

**Religious Pluralism in the Bible and the Pastoral Challenges of Credal Walls In Nigeria:
An Application of Acts 10:27-28.34**

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Abstract: *Prior to the advent of what Chinua Achebe calls ‘the white man’s religion’, “igwebuiké” was the case. “Ujamaa” was the spirit. There were of course tribal and ethnic issues but not to the level of not seeing one another as brother or sister. In the last Synod of the Archdiocese of Onitsha, the Auxiliary Bishop of Onitsha, Most Rev. D. Isizoh lamented that Africa inherited a divided Christianity. The divide in Christendom is undoubtable as is evidenced in destructive criticisms, attacks, anathemas and new teachings different Christian denominations bring against each other. Beyond Christianity, the story is even worse. The experience often ends in gory stories. It is all about join me or face war. Religion ought to be an agent of love and unity. Thus, if religion happens to be an agent of division and intolerance as seen today, one wonders if it is necessary for man to still remain religious. Perhaps, the Quran and the Bible share blames in the intolerance because of the ambiguities in their teachings implying incompatibility of different religious beliefs. John 3:17 teaches that Christ is sent for the salvation of the whole world. Yet Acts 4:12 holds that salvation is only in his name. John 14:6 posits Christ as the only way to the Father. Writing to the Ephesians, Paul told them that without Christ they were without hope and without God. At first face therefore, religious pluralism seems at odds with biblical teaching. This paper using exegetical lens captures the possibility of religious pluralism in the bible. The author sees religious intolerance as one of the greatest problems facing Nigeria and the world at large. It follows the thoughts of Fathers of the Vatican II to conclude that biblical teaching about salvation through Christ is not in exclusivity but in inclusivity. It posits tolerance and openness as the solutions to religious intolerance of each other and the consequent gory stories.*

Key Words: *Religion, Pluralism, Bible, Exclusion, Inclusion, Tolerance, Salvation.*

Introduction and Brief on Conceptual Framework

The Reader’s Digest Encyclopaedic Dictionary defines pluralism as “a social condition in which desperate religious, ethnic, and racial groups are geographically intermingled and united in a single nation”¹. E. C. Hobbes² believes that while the reality of which this definition speaks

¹ A.H. Marckwardt: *The Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, Chapman R.L. et al. eds., Pleasantville: Funk & Wagnalls Publishing Company, 1975.

² E.C. Hobbes: *Theological and Religious Pluralism: Pluralism in the Biblical Context*. Prepared for the Autumn Pacific Coast Theological Society Meeting, November 16-17, 1973.

has certainly been around for a very long time, the *concept* of pluralism is of quite recent vintage when one compares the definition given above with the definitions in earlier great dictionaries of the English. The Second edition of the *New International Dictionary*, for example, stops just before it reaches the definition above, which appears in the Third Edition for the first time; thus, between 1934 (Second Edition) and 1966 (Third Edition) this usage of the word "pluralism" came to the attention of America's leading lexicographers for the first time. The term is well-known to past generations in its application to moonlighting clergymen and to philosophical non-monists and non-dualists, but in this special sense it was not known to our forefathers. But just as Uranus³ was existing in the solar system but unknown to the scientist until 1781 when Wihlhelm Herschel discovered it, so we may accept the fact that our fathers knew the reality indeed, but the name is only in our day revealed to us. Perhaps this linguistic revelation will similarly open up for us some deeper grasp of our religious tradition. *Pluralism* (in this new sense) should be seen as genuinely different from, and as an alternative to, either *indifferentism* on the one hand, or *toleration* on the other. *Indifferentism* is the principle that differences of religious belief or practice are essentially unimportant, and is no doubt related to the use of "indifferent" in the sense of "without interest or concern; not caring; apathetic". It may be that there are civilizations where indifferentism permits a form of pluralism, but it becomes a serious question whether in fact those civilizations, a congeries of many cultures is merely rather than true "civilizations," possessing some kind of coherent unity. *Toleration* is the allowance by a government of the exercise of religions other than the religion, which is officially established or recognized, or forbearance of what is not actually approved. In this case, there is no doubt the possibility of a situation of pluralism in society; the primary difference between a tolerant society and a pluralist society is the risky character of the tolerated groups within a society which tolerates them. Genuine *pluralism*, it seems to the researcher, differs from either of these other policies which might result in the permission of deviation within a society or civilization, primarily because it implies a positive attitude toward such deviation, a positive valuation of the presence of diverse religious (or other) groups within the society, free to participate in and develop their special interest or culture. It is in terms of this positive attitude toward variety or deviation or diversity that we shall consider the question of pluralism in the Biblical context, rather than considering only toleration or indifferentism. Some Christians have argued that religious pluralism is an invalid or self-contradictory concept based upon passages of the Bible such as:

Acts 4:12 (KJV): either is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

1 Timothy 2:5 (KJV): For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;

John 14:6 (KJV): Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

Acts 17:29 (KJV): Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

Exodus 20:3 (KJV): Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

³ Uranus is a giant ball of gas and liquid, 4x the earth diameter. Like Galileo who named the stars after his patrons the Medicis, so Herchel decided to name his discovery "Georgium Sidus" after King George III of England. It was the European astronomers of the time who rejected naming a planet after England's ruler. They opted for Uranus – the first sky god and father of Saturn in Roman mythology. Cf. K.C. Davis: *Don't Know Much about the Universe*. Everything You Need to Know about Outer Space but Never Learned. New York: 2002.

Exodus 34:14 (KJV): For thou shalt worship no other god; for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God:

Mark 12:32 (KJV): And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he:

Isaiah 42:8 (KJV): I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.

The paper first examines the *practice* of pluralism, or its presence as a reality, in the Biblical context, and then proceed to examine the possible presence of the *doctrine* of pluralism, or the use of the concept or policy implied in pluralism, in the context of the Bible. It shall further examine Acts 10:27-28.34 as a biblical text solution to crisis generated by intolerance. The hermeneutic application will zero the text down to the African situation giving a call to tolerance for mutual co-existence especially as God is viewed by Africans as pervading all reality⁴. We will conclude with some observations deriving from this examination.

Pluralism in the Bible

A *prima facie* reading of the OT and NT gives the impression that religion is monolithic. This superficial impression is not unconnected with the fearsome denunciation of cultus and faith or belief by prophets, priests and lawgivers. Originally, the community that produced the bible was pluralistic. Some OT texts like Psalm 86: 8 and Job 1: 6 show evidence of polytheism in Israel. The idea of monolithic faith was a result of conflict of interest in which a group tried to suppress the other in favour of their own, yet pluralism continued to find expression through the Biblical community's history. For examples, Israel used masseba stones, a Canaanite pillar symbol as markers in important places where God appeared (Gen 28:18.22; 35:14; Exod 24:4) but when they settled in Palestine, the prophets condemned the use of massebah stones because they were symbols of the male fertility gods (Hos 3:4; 10,1-2; Exod 23:24; 34:13; Lev 26:1; Deut 17:5; 12:3; 16:22; 1Kgs 14:23). In the earliest stages of Israel's history, we find a league of diverse tribal groups, with differing traditions, shrines, and even gods. One group preserved the Abraham traditions, while another told the stories of Jacob; the Joseph tribes brought into the larger community the traditions of Egypt and bondage and Exodus, and perhaps Sinai as well. The later scheme of Jacob with twelve sons, born of two Aramean wives and two Canaanite concubines, no doubt reflects the diverse origins of the league that formed in Shechem, just as the tradition of Joseph's two sons being born of an Egyptian mother (daughter of the Egyptian priest of On!) surely reflects ancient ties with Egypt, another mark of diverse origins. The great shrines at Shechem, Gilgal, Bethel, Hebron, and Beersheba, held their own for centuries, even against powerful efforts to centralize worship at Samaria and Jerusalem, and the ruins of the great shrine at Shiloh were still looked on with deep feeling as late as Jeremiah (7:12-14). The gods who were worshipped in this early phase, and whose names are carried on in the traditions, were several: the family gods or clan deities - the Shield of Abraham, the Fear of Isaac or the Kinsman of Isaac, the Mighty One of Jacob (Gen. 15:1; 31:42; 49:24]), the various forms of *El*, such as *El Olam* (Gen. 21:33), *El Shaddai* (Gen. 17:1; 49:25), *El Elyon* (Gen. 14:18), *El Bethel* (Gen. 31:13), sometimes with *El* apparently a proper name as in *El Elohe Israel* (Gen. 33:20) and *El Elohe Abhika* (Gen. 46:3), even sometimes in the early period the various *Baals* (surviving in the names of Saul's son *Ish-Baal* and grandson *Meri-Baal* (II Sam. 2:8-10; 4:4), both of which were editorially altered later to conceal the presence of the name of *Baal* in the names of Saul's own family; also note Judges

⁴ Edet, F: "The Concept of God in African Traditional Religion", *Sophia: An African Journal of Theology*, vol. 12, n. 1, 2009.

6:32, where the hero *Jerub-Baal* is identified with Gideon and the name is given an anti-Baal significance!), as well as (of course!) the god from the mountain or the desert, *Yahweh*, brought in by the Joseph tribes and their Mosaic traditions. It is interesting to note the type of welding of the traditions where the names of the gods are concerned which appears in Ex. 6:3.

Echoes of Canaanite religious myth in some of the Israelite prophecies are also proofs of religious pluralism in the Bible. Isa 27:1 is a dramatic example. Boadt explains that it is borrowed from the Baal epic⁵. Ps. 74:13-14 has similar idea. Isaiah 51:9-10 borrows the same image to describe God's victory over the Egyptians in the exodus. The metaphor of divine victory over the forces of evil, personified as the gods of the Sea or Death, lies behind other passages such as Job 41 and its description of Leviathan, Ps 89,9-10 and its praise of 'God's' might, and Isaiah 38:9-19 with its victory hymn over the power of death. Boadt noted that while rejecting the multiple gods and the nature myths of Canaan, Israel felt itself free to use many of the themes to enhance the power of Yahweh. Thus, Yahweh is sometimes called Baal (Lord) over the earth (Hos 2:16) or even EL (Isa 14:13). Ps 29 is probably a poem to the storm god Baal taken over by Israel and applied to Yahweh in order to emphasize that Yahweh and Baal rule creation.

Lambert argues that ancient Israel being part of Ancient Near East could not have been shielded from the polytheistic culture characterizing the ANE⁶. For Albright⁷ and Day⁸, since Canaan shaped Israel into nationhood and Canaan was known for her many gods, there is no way Israel who grew in and from her could not have had polytheistic tendencies. Smith underscores this position when he documents that the frequency of Baal and Asherah in occurrence in the OT demonstrates the polytheistic undertone of the ancient Israel⁹. Coogan believes that while *El* gave existence to everything that is, Asherah was worshipped as next in command¹⁰. This is also the position of Johnson when he writes that till 5th Century B.C. Israel had pantheon with Yahweh as the chief deity among others¹¹. Sitali saw Baal as 'Lord' and worshipped in many places though *El* remained the head¹².

Particularly striking is the word used in the OT when the bible speaks of 'ONE GOD'. In Deut 6:4 for example we read: *šūma` yiSrā`el yhw`h `élöhē`nū yhw`h `eHäd* . . There are two words for the numeral 'one' –*yäHäd* or *'eHäd*. The former is absolute oneness and admits of no plurality. The latter, is a compound unity meaning 'one of others. Interestingly, the OT uses the second one when referring to one God as in Deut 6:4 above and also Zech 14:9. *'eHäd* can also mean 'another'. Deut 6:4 *šūma` yiSrā`el yhw`h `élöhē`nū yhw`h `eHäd* is generally translated as 'Hear Oh Israel, God our God is one God' to reflect what we believe to be Israelite

⁵ L. Boadt: *Reading the Old Testament. An Introduction*. New York: Paulist Press, 1984.

⁶ W.G. Lambert: "The Historical Development of the Mesopotamian Pantheon: A Study in Sophisticated Pantheism". In Hans Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts (eds). *Unity and Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature and Religion of the Ancient Near East*. (Pp. 191-200). Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1975.

⁷ N. F. Albright: *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.

⁸ J. Day: *Yahweh and the gods and goddesses of Canaan*. New York. Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.

⁹ M.S. Smith, M. S: *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹⁰ M.P. Coogan: *Stories from Ancient Canaan*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978.

¹¹ A.R. Johnson: *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God*. Cardiff: University of Wales, 1961.

¹² Sitali, S. A. (2014). *Jewish Monotheism: The Exclusivity of Yahweh in Persian Period Yehud (539-333BCE)*. A Thesis at Trinity Western University, Langley, Canada. Retrieved November, 2015, from https://www.twu.ca/library/theses/266698_pdf_257524_EAFDDEFA-AF12-11E3-A68D-7F522E1BA5B1_sitali_a.pdf

monotheism but actually the translation could also be ‘Hear Oh Israel, God of our gods is another God’ giving the sense of the pluralism that though there are other gods, they must love the Big God more with all their heart. Some scholars like Summerell understands *eHād* as indicative of Yahweh’s otherness¹³. It is, however, the strong belief of the author that from linguistic perspective as seen above and from evidences based on biblical texts, the word credits the acknowledgement of Yahweh as God in the midst of others. The Israelites are only demanded to follow only Yahweh and not the other gods belonging to other nations around them. Some biblical texts give credence to the researcher’s observation when it talks of God and other gods:

1. “Who is like you among the gods [*elim*], Yahweh?” (Exod. 15:11)
2. “What god (*el*) is there in the heaven or on the earth who can do according to your works and according to your mighty deeds?” (Deut. 3:24)
3. “O Yahweh, God of Israel, there is no god (*elohim*) like you in the heavens above or on the earth beneath” (1 Kgs. 8:23).
4. “For you, O Yahweh, are most high over all the earth. You are highly exalted above all gods (*Elohim*)” (Psalm 97:9).

Biblical writers also assign unique qualities to Yahweh. Yahweh is:

- All-powerful (Jer. 32:17, 27; Pss. 72:18; 115:3)
- Sovereign king over the other *elohim* (Psa. 95:3; Dan. 4:35; 1 Kgs. 22:19)
- Creator of the other members of his host-council (Psa. 148:1–5; Neh. 9:6; cf. Job 38:7; Deut. 4:19–20; 17:3; 29:25–26; 32:17; Jas. 1:17)
- The lone *elohim* who deserves worship from the other *elohim* (Psa. 29:1).

Arguing from similar point of view, Heiser holds that while the word *elohim* is plural in form, its meaning can be either plural or singular. Most often (over 2,000 times) in the Hebrew Bible *elohim* is rendered singular in reference to the God of Israel. We have words like this in English. For example, the word sheep can be either singular or plural. When we see “sheep” by itself, we don’t know if we should think of one sheep or a flock of sheep. If we put “sheep” into a sentence (“The sheep is lost”), we know that only one sheep is meant since the verb requires a singular subject. Likewise, “The sheep are lost” informs us that the status of more than one sheep is being discussed. Grammar guides us. It’s the same with Hebrew. Psalm 82:1 is especially interesting since *elohim* occurs twice in that single verse. In Psalm 82:1, the first *elohim* must be singular, since the Hebrew grammar has the word as the subject of a singular verbal form (“stands”). The second *elohim* must be plural, since the preposition in front of it (“in the midst of”) requires more than one. You can’t be “in the midst of” one. The preposition calls for a group—as does the earlier noun, assembly. The meaning of the verse is inescapable: the singular *elohim* of Israel presides over an assembly of *elohim*¹⁴.

¹³ Orrin F. Summerell, *The Otherness of God* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 190-205.

¹⁴ M.S. Heiser: *The Unseen Realm: Rediscovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*. New York: Lextam Press, 2015.

Further, E.C. Hobbes observes that Political unification under David and under his son Solomon might have posed a threat to the astonishing pluralism exhibited prior to the monarchy; but while centralization of political power in the king and in the city Jerusalem combined with the beginnings of religious centralization in the Temple, a remarkable openness to the diversity must have remained, an openness which we witness in the composition of the great epic we call "J", probably written during the reign of Solomon. Here the diversities of tradition, cultus, gods, and shrines are brought into a complex unity (probably paralleling the political unity under Solomon) which nevertheless allows each tradition its own place and witness. Instead of suppression of variety and diversity, we have appreciation of them, and appropriation of what each strand can offer to the larger, complex whole. The great contribution of J with respect to pluralism is that he managed to hold all these diversities together by means of two things alone: the construction of a genealogical scheme which united all the various traditions into one family's heritage, and the claim that Yahweh alone was Israel's God, the other gods being only variant names for his worship and self-revelation. The latter is a stroke of genius if it is hoped to permit pluralism to continue; the commoner course would have been to denounce all the other gods in the tradition as bogus or as alien, and demand allegiance to Yahweh alone. But J arranged for another possibility to predominate: the possibility of creating the unity of the Israelite society in terms of faith in Yahweh as Lord of history, who can permit diversity in names, shrines, cultus, traditions, and all the rest, but who unites his people into one complex whole in terms of their history, a common history under Yahweh's invincible guidance. It should be noted that J is neither tolerant of false gods nor indifferent to them. Rather, he comprehends them, in the main, even absorbing the Els and the Baals into the larger and greater deity of Yahweh, and their worship into the larger unity of the worship of Israel¹⁵.

Again, the division of the kingdom after the death of Solomon threatened the unity envisioned by J. Yahwism was projected as exclusivity, Israel a nation under one God. This is obvious in the prophecies by Elijah and Elisha who denounced other gods as mere toleration and infidelity (cf. 1Kgs 18). However, the rise of the 8th century prophets passes another message on the possibility of understanding Israel as a nation under one God whose unity is understood not in terms of a single shrine, tradition, cultus, or even name, but rather as an ethical unity. The prophets demanded fidelity to Yahweh in the sense of responsible and moral behaviour within a development of variety of cultures and special interests within the one society, so long as none of them were developed at the expense of the others or well-being of the people in the society. An Elijah might tear down the altars of the Baals, but an Amos would stand at the altar and demand righteous behaviour by the powerful and rich. For Isaiah in his universality, Cyrus the King of Persia is God's servant (Isa 45:1; cf. Isa 44:28). The same King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem (Ezra 5:13). Cyrus even claimed in 2Chr 36:22 that God of heaven spoke to him and ordered him to rebuild the house of God at Jerusalem. It must be noted that Cyrus was a pagan and probably did not believe in the Yahweh of Israel. It is therefore a proof of pluralism that the same God could see him as his servant and even speak to him. This simply implies that when the prophets speak of fidelity to Yahweh, it is not in exclusivity of worship or belief but a demand for a responsible and moral behaviour.

Also, Israel herself is to be the Servant whose service and suffering accomplish the redemption of the nations, who together will form the one society under Yahweh, despite their many backgrounds and traditions and worships. His healing or salvation will reach to the end of the earth, signalled by the new Exodus which is about to come to pass. Outsiders of all sorts--

¹⁵ The views above are taken extensively from E.C. Hobbes: *Theological and Religious Pluralism: Pluralism in the Biblical Context*.

foreigners, eunuchs, outcasts--will be gathered into the new, greater Israel, according to the school of this great prophet (Isa 56:3-8). The unity sought is a unity of righteousness, an ethical unity, not a suppression of dissent to create a unity of all expression (Isa 59:1-21).

Ezra and Nehemiah were anti-indifferentism. They upheld exclusionism to Yahweh and opposed what neighbouring nations believed in. However, their anti-pluralism was countered by such magnificent writings as Ruth and Jonah, which envision pluralism's practice, whether historical or fictional.

The New Testament is not so much different but since the epoch covered is not too long, it is difficult to see the problem as glaring as in the OT. A reading of the NT gives one the impression that Christianity existed as a group with a totally new and different tradition and practice; and that what is called orthodoxy is nothing but the attempt of a given community to suppress other ones. For instance, the primacy of Peter upheld by the Synoptics especially Matthew and Mark is shadowy in the Fourth Gospel in the face of the more prosperous community of the beloved disciple. Efforts made by the Jerusalem church to suppress the Pauline "deviation" failed, perhaps partly because of the death of its original leaders and perhaps partly because of the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70. But the pluralism represented in the Pauline churches, and so eloquently defended by Paul himself against efforts to require uniformity of practice within the churches, continued to be attacked, and in the end it lost out to the efforts of other churches, especially that of Rome, to establish one standard of belief, practice, and tradition (its own) as "orthodox."

Disparities in some theological teachings of the NT also manifest this pluralistic tendency. Differences of Christology abounded in the early church. The so-called "Christological titles" scarcely conceal the plurality of modes of doing theology, both in the Palestinian church and in the Hellenistic church of the first century. Sometimes the titles in one community simply did not make sense in another. For example, the title *Messiah* or *Christ* soon became nothing but a proper name in Hellenistic circles, or were understood quite differently. *Kurios* in Jewish circles would probably have conveyed "Yahweh," since it is the LXX translation thereof. In Hellenistic circles it might simply mean "master," or it could mean the "Lord" of the mystery religion, or underwent a sea-change in meaning. *Son of God* in the Old Testament means "Israel," or (as representing Israel) the king of Israel; but in Hellenistic culture it meant at the very least a *theōs aner*, and at most a demi-god begotten by a god of a woman, or perhaps at first lost its meaning only to be revived in a transformed sense. *Son of Man*, would be meaningless after the shift to Hellenistic culture, but was perhaps revived by Mark in the sense of "Suffering Servant," "Crucified One," as a polemic supporting Pauline Christianity against the triumphalist Christology which claimed the Twelve and especially Peter as authority and support.

A critical perusal of Acts of the Apostles indicates that great differences existed as to the extent to which Christianity should understand itself as related to the religion of Judaism. The early Jerusalem community apparently felt itself to be a genuine part of Judaism, and behaved accordingly, and even after this became impossible because of conflict with Jewish leaders, allegiance to the norms of Judaism was deep e.g., dietary laws, circumcision. The Pauline churches apparently were heavily rooted among the *foboumenoi ton theon*, the Gentile fringe attending the synagogues but declining to become proselytes, and as a result were much freer in their attitudes toward the Jewish connections of Christianity. The more "gnostic" churches not only felt themselves totally free of the Old Testament and Judaism, but felt or came to feel that Judaism and the Old Testament were hostile to (and even antithetical to) the Gospel and

Christianity. Paul's churches were subjected to vigorous efforts on the part of both "Jewish" and "gnostic" sympathizers to win their adherence, away from Paul's own pluralist position leading to the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15.

The divergencies represented by the four canonical gospels each of which was held in high esteem by a community are evident proof of pluralism in the NT. The Fourth gospel in particular appears to stand almost totally aloof from the other three gospels. Whereas the other gospels tend to uphold Christology from below, the Fourth gospel proposes Christology from above. In the passion narrative, the other three present Jesus as a suffering and helpless servant, the Fourth gospel posits a triumphalist Jesus in whom suffering is at the same time a glorification.

Outside the gospels and Acts, the pluralism is not less noticeable. The letters of John seem to be structured against some opponents. Paul in his letter to the Galatians speaks of how he castigated Peter. Part of the letters to the Corinthians seem to be addressed to some members who seem to be syncretic. In second letter of St. Peter, we see him indulging in the ancient rhetoric of charging that his opponents in belief are of course wholly immoral and dissolute as well. They are not merely wrong, but they are wicked and sinful.

Thus, the overall picture we get from both the OT and NT is that there was religious pluralism except that the NT seems to interpret it to be indulgence into a heresy while the OT was more tolerant and indifferent especially from after the exile.

Pluralism as Part of Faith Expression

The preceding discussion reveals that pluralism is not simply obtainable in the history of the Biblical community. It appears to be something quite basic and essential to the faith of the community. In other words, it is intentional, and thus there is at least implicitly a doctrine, concept, or policy of pluralism in its history. Obviously, if the concept of pluralism as such is new in our century, we are not likely to find it spelled out in so many words within the text of the Bible. It is wrong to explain away pluralism as something consciously permitted in ancient Israel in order to take over the land of Canaan. This explanation could be plausible if we do not have longer history of Israel beyond the 9th century B.C. It is on record that the name Yahweh gained particular reverence sometime after the exile. Words like Adonai or Elohim were used as substitutes. Such reverence might have been prompted by a religious scruple or by the fear that by being named, the Lord might seem to be put on a par with pagan deities, who also had personal names¹⁶.

Hobbes contends that the great diversity which obtained in the early stages of Israel's history is treated by J, not as an unfortunate rampant growth of heresy, but as a complex unity under the sovereignty of Yahweh. This unity was conceived of historically, rather than simply or primarily as natural; that is, the unity was not one of a grand design whose parts are present at any one time, but it was instead one which was being accomplished historically, in time, as the affairs of men were brought into line with the purposes of Yahweh. All of the various parts of society and various groups contribute to the larger future, which ultimately is the reign of Yahweh in righteousness over all the earth. That reign is implicit in the beginnings of mankind of all races, as shown in the notice of Gen. 4:26: already in the time of Adam's son Seth, men

¹⁶ "Yahweh" *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. XIV. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967, pp. 1064-1065.

began to worship Yahweh. J's comprehension of complexity into the unity of Yahweh's reign is carried forward by E, two centuries later, who reflects some of the ethical emphasis of his contemporary prophets Amos and Hosea (e.g., note his magnificent conclusion to the Joseph cycle, Gen. 50:20, where even the evil intentions of men are taken up into God's purposes of good). And while J does not see the use of various names of God as a matter of progressive revelation, as P centuries later does (e.g., Ex. 6:3), instead simply combining his traditions as all involving worship of Yahweh, he nonetheless unhesitatingly accepts and approves the diverse traditions and shrines that were affirmed in his time (e.g., J's version of the tradition of Jacob at Bethel, Gen. 28:10, 13-16, 19). The history of Israel continued to be written along such pluralist lines, comprehending diversity under the larger historical purposes of God, as shown by E's version and P's final version. The Deuteronomists in some sense may represent a backward move, in their intolerance of most forms of diversity (note the Josianic reform of 622 B.C.C. and its connection with Deuteronomy, which was both ultra-nationalistic and hyper-orthodox, suppressing "heresy" with a vengeance); in their favour may be observed the humaneness of their version of the laws, no doubt influenced by the ethical prophets during the century preceding their compilation. However, "ethical" is not the same as "pluralist," and it must be conceded that Deuteronomic history represents a rather different concept than the pluralism noted in J, E, and P¹⁷.

The Second-Isaiah describes the future as Yahweh intended it. He is to be Yahweh not simply for the Jews but for all the nations. Ruth and Jonah testify to the presence of pluralism represented in the great histories and in Second-Isaiah.

A look at the quotidian life of average Israelite family depict that much as Yahweh remained a national God with unmistakable stamp on her political life as a society, he made little impact on the religious everyday life of the families because of internal religious pluralism. The personal names and individual laments in ancient Israel give credence to this. Rainer Albertz observes that there are few personal names which refer to the history of the people. In the early period we have *'Ikabod* in ISam 4:19-22 after the loss of the Ark and *Š^ekanyā* (Yahweh has taken up his abode) in Neh 3:29 after the rebuilding of the Temple. There are also few symbolic prophetic names. Apart from these, Yahweh is not seen as element in the names of children. In early list of names in Num 1:5-15 only *El*, *Shaddai* and *Šur* appear, and in the narratives of the book of Judges *Baal* (Judges 6:32) and *'Anat* (Judges 3:31; 5:6). Other than these, El dominate the names. The period before the state and early Monarchy has plurality in dominance. Example is Paul's family. Affinity to family god is evident in his family. His grandfather was called 'Abi'el, his father-in-law 'Aḥima'az, his wife 'Aḥino'am, his cousin 'Abner and his third son 'Abinādāb. His first son has name containing Yahweh (Jonathan). But then his second son is called Eshbaal and the fourth one has a Canaanite type of name Malkishua. Even Jonathan's son was called Meeribaal. It was only after the early Monarchy that Yahweh equalled El in nomenclature. It came up in the majority from late Monarchy like in the case of Josiah and only because of movement from plurality to conformity. One can conclude from this rare occurrence of names referring to Yahweh that for a long time the central religious experiences of Israel had no decisive significance for the religious life of the Israelite families. People had their own treasury of religious experiences, experiences of divine blessing, divine protection and divine salvation, which they had already had for long with their family gods; such that even when Yahweh found his way into Israelite personal names, he did not add

¹⁷ E.C. Hobbes: *Theological and Religious Pluralism: Pluralism in the Biblical Context*.

anything essentially new to this symbolic world of the family¹⁸. Individual Psalms of lament like Pss 22:5-6; 143:5; 77 also give similar impression.

Rainer Albertz notes further that alongside the public sanctuaries, there were also house cults. He cites the Megiddo archaeological finding as an example. Here, in the courtyard of a tenth-century private house, a regular small house chapel was found, consisting of two small limestone horned altars, two cult stands, a number of goblets, shells and canes; there is also a cane with numerous holes for incensing. This is just one among many similar findings indicating the factuality of pluralism in the ANE and OT.

The New Testament, as we have seen, exhibits a great diversity in early Christianity with respect to many aspects of belief and practice. Often the diversity of beliefs was attacked as a heresy. However, this paper submits that diversity of "ethnic, racial, religious, and social groups" found approval or at least acceptance by the mainstream of New Testament authors. What Jesus' attitude was is subject to so much dispute about historical methods that it would be foolish for this paper to venture a reconstruction. But we do have such authors as the Evangelists and Paul lying before us in their works, and their position seems rather clear. Explorations into the different books of the NT makes this point more factual.

The author of the gospel of Matthew is evidently more legalistic and Judaic than most other NT books and so represents the narrower forms of early church theology. It is interesting to see that he upholds good deeds as proof of righteousness (Matt 25:31-46) than just profession of belief in God (Matt 7:21). He goes further in Matt 7:22-23 to warn that prophets, exorcists and miracle workers in Christ's name may be excluded from the kingdom if they are not doers of the will of God. Thus, the "common community" within which diversity may occur is clearly not one of "orthodoxy," but one of behaviour, a community which does the will of the Father by loving and caring for the weak and helpless and needy.

Mark's Gospel though evidently Pauline still shows the tradition that Jesus is not so much interested in uniformity of belief or confession as in behaviour or living. In Mark 8:27-33ff despite Peter's confession, Jesus still rebuked him as Satan for not being on God's side. It is not enough for him to profess, he ought to teach the suffering of the Son of Man. The teachings about clean and unclean food and the case of the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7 clearly manifest Jesus' aversion for restrictions based on legal traditions, ritual codes, race, religion and even family (cf. also Mark 3:31-35). In Mark 9:49-50 John's desire to forbid a non-apostolic member from casting out devil in Jesus' name because he is not one of them was met with repudiation from Jesus - "He that is not against you is for you".

In Luke-Acts, the situation is even more glaring. He maintains that many shall come from the East and West and sit with Abraham at table while the children of the covenant would be cast away. The demand by James and John to call down fire against the Samaritans was met with rebuke by Jesus (Luke 9:51-56). The parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector (Luke 19:9-14) also expresses inherent toleration of pluralism. The community is not to be limited to those who "follow with us"; and vengeance against those who refuse to welcome Jesus is forbidden, even rebuked. In Acts there is a tendency to offer compromise as a solution to diversities which plague the community overmuch, and to blur distinctions and differences. But even there, Luke sees a possibility of more than one form of piety and cultus, at least a difference between what

¹⁸ A. Rainer: A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period, vol. 1, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994.

is laid on Jews and what is laid on Gentiles (put into the mouth of James), a possibility which is worked out at the "Apostolic Council" (Acts 15).

The situation in the Fourth Gospel is more complex, and cannot be handled by means of citing traditions he transmits. Perhaps it will suffice to point out that on one hand John makes a clear distinction between the community of Jesus and the "world" (here *kosmos*), as in 15:18-25, but on the other hand he presents God as aiming at the salvation of the "world" through the sending of Jesus (3:16f.). He clearly does not envision any sort of "common community" between the church and the world. Yet he sees the unity of the church to be an organic unity of love, rather than one which requires suppression of diversity in belief and practice. Jesus has other sheep, not of this fold, to be united into one flock under one shepherd (10:16), who will become one through the proclamation of the word (17:20f.); a oneness reflecting the unity of Jesus with the Father, which is a oneness of love (17:22-26). And in the school of John, it is those who have left us who are not of us, for if they were of us, they would not have left! (I John 2:19); notice that it is not a matter of excluding the diverse elements, but a matter of their departing our community. The unity of the community is presented as an organic one, like a vine and branches; and the life of the vine is interpreted as love (15:1-17), not common practice of belief or race or social group.

Paul permits diversities within community. He devotes I Corinthians to this. He repudiates schism which is opposite of pluralism but interprets exclusion as sinful. The evil of the Corinthian church was schism and not pluralism. Paul explains in ICor 12 that the unity of the body of Christ, which is the church, is an organic one, like a true body, which has a diversity of members, organs, gifts, practices, responsibilities, and so on. To set one's own group (or self) against the others as superior or even as alone Christian is to fracture the body of Christ. And the way in which the body is knit together is love, described in terms which read like a description of Jesus as Paul perceives him. The other writings of Paul press the same theme. Romans, written to a powerful church Paul did not know first-hand, nonetheless includes discussions of the need for allowance of diversity in cultic practices. Galatians, fulminating against a perversion of Paul's Gospel, is directed against those who would bring every Christian under one set of requirements and practice, a move which Paul sees as the end of the community named by the name of Christ.

Since plurality is a reality both in the Old and New Testaments, what is expected of the Church of God in the face of similar challenges today? St. Paul, the most prolific writer of the NT times was able to address the issue in his own time. The author of Luke-Acts has his own position too. The researcher just picked Acts 10:27-28.34 as a litmus paper on possible solution to a problem that is challenging the mystical body of Christ today.

An Exegesis of Acts 10:27-28.34

This small section is part of a pericope dealing with Peter's visit to the house of Cornelius from Joppa (Acts 10:23-48) which is still part of a larger chapter beginning with Peter's mystical experience in Joppa (Acts 10:1-22) and his eventual departure for the house of Cornelius, the Gentile God-fearing man on invitation.

The Greek version of Acts 10:27-28.34 reads:

Kai sunomilōn auto eisēlthen kai euriskei sunelēluthotas pollous, efē te pros autous, Humeis epistasthe hōs athemiton estin andri Ioudaiō

kollasthai ē proserchesthai allofulō. Kamoi ho Theos edixen mēdena koinon ē akatharton legein anthrōpon. ... Anoixas de Petros to stoma eipen, Ep'alētheias katalambanomai hoti ouk estin prosōpolēmtēs ho Theos,

The text has some textual problems. In v. 28, D mae inserted beltion. The fact that the insertion is attested in very few and recent manuscripts, makes its originality very doubtful. Again, just before allofulō, $\hat{\iota}^{50}$ D sy^p inserted andri while $\hat{\iota}^{74}$ a A E 945. 1739. 1891 *pc* transposed *ho Theos edixen*. The researcher's sample text is witnessed in $\hat{\iota}^{50}$ B C (D) Y 33^{vid} Ū Ir^{lat}. Application of the principle of lectio difficilior and the age of the witnessing manuscripts make the text used probably closer to the original.

After considering these textual issues, this paper posits a working translation of the passage thus:

And talking with him he entered and finds many gathered, so he says to them, 'you know how unlawful it is to a Jewish man to join or come to a foreigner. But to me God shows that no one is to call a man common or unclean'. ... Now Peter opening the mouth said, 'on the basis of truth, I understand that God shows no partiality'.

Sunomilōn is present participle singular referring to Cornelius who invited Peter. Its present aspect carries the force of continuity meaning that as he was conversing with him, he probably recollected the vision he had shortly before the visitors came, he did not delay, he went in with him. The immediacy in taking action is enforced by *eisēlthen* in the aorist with an aspect of an action taken once and for all. In other words, Peter did not allow his Jewish credal bias to hold him back. He was not in doubt that God was up for something. He left immediately as soon as the visitors from Cornelius' house came to him. The haste was not deterred by the site of Cornelius who bowed before him, a gesture meant for someone divine or angelic¹⁹. The gathering of the many people put in the perfect active participle (*sunelēluthotas*) expresses the desire of the people. The perfect participle indicates that they were already there in waiting with the hope that Peter would not only come but must have something to say²⁰. The urgency and seriousness of his message is enforced by the Luke's use of the word *athemitos*. Oerke explains that this word is numbered with other words in 1Pet 4:3 as pagan evils²¹. It simply means that ordinarily Peter would not be in their midst. It was not customary or legal to do that but the force of his work as an apostle breaks such artificial and man-made barriers and enhances his willingness to accept the gentiles²². The people gathered must have been familiar with the reserve of the Jews in the presence of strangers. They knew of their religious intolerance; they knew too of the religious wall which they had built around themselves. Peter seized upon this thought and explained to them the reason why he was in their midst. His concern was no longer about the permissible or forbidden food but the more essential problem of a world-wide mission. The Jewish distinction between clean and unclean no longer exists

¹⁹ R.E. Brown et al.: "The New Testament and Topical Articles" in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, vol. II. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, pp. 188-189.

²⁰ H. Balz: "sunerchomai" in *EDNT*, H. Balz and G. Schneider ed., vol. 3, Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, pp. 304-305.

²¹ Oerke: "athemitos" in *TDNT*, K. Gerhard ed., vol. 1. Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p.166.

²² R.E. Brown et al.: "The New Testament and Topical Articles" in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, vol. II. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, pp. 188-189.

for him²³. *Mēdena koinon ē akatharton legein anthrōpon* demonstrates Luke's conclusion about clean and unclean people. This is seen again in Acts 11:9 and 15:9.

Ep'alētheias katalambanomai hoti ouk estin prosōpolēmtēs ho Theos serves both as an introduction and also relates the discourse to the situation in which Peter finds himself. *Hoti ouk estin prosōpolēmtēs ho Theos* is an allusion to Deut 10:17 which denies that God respects persons or accepts bribes (cf. Lev 19:15). The adjective *prosōpolēmtēs* along with its related forms occurs only in the LXX and NT. It is fashioned from the Hebrew *pānim nāsā* meaning "lift up the face" (of a humiliated suppliant or suitor). The expression refers to bribery and corruption, but Peter asserts that nothing like this is found in God, especially in the matter of salvation available to Jews and Greeks (cf. Rom 2:10-11). The continuation of his speech in v. 35 shows that righteousness is not a strict reserve of the Jews but could be practiced by all.

Religious Pluralism in Nigeria

Nigeria is considered a secular state with multi-religions. Dominant amongst these myriad religious groups are Muslims, Christians and Traditional Religionists. The intolerant attitude amongst these religions have made mutual and peaceful coexistence almost impossible in Nigeria. Often, some people believe that tribal differences is the main cause of unrest in Nigeria. The author holds a different position. Nigeria is not the only nation with different tribes. The United States of America, Ghana in Africa, Kenya etc have different tribes making up one country and yet they have enjoyed relative peace. If Nigeria's case is different, then, the cause of the uneasy calm goes beyond tribal differences. The author sees religious intolerance as the remote cause of Nigeria's political impasse. He posits religious pluralism as practiced in Bible as a possible solution. In this paper, "Beyond the bias of credal walls: A study of Acts 10:27-28.34", the researcher is concerned about the reality of pluralism in the bible and how it was managed. It is the belief of the researcher that an understanding of the reality of pluralism in the bible and its management will help the Churches of today in Nigeria go beyond the conflicts of partisanship, divisional tendencies and sociological schism which has hitherto prevented the Churches from pressing forward into the domain of non-conformists. The paper has proven the reality of pluralism both in the OT and in the NT. Acceptance of Yahweh as Israel's national God did not obliterate the existence of family gods evidenced in the names given before the exile. In the NT, Jesus focused on his mission irrespective of other religious affiliations in his time. The Apostles maintained the same toleration stance and did not fail to carry on their mission once the opportunity calls. The action of Peter in Acts 10:27-28.34 is a perfect example. He did not allow his Jewish background and non-accommodating attitude to deter him from his evangelistic mission to the gentiles. The scene was repeated frequently throughout the history of the Christian missions. The researcher enjoins on the Churches especially the Churches in Africa, both Christian and non-christian to go beyond the credal bias of what the missionaries encountered within the framework of African Traditional Religion and which they misconstrued as polytheistic. They wrongly thought that Africa has no knowledge of Supreme Being²⁴. Genuine spirituality and a benevolent humanity are to be found in most religious practices including African. If the Churches penetrate with this understanding, they will discover they have a ploughed and fertile ground more receptive to the gospel message in many respects than ever imagined. The fact remains that Africans want

²³ J. Kürzinger: *The Acts of the Apostles* vol. 1, New York: Herder and Herder, 1969.

²⁴ E. Ekeke and C. Ekeokpara: "God, Divinity and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology", *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences*, vol. 1 n. 10, pp. 209-218.

to be Christians or muslims without losing their African identity²⁵. Only a recognition of this and tolerant attitude toward pluralism will help since worship of God is central to African Religion²⁶. Again, instead of attacking and condemning other sects, denominations and beliefs, Churches must learn to tolerate each other without losing sight of their evangelizing mission. If Churches develop this positive attitude towards each other, peace is sure to reign and understanding of each other through dialogue will surely hold sway.

Conclusion

The bible is replete with religious pluralism both in the Old and New Testaments. Tolerance and acceptance of each other were the solutions to possible misunderstandings. In situations where this was not upheld, destructive criticisms, war, and destructions were the order of the day. The churches in Africa and Nigeria in particular must learn to accept each other if there is bound to be peace, understanding and development and this is the advantage of religious pluralism. No one has gone to heaven to see God. God is also the creator and father of all. He does not belong exclusively to any sect, belief or denomination. No religious body can claim absolutism to transcendental truths. Every religious belief has something good about it. It is unfortunate that what ought to bring people closer together in understanding each other appears to be the remote agent of division, rancor, intolerance, terrorism and bigotry people experience in different countries especially in Africa. This paper believes that the moment different religious groups begin to appreciate what is good in the other, there will be tolerance, peace, understanding and love. This will be possible when each admits of her limitedness and possible complementarity in the tolerance of pluralism of religions.

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²⁵ Jele, S.M. and Johan, B: "Critical Analysis on African Traditional Religion and Trinity", *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, vol. 69 n. 1, 2013.

²⁶ Sarauta, J.K: *The Worship of God in African Traditional Religion. A Nigerian Perspective*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1997.

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