

# Lessons on Intra-Religious Dialogue: The Society of Jesus and Contemporary Protestantism in Africa

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**Abstract:** - From the period of the Protestant reformation and Catholic Counter reformation, there have been numerous incidences of antagonism between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Indeed in Africa, the two Christian traditions introduced denominationalism and were always competing for converts. However, Christianity being one religion does not mean the different branches must of necessity compete, but can learn from each other. This paper looks at the lessons that contemporary Protestants can draw from the Society of Jesus, one of the major players in consolidating Roman Catholicism since the reformation period.

**Key Words:** Jesuits, Protestantism, Intra-Religious Dialogue, Mission.

## I. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubting the fact that the Protestant Reformation of the Sixteenth Century shook Western Christianity, and set it on a path of division from which it is still grappling with the effects. The branch of Christianity that has come to be known as Protestantism broke away from Catholicism in ways that were more often than not acrimonious. Catholics and Protestants became antagonists in the race to control the religious life of Europe.

With the onset of the Catholic Counter Reformation emerged the Society of Jesus as a leading protagonist in the “religious strife.” As Michael Hurley (Hurley, 1992) says in the past Protestants could remember Jesuits as dedicated to the undoing of the good work of the Reformation, as the leaders of the Counter Reformation and Jesuits for their part could remember Protestants as their persecutors, oppressors and opponents.

This paper will look at the Jesuit movement with the aim of drawing lessons for contemporary African Protestants. The main question that this paper will seek to answer is, “What lessons can contemporary Protestants in Africa draw from the Jesuit movement?”

## II. THE SOCIETY OF JESUS: A BRIEF HISTORY

The Society of Jesus was founded in 1540 by St. Ignatius Loyola. In the intervening 455 years many Jesuits became renowned for their sanctity, for their scholarship in every conceivable field, for their explorations and discoveries, but especially for their schools (Dyck, 1978).

The Society of Jesus begun when, after a period of intense prayer, Ignatius of Loyola composed the *Spiritual Exercises*, a guidebook to convert the heart and mind to a closer following

of Jesus Christ. On August 15, 1534, at Paris, six young men who had met him at the University of Paris and made a retreat according to the *Spiritual Exercises* joined him in vows of poverty, chastity, and a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. If this last promise did not prove possible, as it did not, they vowed to accept any apostolic work requested by the pope. In 1539 Ignatius drafted the first outline of the order’s organization, which Pope Paul III approved on September 27, 1540 (“Jesuit: Religious Order,” 2014).

The society grew rapidly, and it quickly assumed a prominent role in the Counter-Reformation defense and revival of Catholicism. Almost from the beginning, education and scholarship became the society’s principal work. The early Jesuits, however, also produced preachers and catechists who devoted themselves to the care of the young, the sick, prisoners, prostitutes, and soldiers; they also were often called upon to undertake the controversial task of confessor to many of the royal and ruling families of Europe. The society entered the foreign mission field within months of its founding as Ignatius sent Saint Francis Xavier, his most gifted companion, and three others to the East. More Jesuits were to be involved in missionary work than in any other activity, save education. By the time of Ignatius’s death in 1556, about 1,000 Jesuits were already working throughout Europe and in Asia, Africa, and the Americas (“Jesuit: Religious Order,” 2014).

In 1773 Pope Clement XIV, under pressure especially from the governments of France, Spain, and Portugal, issued a decree abolishing the order. The demand that the Jesuits take up their former work, especially in the field of education and in the missions, became so insistent that in 1814 Pope Pius VII reestablished the society. After it was restored, the order grew to be the largest order of male religious. Work in education on all levels continued to involve more Jesuits than any other activity; however, the number of Jesuits working in the mission fields, especially in Asia and Africa, exceeded that of any other religious order (“Jesuit: Religious Order,” 2014).

## III. JESUITS METHODOLOGIES

The Jesuits have been successful in their activities and aims due to two main reasons. These are cross-cultural missions and education. These will be looked at in turn.

### 3.1 Cross-Cultural Missions

From its earliest days, the Society of Jesus was marked by men going out to non-European cultures to evangelize. Francis Xavier, who lived between 1506 and 1552, was a Paris companion to the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius Loyola. He was one of the first Jesuit missionary to leave Europe, becoming a missionary to India and the Far East. Other Jesuits like Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) in China and Roberto di Nobili (1577-1656) in south India pioneered a new way of evangelization which started as adaptation, but has come to be known as inculturation; a presentation of the gospel in a de-Europeanized way, in terms of the language and culture being approached (Cushner, 1959).

Caitlin Lu (Lu, 2011) notes that:

After living in the southern city of Zhaoqing for two years and immersing himself in local life, Ricci decided on an evangelical strategy with four guiding principles: achieving linguistic and cultural mastery; focusing on how to influence the top echelons of Chinese society, rather than the masses; impressing Chinese literati and officials with the science and technology of the West as a means to pique curiosity in and acceptance of Christianity; and finally, accommodating Chinese values, rituals and customs in an attempt to harmonize them with Christian teachings.

### 3.2 Education

Jesuits did not start out to establish secular schools, that is, to invite the enrollment of students not intending to enter their order as religious. They came to see the necessity of having such schools, however, as a logical and natural development of their purpose. It meant that the Jesuits had to establish their own places of education, first seminaries, then as a by-product, schools (McMahon, 2004). This was a mirror of the beginning of the Jesuit educational system.

This educational system developed especially once Jesuits came up with a guideline known as *Ratio Studiorum* and its use was made mandatory. This document was fundamental in giving structure to the Jesuits and making their educational system, as a system, possibly the greatest in the history of the world. Its colleges, universities, and high schools spread throughout the world (McMahon, 2004).

The *Ratio Studiorum* contains lots of the teachings of Ignatius of Loyola. It is not a theoretical treatise on education; it is a practical code for establishing and conducting schools. It sets up the framework, gives statements of the educational aims and definitive arrangements of classes, schedules, and syllabi, with detailed attention to pedagogical methods and, critically, the formation of teachers. The heart of any school is its teachers, and that has got to be at the top of the list (McMahon, 2004).

## IV. HISTORY OF PROTESTANTISM IN EAST AFRICA: A BRIEF SURVEY

Protestantism in Africa can be traced to the resettlement of freed slaves at the Coast of West Africa, in places like Liberia and Sierra Leone. As Elizabeth Isichei (Isichei, 1995, p. 164) says, the Church Missionary Society (CMS), a missionary arm of the Church of England established a native pastorate in Sierra Leone in 1861. The native pastorate was made up of largely freed slaves from the British Isles and other British territories. In East Africa, the script was almost the same with the CMS establishing Frere-town, located in today's Kisimani area of Mombasa as a center for freed slaves. It is important to note that these were activities of the modern missionary enterprise. Roman Catholics had been active from the sixteenth century with the Portuguese Christianity in Africa, as ably discussed by John Baur in his book *2000 years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History*. However this Christianity did not have a lasting impact as Baur argues that these attempts at planting the church in Africa faced hardships of navigation and climate which decimated and weakened the missionary personnel (Baur, 1998, p. 92).

From the freed slave's settlements, the Protestant Missionaries were able to spread and expand from the Coast to the hinterlands. Protestant missionary societies sent missionaries from the mother churches in Europe to the mission fields in Africa. Baur, for example mentions Thomas Birch Freeman as a pioneer Methodist Missionary in West Africa (Baur, 1998, p. 111). In East Africa, Johann Ludwig Krapf was sent by the CMS and arrived in Mombasa in 1844. With the expansion of these mission enterprises and with colonization and modernity, the missionaries became successful and soon such that by the time most African Countries were attaining independence, their populations were more likely to be Christian.

This is not to say that Roman Catholics were completely out of the picture. On the contrary, Roman Catholic missionaries were very much active. Baur narrates how the Congregation of St. Joseph of Cluny were active in Africa from as early as 1819 (Baur, 1998, p. 135). These sisters were sent to take charge of hospitals in Senegal. But also other missionary orders like the White Fathers, the Holy Ghost Fathers and others were also active. Indeed, in East Africa, the Roman Catholics had been the first to establish a center for freed slaves at Bagamoyo. Jesuits too had been active in Africa evangelizing from as early as 1879, especially in present day Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe (Baur, 1998, pp. 203–208).

## V. LESSONS TO DRAW FROM THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

It can be argued that Protestants and Catholics are so different doctrinally and theologically that there would be nothing one can learn from the other. However, it is important to draw some important insights from the Roman Catholic Church's Decree on Ecumenism. In its introduction, it states that:

The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ Himself were divided. Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature ("Unitatis Redintegratio," 1964).

As this document suggests, division among the Christian Churches contradicts the will of Christ and scandalizes Christ's message. It is thus in the light of this that this paper seeks to answer the question, "what can contemporary Protestants in Africa learn from the Society of Jesus? As has been noted before, the Society of Jesus is one of the main reasons as to the success of the Catholic Counter Reformation. This society has been loved and hated in equal measure by both Catholics and Protestants ("Jesuit: Religious Order," 2014), yet they have been so successful in what they do. The question is why? The answer to this question will provide the answers to the questions presented by the current paper. Jesuits have been very successful in their ministry due to three main reasons: The *Spiritual Exercises*, their model of education and their model of evangelism.

### 5.1 *Spiritual Exercises*

The *Spiritual Exercises* is a compilation of meditations, prayers, and other contemplative practices. The *Spiritual Exercises* is a handbook for use by spiritual directors who accompany and guide people through this dynamic process of reflection. The object is to help people develop their attentiveness, their openness, and their responsiveness to God. In other words, the exercises embody the characteristic themes of Ignatian spirituality. They are organized into four sections or "weeks." These are steps along the path of spiritual freedom and collaboration with God's activity in the world ("Jesuit: Religious Order," 2014).

The *Spiritual Exercises* can be summarized into four sections, each covering a particular week as follows: The first week of the Exercises is a time of reflection on one's life in light of God's boundless love for him or her. The meditations and prayers of the second week teach one how to follow Christ as his disciples. On the third week one meditates on Christ's Last Supper, passion, and death. Lastly, on the Fourth week, one meditates on Jesus' resurrection and his apparitions to his disciples (Loyola, 1964).

Jesuits do the exercises in literally four weeks, during what is known as the 30-day retreat or simply "The Long Retreat." And they do so typically at a retreat house with a spiritual director. But with the growing interest in Ignatian spirituality, many people are practicing the Exercises in other ways (Paprocki, 2004).

One popular version is known as the "Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life," which someone can do while continuing his or her daily responsibilities. This approach often involves an hour a day of prayer and reflection for several months, with regular guidance from a spiritual director (Paprocki, 2004).

This is precisely what contemporary African Protestants can learn; the art of spiritual practice that is based on a sound theological practice. Many Protestants today want to live a spiritual life which is abstract, and has got no tangible benefits to the person. It is the opinion of the current writer that Protestants have adopted a Cartesian Dualism, where the body is contrasted with the soul. God is more interested in the soul, which is spirit and therefore good; the body, which is physical, is seen as insignificant.

This Cartesian philosophy is a product of the 17<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment era. It needs to be contrasted with African philosophy where the person, both body and soul is significant. This is the reason why many people today are interested in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius as it provides a holistic approach to spirituality. Oguagua agrees when he says that today many, including non-Catholics try to grow in the spiritual life by integrating features of Ignatian spirituality (Oguagua, 2005, p. 40).

### 5.2 *Model of Education*

Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the Superior general of the Society of Jesus notes that Jesuit education has been historically successful in many cultures because it is eminently adaptable to the environment of the learner (Kolvenbach, 2005). There are several characteristics of the Jesuit model education, and they are linked to the spiritual vision of Ignatius. This paper will highlight a few of these characteristics.

The first characteristic is the fact that Jesuit education acknowledges God as the author of all reality, all truth and all knowledge. God is present and working in all of creation: in nature, in history and in persons. Since every program in the school can be a means to discover God, all teachers share a responsibility for the religious dimension of the school. However, the integrating factor in the process of discovering God and understanding the true meaning of human life is theology as presented through religious and spiritual education. Religious and spiritual formation is integral to Jesuit education; it is not added to, or separate from, the educational process (Kolvenbach, 2005).

Secondly, Jesuit education is adapted to meet the needs of the country and the culture in which the school is located. This adaptation, while it encourages a healthy patriotism is not an unquestioning acceptance of national values. The goal is always to discover God, present and active in creation and in history. Thirdly, Jesuit education includes formation in values, in attitudes, and in an ability to evaluate criteria; that is, it includes formation of the will. Since knowledge of good and evil, and of the hierarchy of relative goods, is necessary both for the recognition of the different influences that affect

freedom and for the exercise of freedom, education takes place in a moral context: knowledge is joined to virtue (Kolvenbach, 2005).

Clearly, this kind of education is transformative. It should be noted that in African Christianity, the Protestants were among the first to establish schools. William Anderson calls it *kusoma* (reading) Christianity (Anderson, 1977, p. 111). Anderson goes on to say that this kind of Christianity was shaped by prayers, forms of worship, and translations of the Bible, and Christians went to the Church *kusoma* (to read) rather than *kusali* (to pray). This is characterized by Protestant Christianity where prayers in the liturgical books, hymns in hymnals, and the Bible are all read. As can be deduced, Protestant education was meant for the African converts merely to be able to read the Bible. Although Protestants also established other elite schools for the education of the children of the elite and for those who would eventually work in the colonial civil service.

Carmody is of the opinion that in the late nineteenth century, Catholic missionaries to Africa gradually realized the school's potential for converts and thus built schools as a new mode of evangelizing. Protestant missionaries in Africa had done this earlier because they perceived a need for basic literacy. If one were to become a convert, one needed to be able to read the Bible. From this perspective, the school also featured in economic development for people such as David Livingstone who placed commerce or economic development before Christianity and setting up churches (Carmody, 2012).

Anderson argues that the biggest failure of *kusoma* Christianity was that it failed to meet the spiritual questions and needs that Africans felt (Anderson, 1977, p. 118). He goes on to say that it simply taught a new faith and a new worship without dealing realistically with the African religious experience. However, it had one positive outcome, if it can be called that. His is the fact that, with Africans being able to read the scriptures for themselves, they discovered the holy Spirit, and with that there was the emergence of the African Instituted Churches, most of which emphasized on a practical spirituality.

Today, most of the Protestant schools have been handed over to the government, and Protestants are missing an opportunity to shape the minds of the future leaders of society. In its encounter with modernity, Protestant schools, save for Universities, have become increasingly under state control with the result that conversion became progressively

marginalized. Perhaps, they had better take a cue from the Society of Jesus and prepare a model of education which is holistic.

Jesuit Education is based on the Ignatian pedagogy which embodies five key teaching elements: Context, Experience, Reflection, Action, and Evaluation (Kolvenbach, 2005). Protestant education in Africa needs to borrow a leaf from the Jesuit model in order to be effective. This will stem the tide of Christian Voyeurism where Christians move from Church to Church in the attempt to find spiritual fulfillment, because they did not have a firm spiritual foundation.

## VI. CONCLUSION

There is much that Christians can learn from each other. In the aspects of spiritual formation, Protestants can learn a lot from the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, as well as the model of education so well developed and practiced by the Society of Jesus.

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