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Lecture

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## **Lutheran-Roman Dialogue: Reflections on the Situation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT)**

### **The Lutheran-Roman Relationship during European Missionaries Era: An Experience from Tanzania**

In Tanzania, Christianity was introduced between the 1880's and 1900's by various Missionary Societies from Germany. These were the Leipzig, Bethel and the Berlin Mission Societies. The Mission Societies worked in different parts of the country; Bethel in the North Western and North-Eastern part of Tanzania, Leipzig in the Northern part, and Berlin in the Southern part of the country. Among the three mission societies, Berlin worked most closely with the German colonial government in Tanzania. This close relationship did not only exist in Tanzania, but started in Germany where the emperor was a Lutheran and therefore favoured the Lutheran Church over the Roman Catholic Church. In Tanzania, especially in the South where the Berlin Mission was operating, around Lake Nyasa and the Livingstone Mountains, it seems that the native chief of the Kinga people gave mandate to the Lutheran missionaries to do mission work without any interference from Roman Catholic Missionaries.

The Lutheran missionaries' agenda of keeping Roman Catholics from setting up mission stations can be clearly seen from Missionary Karl Tramp's report. The missionary's report shows that on 2nd June 1933, two Fathers from Tosamaganga (an Italian Roman Catholic station that belongs to Consolata) came to chief Mwemutsi asking him for permission to establish a mission station in Ukinga. The chief asked them whether they were Catholics, but they denied saying that they were "*Vapadele*" which means "*Padres*." They concealed their real identity because they knew that, due to the influence of Lutheran missionaries, the chief would not allow them to open a station in Ukinga. Since this chief was a good friend of the Lutheran Missionary, he told the two *Vapadele* that since they were not Catholics they should report to Missionary Karl Tramp in Tandala and ask him to write a letter of recommendation. If Tramp would agree, the chief could easily grant them permission. Although the visitors tried to convince the chief to give the relevant permission without reporting to the Lutheran missionary, the chief refused completely, telling them that he had given his land (Kingaland) to Missionary Tramp. Therefore, he could not give it to anybody without consulting him (Ilomo, 2011, pp. 32-33).

Despite the efforts made to stop Roman Catholics from Tosamaganga establishing a station in Kingaland, in 1964 the Consolata Fathers' Roman Catholic Society did succeed in establishing a mission station in Tandala, 3 kilometers away from the station established by Berlin missionaries. Today this station has built a large hospital (Ikonda Consolata Hospital) which is the biggest and most reliable in the whole area of the Southern Highlands. This hospital serves not only people from the Southern Highlands, but also some wives of Lutheran missionaries, who recently worked in Tandala, have delivered their children there. The Lutheran German missionaries who have worked there since the 1960s are from the Bavaria Mission Society (today known as Mission Eine Welt) and the North Elbian Mission Society, not the Berlin Mission (Ibid. p. 33).

Further evidence that the Berlin Mission counted on the Kingaland chief to help them keep Roman Catholics out comes from a letter Missionary Tramp sent to three Synods in Germany: Havelberg-Weilsnach, Perleberg and Wittenberg dated on 27 May 1933. These Synods were partners in the Kingaland mission work. In this letter, Tramp states that Hunger, a missionary who worked in the Matema mission station (nowadays Konde Diocese of ELCT), reported that Roman Catholics wanted to establish a mission station at Lumbila, one of Matema's small stations. Tramp reported that he was intending to tell chief Mwemutsi to stop the Roman Catholics since the place was under his protection. Tramp furthermore states that chief Mwemutsi helped to defend the mission's property. However, he was also challenged by the fact that the areas that the chief protected for the Berlin Mission were not in use, since the missionaries could no longer afford to expand due to budget cuts. In this respect, Tramp asks how long the chief would stand on his side against Roman Catholics if his Mission could not afford to make use of the areas. Retrospectively, Tramp's concern was proven prescient since, today, the place (Lumbila) has a Roman Catholic presence due to lack of utilization by the Lutherans (Ibid. pp. 33-34).

The poor relationship between Lutheran and Roman Catholic Missions did not only affect the relationships between their missionaries, but also African Christians. In 1960, in one of the mission stations established by Berlin at Igumbilo in Lupila Congregation, there was also a Roman Catholic (Benedictine) mission station at the neighbouring village called Sunji. At Igumbilo preaching point, the Berlin missionaries had already built an elementary school that accepted all kinds of children from various denominations as well as non-Christian believers. However, the Roman Catholic Priest, Fr. Octavian refused to allow African children from the Roman Catholic Church to attend the Lutheran school. An indigenous man, from Igumbilo (Ndilivako Ndelwa), reacting against the Roman priest, said "such missionaries like Fr. Octavian are not needed in the country." The Roman Catholic priest decided to sue Mr. Ndelwa at the District Court in Njombe claiming that his life was threatened by Mr. Ndelwa. Mr. Ndelwa was

taken into custody and denied bail (interview with Pastor Yonam Tweve on 25 May 2016). In 1960, Pastor Tweve was an evangelist who was one of the witnesses nominated by Pastor Nikwanduka Mtawa to attend court sessions in Njombe and Mbeya.

Since Mr. Ndelwa was a trained teacher for Lutheran schools in the Region, the mission station, under the African priest Nikwanduka Mtawa, chose five Evangelists to attend the court sessions in Njombe (95km from the mission station), which they travelled to and from on foot. This not only expended energy traveling, but had other implications too. One particular implication was financial. For about a year, Pastor Mtawa had to take resources from the Lutheran Mission station to give to the five representatives. Another implication regarded the lack of preachers to preach the Word of God, especially during the days when the five evangelists attended the court sessions. This led to backsliding of newly converted Christians (Ibid.). 'Backsliding' refers to a newly or a long-time converted Christian who reverts to their old ways of worship, or turns away from the Church. For the context of Lupila, Church members were at high risk of going back to their former traditional worship due to the fact that they were newly converted. The newly converted Church members need close nurturing from the Pastor or Evangelist as their faith is not deeply rooted.

Ndelwa's case was further complicated when it was decided that it was an attempted murder case, and then transferred to higher court in Mbeya. Fortunately, the Resident Magistrate found that the intention of Mr. Ndelwa was not to kill the Roman Catholic priest. He spoke out of pity for the pupils who were denied the right to attend school due to religious affiliation, since he was a professional young teacher. Therefore, Mr. Ndelwa was released but ordered to report to the District Commissioner monthly for one year. The court also ordered the Ministry of Education to post Mr. Ndelwa to teach near Njombe District (in Imalinyi). The order was observed and enabled Mr. Ndelwa to serve out his punishment and return to a citizen of good standing (Ibid.).

The relationship between Lutherans and Roman Catholics experienced in Tanzania was when the Church was under European missionaries, between the years 1885 to 1939, until the start of the World War II and during semi-autonomous indigenous leadership (between 1940-1962). This type of relationship, hating your neighbours due to religious affiliation was strange among Africans. African community members were hospitable to foreigners who visited them. They were given food, accommodation and security. Moreover, during religious rituals even passersby were invited to take part in sharing communal meal. For Africans, such ecumenism during religious rituals was a sign that the offering or sacrifice had been accepted by God. We can also conclude that foreign missionaries (Muslim and Christian) came to some regions of Tanzania, Kingaland being one of them, and established their mission activities without facing

opposition from the indigenous people because African hospitality welcomed the strangers peacefully.

Some Westerners believe that Africans by nature are not generous, that they have learnt generosity from foreign religions like Islam and Christianity. A counter-example to this comes from an experienced missionary in Tanzania - Howard Olson - who lived there from 1944-1988. Olson confesses that hospitality in African community was not brought by foreign influence or missionaries or colonial governments; it is in fact based on African "Ubuntu." This is an African understanding of personhood in which the identity of the self is understood to be formed in cooperative relationship with other human beings. This is defined by Desmond Tutu as, "A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated, tortured or oppressed" (Ilomo, 2013, p.103).

Olson reports an incident from the Isuna community in Singida (Central Region in Tanzania). After moving there for the first time, he and his wife had a lot to do before settling in to their new residence. For that matter, they were not ready to entertain any visitor. However, to their surprise, on the second day upon arriving, their neighbor, called Gwao, made a welcoming visit. Initially, the missionary thought that Gwao made such a visit because he was either a Muslim or a Christian. However, eventually the missionary was surprised to learn that the man was neither Muslim nor Christian. He was a traditionalist (Ibid. pp. 105-106).

Olson underlines that Gwao would not think of visiting them with empty hands, so he presented them with a gourd of honey. Olson does not regard this present like other presents he has received, but regards the honey as more valuable due to the fact that the harvesting environment was not conducive. He elaborates that since harvesting honey is done using only a smoking firebrand, without gloves or a net, Gwao's hands evidenced the many times he had been stung. For this reason, Olson and his wife were deeply honoured to receive the delicious treasure from Gwao's scarred hands. The pain he had endured for them was an essential ingredient of his offering (Ibid.).

After doing a survey of relationships between the Lutheran Church and Roman Catholic Church, especially during the early stage of missionary enterprise in Tanzania (1885 to 1939), we find that they were mainly dominated by the influence of enmity. In the following section, we shall explore the kind of Lutheran-Roman Church relationship that existed during the beginning of the World War II, when all German missionaries were interned and the Church remained (for a

short time) under the control of African leadership and later on in the 1940's when foreign missionaries from Scandinavian countries and the United States came as co-workers.

### **New relationship: Self Governing Church**

From 1940, most of the German missionaries had been interned and mission stations were under African leadership, with only a few ordained pastors and many evangelists. Towards the end of the Second World War, missionaries from the US and Scandinavian countries came and took over the mission stations previously established by the Germans. During this time, the relationship between Lutherans and Roman Catholic Church was still challenging, although Africans were working together with European and American Missionaries. However, the Church was not fully autonomous as most of the key positions in the Church were under foreign missionaries. These new foreign missionaries, like the German missionaries, kept their distance from the Roman Catholic Church.

The great change of autonomy started in 1963 when the Seven Lutheran Churches in Tanzania united to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) under African leadership. The Seven Churches were called after the tribes that existed in their respective regions: 1. Lutheran Church in Southern Tanganyika (Ubena-Konde) of which the headquarters was at Kidugala in Njombe; 2. Lutheran Church in Uzaramo/Uluguru- the headquarters was at Maneromango near Dar es Salaam; 3. Lutheran Church in Northern Tanganyika- the headquarters was in Moshi town; 4. Iraq Church- the headquarters was in Mbulu District; 5. Lutheran Church in Central Tanganyika- the headquarters was in Singida town; 6. Evangelical Church in Buhaya- headquarter was in Bukoba town; 7. Lutheran Church in Usambara/Digo- the headquarters was in Lushoto ( Karne ya Kwanza ya Injili-1891-1991-Kanisa la Kiinjili la Kilutheri Tanzania Ukanda wa Kusini, uk. 38).

The African leaders were the ones who started a new relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. This relationship was in collaboration around a joint mass during Christmas or Easter. Once a year the celebration was held in the Roman church and another year in the Lutheran church. Moreover, during this time the Christians were not only united through these churches' agreements but also through blood or ethnic relationships. Church members forgot their religious differences and celebrated mass together.

When we consider Lutheran- Roman Catholic dialogue in the context of Tanzania, it is not the same as it is understood in the Western sense, but it is rather as a close relationship in matters such as: joint mass at Easter and Christmas times; using a single chapel for worship in

Universities and Hospitals; inviting each other during religious festivals etc. The official ecumenical relationship that the Roman Catholic Church observes most is between itself and the Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT), which includes all Protestant churches in Tanzania, namely, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), Anglican, Moravian, Mennonite, Presbyterian, Methodist and the African Inland Church.

The relationship of the CCT and Roman Catholic Church is not in the form of interfaith dialogue; instead, it is a joint declaration of certain burning issues in the country. Such issues are the process of writing a new constitution in 2014, introduction of *Sharia* court, Islamic law to be included in the Constitution and the burning of churches by Muslim fundamentalists over the last ten years. Normally, when such disputes occur, the CCT and Tanzania Episcopate Conference (TEC) hold a meeting in order to give a report on what has happened and design a joint declaration. Most of these meetings are held in response to the actions of Muslim fundamentalists, for example terror attacks killing Christian leaders or burning Churches. In such meetings, joint declarations are made against the government for slow response on emergency issues, like burning of churches or abusive speeches/sermons by Muslim fundamentalists and dissatisfaction on daily performance of duties by the government organs. During all these Ecumenical joint meetings, the government representatives are not invited.

The existing relationship between CCT and TEC in social matters has been good so far. However, it is not enough. When the government authority hears such declarations, it usually either criticizes the two organs or just entirely ignores them. While the efforts of the two organs (CCT and TEC) should be commended, in our time this approach is not sufficient. Instead, the two organs must include government representatives when talking about their dissatisfaction towards the government in emergency cases.

### **Remaining Challenges faced by CCT and TEC**

The relationship between CCT and TEC, especially after independence, is shown to be good if compared with the colonial and missionary era from 1890's. Moreover, such a good relationship has enabled the two organs to work peacefully alongside each other, conduct joint services in some occasions, share worshipping places (churches/chapels) especially in educational institutions and also make joint declarations during time of crises (social matters). This is a good step and a way forward towards further relationship in theological discussion, the core mission of the Church. The theological discussion between the two is inevitable as long as they both intend to do mission work, and operate in the region with the fastest growing

Christian population, where they will both face many challenges, as are discussed in the following sections.

#### **a. Emergence of new churches**

Up until the 1960s, in Tanzania there were only missionary churches from the mainstream denominations such as the Lutheran Church, Roman Catholic, Moravian, Anglican, Mennonites, Methodist and Presbyterian Church. However, from the 1970s, new Pentecostal churches began to mushroom in the country with no proper structure or theological training, and often led by a single person. These churches attracted mainstream members through "prosperity" theology. Many Christians from mainstream churches either attend the open-air meetings of new churches and later join them or attend meetings and later bring the influence to the members of mainstream churches (CCT and TEC). Most of the members of these new churches are not from non-Christian communities, but are former members of CCT or TEC.

The emergence of these new churches is a threat to the CCT and TEC growth as well as to the national harmony of Tanzania. I therefore, propose the need for the CCT and TEC to conduct theological dialogue to find new ways of identifying the challenges and equipping their respective churches with relevant teachings so that church members can stand firm in their faith. This strategy is not only necessary to protect church members in congregations but also in educational institutions like primary and secondary schools up to university level. These groups in educational institutions are impressionable, interested in testing new teaching and are willing to follow new teachings without questioning its legitimacy. Kilaini, one of the Roman Catholic bishops in Tanzania, is also very much concerned with nurturing a good ecumenical relationship between the Catholic and the traditional Protestant denominations. He makes note of the existing tensions with the new Pentecostal churches (Kilaini n.d., p.2), although he does not give suggestions of a way forward for the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches who are losing members.

#### **b. Fast growth of the Church in Africa and the shift of mission sending centre**

Kilaini (ibid, p.2) asserts that Christianity, though divided into various denominations, is the fastest growing religion in Africa. In one way, this growth is a success, as one of the objectives of the mission in Africa has been reached. This tendency of fast growth means also a shift of mission centre, from the North (Europe and North America) to the South (Africa and Asia). The implication is that the Church in the South will be sending missionaries to the North unlike in the past when it was vice versa. The Church in Africa sending missionaries to the North can be viewed as another success of the mission. However, this growth is only numerical. The growth does not coincide with theological understanding, or in other words the numerical growth is not proportional to theological potency, the cornerstone of the Church.

Regarding the importance of theological potency, a good example can be derived from Karl Tramp, who was superintendent of Livingstone Mountains or Lake Nyasa Synod. The time following his deportation from Tandala, after the First World War, from 1919-1925, became known as the "orphanage of the Church." Work was taken over by the Scottish missionaries from Malawi in his absence. Missionary Tramp reports that he left the station when there were only 20 Christians. However, when he returned in 1925, there were 100 members, an increase of four times. To his surprise, the Christians knew nothing about Christian teaching because they attended baptismal classes for just 14 days before they were baptized. He had to teach those Christians baptismal class for not less than a year before he confirmed them to be fully Christians (Ilomo, 2011, pp.79-80).

Tramp was not satisfied with the level of Christian understanding among his members. However, today teaching Christians in the modern world is even more challenging. The world is secularized. There are a lot of religious choices, and people are much more inquisitive about religious belief than in the past. I believe that the lack of theological potency in our time should not be underestimated. The Church in the West, where Christianity came from, is struggling, and now needs missionaries from the South who are well trained and competent. Otherwise, the Church in the South will remain the fastest growing Church but without any substantive contribution to the Church in the North.

The issue of theological potency is more severe in the CCT member churches than in the TEC. In the TEC the Church has a clear system of educating theologians, from first degree up to doctorate. While in the CCT at times, many theologians are ordained after attending a one year programme, certificate course of two years, or a Diploma of three years. Few of them have First Degree, even less a Masters and very few a doctorate. Besides there being limited numbers of scholars in the Protestant churches, the scholarship also exists outside the hierarchy of these churches. Theological issues are not discussed with these scholars or considered using insights from church members. Instead, whenever there is a burning theological issue, it is decided without deep discussion among leaders of the Church who are not necessarily scholars, since criteria for being a church leader is not an academic standard. It could be better if during theological debates leaders invite scholars to partake, so that the scholarship within the Church could enrich the Church teachings and theological potency. The trend for a long time is that theological scholars, unless they are Church leaders, are not invited to theological debates. This is especially typical in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church scholarship is inside the Church (similar to the Church in Europe and North America). When the Church faces any theological controversy or intends to conduct theological discussion scholars are invited wherever they are; Junior Seminary, Senior Seminary, Ecumenical office



abroad or working in a Congregation. take the contribution from these scholars is taken seriously for the benefit of the Church locally or globally.

If scholarship continues to exist outside the hierarchy of the Church, with low qualification in theological discipline, the Church (especially the CCT) in the South cannot send a mission to the North. The fact that the Church in Tanzania, and Africa at large, is the fastest growing, should be an opportunity to be send missions to the North. However, due to weaknesses in theology, the Church in the South is not capable of addressing the gap in the North.

### **c. Presence of African Religion**

In Tanzania, like in other African countries, African religion, which is a pre-colonial, was regarded as an evil practice by Christian and Muslim Missionaries. Adherents of African religion welcomed these two foreign religions: Islam and Christianity. They were gracious hosts yet never received the same appreciation. Instead, they were seen as satanical by Islam and Christianity. Christians called African religion believers "pagan" and the Muslims called them "kafir." The Roman Catholic Church had a more peaceful co-existence with African beliefs than churches in the CCT. This peaceful co-existence is not by coincidence, but a system in the Roman Catholic Church to recognize other non-Christian religions as stipulated in the Ecumenical Council in 1963. Furthermore, it was clearly emphasized by the Pope when he visited Africa:

Africans have a profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred, of the existence of God the creator and of a spiritual world. The reality of sin in its individual and social forms is very much present in the consciousness of these peoples as is also the need for rites of purification and expiation (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: Ecclesia in Africa of the Holy Father John Paul II).

Regarding African religion, many religious leaders in Africa underestimate the actual number of adherents of African religion.

This misconception originates from the early missionaries. The missionaries believed that when an African converted to Christianity, it was a "rapid change" or a "replacement," but in reality, it is a social process. What happens during conversion is that Christianity or any secondary religious experience like Islam plays an "additive" role, whereby when an African religion practitioner converts, they do not leave their former religion, their primary religious experience. Instead, they add the new to their former belief. Therefore, they continue practicing both religions, in turn complementing each other. It is necessary to consider that

whenever one calculates a percentage of African religion followers, that many Africans who confess Islam or Christianity have a dual belief, which means that they are also believers and practitioners of African religion.

The uniqueness of African religion is also supported by Kilaini (n.d.) who first underlines the decline of African religion on the continent as time passes: in 1900 they were 58% of the population, in 1950 were 26.9% and in 2000 only 11.5% and the estimate for 2025 is 9.2%. Secondly, he underlines that, besides this decline of African religion followers in number, adherents of the two major religions still syncretize their faith with traditional beliefs. Moreover, one reason for the appeal of Pentecostal churches is mixing traditional beliefs and ceremonies with Christian faith. Therefore, Kilaini (Ibid. p.1) advises Christian churches to study the elements of African religion if they are to be effective in evangelization.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Initially, the intention of this paper was to find out about Lutheran-Roman dialogue in the Tanzanian context. First of all, in Tanzania the Lutheran-Roman dialogue is established between the Tanzania Episcopate Conference (TEC), the Roman Catholic body, and the Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT), which represents all Protestant churches. Although there is a relationship between these two bodies, practice shows that there is no real dialogue in the sense of Western perspective. Instead, there is something we call "*convivre*" in French, which means the dialogue of living together. This is similar to Sundermeier's terminology of "*Konvivenz*" similar to the English term, "convivial." In the dialogue of living together, we expect only a practical experience whereby the two parts work together and help each other without affecting the individual differences in daily life.

For both Protestant and Roman Catholic Church, *convivre* could be a good thing, provided it is preceded by a formal interfaith dialogue (theological dialogue). However, to have only a dialogue in the form of living together is not enough. It seems as if these institutions are still in an early stage of their relationship. Having joint resolutions towards the government, without dialogue and without the presence of government representation does not guarantee the effectiveness of the petitions. It shows also that if there were no social challenges, the CCT and TEC would not meet and give joint resolutions. While these two bodies should meet regularly, when they only talk and make resolutions (about social and political matters) against the government, it seems as if they have no prevailing theological challenges in their respective churches that could potentially bring them together through dialogue. This could be another talking point for the two bodies.

I think CCT and TEC operate in Tanzania in such a way that they can work similarly with other Church bodies in Europe and North America. These Church bodies do not consider themselves as foreign religions that are supposed to cope with the African context by recognizing the presence of African religion, which is the primary religious experience of native Africans to whom they are doing mission work. Previously, I pointed out the influence of African religion on most followers of Christianity and Islam (who belong to secondary religious experience). If they continue to not address themes about African religion or include members of African religion in interfaith dialogue, they will be out of context with their members. I believe that since mission fields in Tanzania and Africa are among African religious followers, CCT and TEC cannot avoid having dialogue about African religion or inclusion of African religion followers in an extended ecumenism. This is the way forward for the Church in Tanzania.

When we look at the existing Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in Tanzania and Africa at large, let us reflect on the fact that the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in Europe has existed for 500 years now. It was a serious dialogue, reflecting conflicts that resulted from the Reformation. This dialogue has been engaging in theological themes like: gospel, church, Eucharist, ministry, justification, apostolicity of the Church and baptism. Eventually, the dialogue enabled the two churches to decide to have a joint celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in Windhoek- Namibia in May 2017.

After surveying the Lutheran- Roman Catholic Church dialogue in Europe, we can suggest the similar modality of dialogue in the African Church. The Church in Africa, while operating in a different context, should be part and parcel of the global Church in facilitating the communion of the Church. We should learn about the confessional conflicts of the 16th century as these could provide insights to our own present conflicts. Nevertheless, the experience shows that the Church in Tanzania, and Africa at large, currently does not play an active role in the global mission. I see that the Reformation history is taken as part of Church tradition only to be remembered and no efforts are made to revive the Church unity that broke during the Reformation. This assumption can be justified by the existing relationship in form of a joint declaration of social issues without any attempt at theological dialogue concerning serious issues that challenge the Church today.

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