not imposed, they may lead to growth rather than disruption. This should be easy to understand. Some customs are based on beliefs about the world that are false. Whether the falsity is discovered through internal effort or external prompting, the changes that may result are likely to be beneficial. In general, the kinds of foreign influences likely to lead to beneficial changes in a culture are the ones that come through persuasion or through the force of edifying example rather than by virtue of aggressive forms of intervention, such as conquest or colonialism.

It is with some such understanding that one must welcome the recent UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity. It affirms that

... respect for the diversity of cultures, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation in a climate of mutual trust and understanding are among the best guarantees of international security.

And it goes on to observe that

... the process of globalization, facilitated by the rapid development of information and communication technologies, though representing a challenge for cultural diversity creates the conditions for the renewal of dialogue among cultures and civilizations.⁴

Notice that the UNESCO declaration stresses the need for dialogue among cultures. Actually, regarding many of the cultural items that I have mentioned, there are no urgent issues for dialogue. For example, a non-Chinese does not need any intellectual debates before being able to enjoy Chinese food. The same is true of the transcultural appreciation of music. And so on. Yet UNESCO is absolutely right to insist on the importance of dialogue among cultures. The reason is that cultures consist of more than customs. Earlier, in the list of the constituents of culture, we mentioned language, religion, philosophy, science and technology. As noted previously, there is no need here to talk much about science and technology because there is no serious doubt as to their universal applicability. This, of course, is on the proviso that due recognition is given to the knowledge systems of 'indigenous' societies as illustrated, for instance, in herbal medicine. Not that there are no issues about science or technology from a transcultural standpoint. There are, for example, exceedingly important questions of pace and propriety when a technology developed in one culture is applied in the setting of other cultures. But in our present discussion they are secondary.

However, when we come to language, worldview, religion and philosophy, the situation is different, and the need for dialogue cannot be overemphasized. Take language. In terms of pure symbolism, the differences among languages are conventional, and therefore a matter of custom. For example, the English word 'person' and the Akan word 'onipa' have, very roughly, the same object of reference. And this is a fact of convention. It just happens that the Akans use the given selection of physical marks to play the same referential role for which the English use the mark complex 'person'. Logically, it is conceivable that they might have used other *sign-designs* (to borrow a term from the 20th-century German philosopher Rudolf Carnap). Or, thinking further, both the Akans and the English might conceivably have settled on one and the same sign-design. In fact, the sign 'me' has the same reference in English as in Akan! But in terms of signification, as distinct from reference, differences are liable to emerge that reflect different ways of conceptualizing individual and social existence in the corresponding cultures. Issues of language, then, shade easily into issues of worldview. Having been professionally occupied with the comparative study of African and Western ways of conceptualizing reality, I know that the differences can run deep indeed. And I know also how little dialogue there has been on those differences. Notice that this already brings us to the regions of religion and philosophy.

Let me illustrate a little. All my investigations convince me that African ways of conceptualizing reality, or, more simply, African categories of thought, are in many cases fundamentally empirical. They contrast profoundly with the transcendental way of thought that one finds in much Western philosophy. This difference leads, in turn, to radical differences in metaphysics. It leads, to take one example, to differences in the conception of God. In much African thought, God is a kind of cosmic architect, while in most Western thought God is a transcendent creator of the universe out of nothing. Suppose I am not mistaken, as I well may be, and these differences are real. Then, we should not just tabulate them; we should also evaluate them. That is to say African and Western thinkers should enter into the discussion of these issues with a view to arriving at some interculturally warranted conclusions.

I cannot argue the point here, but my conviction is that such cross-cultural dialogue is possible and potentially enlightening for all parties concerned. This possibility is predicated on the fact with which I started this discussion: that we, humans, are all rational bipeds.⁵ The dialogue has hardly started, but sooner or later I think it will start, not only between Africa and the West, but also among all cultures, Western, Eastern and African. I venture to predict that, if we human beings do not bomb ourselves out of existence, the time will come when a person's philosophical persuasion may have no necessary connection with his or her cultural origins.

But something tempers this optimism. It is the existence of formidable impediments to dialogue in certain religious doctrines. What are called world religions are usually *dogmatic* religions. I do not immediately intend the word 'dogmatic' in the pejorative sense, in which to be dogmatic is to hold a belief so inflexibly as to be impervious to rational considerations. A dogmatic religion is simply a religion that is based on some articles of belief. So, Christianity, for example, is a dogmatic religion. But a Christian need not be dogmatic in the anti-rational sense. However, dogmatic religions tend to breed dogmatic adherents, which explains in some measure the phenomenon of fundamentalism. This way of believing is dogmatism, usually with thinly veiled pretensions to infallibility. Such beliefs are said to be held by faith as opposed to reason. The word 'faith' can be used in various senses. In the present sense, which is only one of the senses of the word, what is believed by faith is, by virtue of that fact, inaccessible to rational evaluation. Accordingly, there can be no discussion with non-believers.

There is another complication. Religious dogmatists (of the anti-rational variety) are apt to maintain the dependence of morality on religion. The notion of what is morally right now comes to *mean* what is willed by the God in whom the particular believer believes. The combination of anti-rational faith with this divine-command view of morality can lead to imperiously held views, not only about how abysmally wrong-headed non-conformers are, but also about how ungodly and unregenerate they are. This is because the pious persons in question may believe that God has *revealed* to them, directly or indirectly, his likes and dislikes in many rather important matters of conduct. Given this they will hold their beliefs very strongly; indeed, with uncompromising inflexibility.

Consider, now, two peoples espousing two religions in which diametrically opposed anti-rational beliefs have a sanctified status. Clearly, so long as such beliefs hold sway among their proprietors, there can be no chance of a dialogue. The reason is that dialogue presupposes the fallibility of all its participants. Consequently, if such beliefs should happen to function even as undertones of political dispute, the difficulties of conflict resolution are multiplied a thousand-fold. The only ray of hope that one espies in this matter is owing to the fact that in some dogmatic religions, for instance in Christianity and Islam, there are some devotees who do not entertain their beliefs in an anti-rational manner. They appear outnumbered, but, since time is infinite, such believers might, perhaps, come some day to outnumber their more faith-based partners in piety by the power of rational education.

Let me in concluding note an African contrast. When people talk of 'world reli-

gions' they do not mention African religions. These they sometimes euphemistically call 'primal' religions. One reason for this differential classification is that African religions do not offer promises of salvation. The idea of postmortem salvation, in fact, does not make sense at all in a great many African religions. The African world of the dead is a this-worldly world. The whole engagement of the ancestors, who reside in the world of the dead, is to help those who live and work and have their struggles in this world.⁶ It is when the stakes are magnified with hopes of a beatific salvation that revelation tends to become the touchstone of a 'true' religion.

African religions, on the other hand, are not dogmatic in any sense. In consequence, they have no need of a revelation. And, because the concerns of their eschatology, if such it be, are directed to this world, they have no use for salvation with its associated dogmas. Take the Akan example of freedom from religious dogmatism. Although they have a saying to the effect that no one need show a child God (*Obi nkyere akwadaa Nyame*), they do not mind if an individual is a skeptic, in Akan, an *okyinyigyefo*, literally, one who is given to debating. Akan religion, as other African religions, is not an institutional religion. They do not have chapels or mosques or any simulacrum thereof. Neither do they have or need an officialdom for monitoring piety, reinforcing virtue or mediating between the flock and the Lord.

Accordingly, there is no such thing as a set of beliefs that one must profess in order to be member of an Akan (or the Akan) religion. Any Akan who believes in Nyame (very roughly God) has trust in his goodness. But this is regarded as a personal conviction embedding a truism – remember not even a child is supposed to need instruction as to the existence of God. The belief and the associated attitude are important in the life of an individual, but they are not the basis of an alignment with others in the pursuit of any common aim, for no such aim is left unattended in the culture. One might sum these remarks up by saying that Akan religion is a purely personal one. In such a religion revelation and dogmatism are purposeless.

We discount here the notion that 'fetishism' is an aspect of Akan (or in general African) religion, much less its entirety. In so far as this term refers to any part of Akan culture, the referent is a set of utilitarian procedures for exploiting the assorted resources of this world.⁷ Returning to the Akan individual and her or his religion, if any, we may note the following. One is born an Akan, if that is one's destiny, and there are certain metaphysical beliefs that are entertained by the generality of Akans. But these do not constitute a passport needed for access to any institution in Akan society. Correspondingly, no threats of sanctions await an unbeliever.

Here then is the major point of these last reflections as far as the subject of dialogue is concerned. Because Akan, and in general African, religion is not dogmatic, the tendency towards maintaining anti-rational articles of faith is non-existent. It is a consequence of this same trait of African thought that morality is conceptually independent of religion in that climate of thought.⁸ What this means is that African thought on morality and religion is exempt from one of the most intractable impediments to dialogue among peoples. If this is so, then it is, after all, fortunate that African religions are not 'world religions'. One can only reiterate the hope that all 'world religions' will come more and more to develop a similar outlook. If that

happens, progress in intercultural dialogue, so important for a healthy attitude to cultural diversity, would be more easily within our grasp.

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Notes

1. On this kind of difficulty in the formulation of the Golden Rule see the discussion by the American logician Harry Gensler (1990: 247).
2. See Gensler (1990, Ch. 9, Section 4, esp. p. 252). I have made only a slight change in Gensler's wording.
3. On this matter see Wiredu (1999, 2001a, 2001b) and (1996a), Chs 13 and 14, especially the latter on 'Democracy and Consensus: A Plea for a Non-Party Polity'.
4. UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity, Paris, 21 November 2001.
5. I have argued this in, for example, Ch. 3: 'Are There Cultural Universals?' in *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (Wiredu, 1996a).
6. See Wiredu (1996b).
7. On this see Ch. 5: 'Universalism and Particularism in Religion from an African Perspective' in *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (Wiredu, 1996a).
8. This is contrary to the usual accounts of African thought, but see Wiredu (1991).

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