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On Denominationalism and Inter-Denominationality: Discerning the Signs of the Times in Nigerian Christianity

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ABSTRACT

At this stage of Christianity in Nigeria, the question: “why do we fight with each other?” is not just relevant but cogent. Since the 1880s when Christianity arrived the southern part of Nigeria, there has been rivalry among the Christian denominations – from the struggle for territorial and numerical dominance, to antagonism in educational, political and social spheres. Sadly, this disunity has weakened Christianity as a force to check the excesses of the government and the lopsided policies that are not in the interest of the largely Christian populace. While Christians bicker and betray each other for denominational gains, the whole nation decays to the detriment of all. In this article, we exposed how Christianity came as denominations in Nigeria, provided a critical appraisal of denominationality and the ills of denominationalism. Then, we proffered inter-denominationality (not denominationalism) as the preferable orientation from denominationality for a better Christian relationality in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS

Christianity; church; denominations; denominationalism; inter-denominationality; Nigeria

Preamble

The history of Christianity in Nigeria largely coincides with its history of denominationalism. The influx of missionaries of different ecclesial backgrounds, like Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Adventists implied that the Christianity the locals received was already tainted with division, and rivalry. But plurality of Christian missionaries does not immediately imply that the different groups could be defined as denominations.

Early enough during the missionary era, it became clear that denominationalism with its tendency towards division and impermeable ecclesial boundaries did not bode well with the African tradition. In his account of the collapse of the *Church Union Movement*, the original ecumenical movement in Nigeria that was slightly modelled on the Church of South India, Ogbu Kalu, asserts that, “denominationalism is a subversion of the Church of Christ,”¹ one that played a key role in the failure of *the Union*. Kalu argues that denominationalism succeeded in creating “new tribes in Christ, vested interests

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¹Ogbu, *Divided People of God*, 47.

whose powers threaten the strength of organic bonds,”² and therefore, ought to be completely rejected. Kalu’s position notwithstanding, there is need to critically question this characterization of denominationalism. Is denominationalism entirely negative if one understands it as a “family” of the “form” (which is denomination) rather than as an extremist position of denominational identity? While, we must keep these two senses of denominationalism in perspective, the objective of this essay is to critically assess the reality on ground, as far as Nigerian Christianity is concerned, and find ways of exploring denominational identities for mutual enrichment of one another.

Introduction: The Early Church, Diversity and the Quest for Unity

Despite Christ’s prayer for unity (Jn.17:21), divisions and internal apostasy were the major concerns in the early church (Acts 20:29–30). It is no surprise that urging the Christians to be aware of this reality and to be on guard against it for the unity of the body of Christ was an essential part of Paul’s epistles (1Tim.6:3–6; 1Cor.1:13.17; Gal.1:6–9). Notwithstanding diversities, the apostles always sued for unity. Some scholars maintain that it is a legend that the apostles themselves, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, created the “Apostles’ Creed” probably right after their inauguration as the first church on the Pentecost. They argue that there was neither any unanimity among the apostles nor was there a single, united, authoritative body called the church, at this time.³ While the history of the early church as well as that of the canonization process might support such a view, it is nonetheless, clear that there were sustained efforts at promoting unity.

Hence, it would seem that the efforts to promote and sustain oneness and unity among the different churches formed a basis for the theological framework and institutional structures of what we identify now as Christianity. Keeping Christians together was a major issue for which so much human, intellectual and spiritual resources were expended. Christianity, as we know it now is, was therefore, partly a product of convinced rigorous efforts of people in sustaining a particular frame of religious identity on Jesus Christ and his teachings. Christianity could have begun from a single person (Jesus Christ) and his disciples. However, churches, most likely, did not begin from a unanimous single unit or body of the apostles, which then grew into synods and councils, powerful and decisive. Rather the single authoritative unit developed in response to the growing disparities among the groups, differentiated by territory, teachings and leaderships.

Were these diversities denominations? What does this mean for us today in the face of multifarious denominations? Are the differences necessarily human? Are the denominational separations inevitable? Can we say that there have been denominations in Christianity *ab initio*? How have we come to understand the differences in the Christian communities today and why? This article intends to elucidate the questions on denominations and its different shades. But we shall need to clarify some key concepts of the work first.

A Conceptual Note on Denomination and Inter-Denominationality

We begin with an understanding of Christian denominations as simply referring to the different Christian group of believers with distinctive identities. Such distinctiveness

²Ibid., 45.

³Outi, *Debates over the Resurrection of the Dead*, 109.

could be on the name, mode of worship, leadership structure, theology and/or biblical interpretations, etc. On this capacity, it is complicated to know what exactly constitutes a denomination. In the Catholic Church alone, we have not only the Latin rite, but also 22 other rites *sui iuris*. These have conspicuous differences among them. Are they different denominations? If one considers, for example, the different groups identified as pious societies or prayer groups in some Roman Catholic dioceses, like the Catholic Charismatic Renewal and the Legion of Mary, who are strikingly different from each other in their styles of prayer and even religious beliefs, yet are bound together as Catholics, then we are faced with the question of what makes a Christian group a denomination? In Protestantism and Pentecostalism, especially in the Nigerian context, should each of the innumerable churches and ministries be identified as its own denomination?

For the purposes of this article, we consider only the major Christianity communities in Nigeria as denominations, which are largely represented by these blocs: Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Pentecostalism, and African Independent Churches. Yet, these major divisions cannot exhaust the differences in the innumerable number of churches in the country.

One way of expressing the relationship among these denominations is the concept of inter-denominationality. This refers to the consciousness of living one's Christian faith in openness to the positivity of the different denominations. It operates in readiness towards acceptance and appreciation of the differences among denominations; in understanding towards mutual enrichment and compatibility. Inter-denominationality does not propose cross-denominationality. The latter implies a conscious distortion or dissolution of the denominational identities. Inter-denominationality respects the conscious decision and conviction of Christians in their denominations. It, however, promotes the inner disposition to connect with other Christians on different levels such as charity, spiritual, political engagement, social transformation programmes, etc.

On the Question of Denominations and Denominationalism

Denominationalism has today assumed an ecclesiological status as a way of defining or describing what is a Christian community. One way of distinguishing both concepts, "denomination" and "denominationalism," is to consider the latter as a compound way of speaking about the existence of the former. In that sense, denominationalism constitutes "a meta-ecclesial system for a religiously pluralistic society."⁴ Thus, on the one hand, "denomination is not a *disestablished* church," and on the other hand, "denominationalism is the *established* church of pluralism."⁵ Another way of distinguishing both is to consider denominationalism as an extremist view of denominational differences that encourages rigid identities. Within the Nigerian context this second distinction is evident in the disposition of denominations toward each other, in such a way that impedes opportunities for encounters among themselves.⁶ To hold both distinctions together, we can consider denominationalism as both a framework of ecclesial plurality

⁴Leithart, *The End of Protestantism*, 59.

⁵Ibid. By "established" Leithart implies the concrete, structural expression or manifestation of plurality of the church.

⁶Ibid., 61.

and a defect of denominational reality. In other words, it “functions to describe both denominational theory and the resultant condition or situation of institutionalized division.”⁷

Apart from sharing similarity with the confessionalization that has its root in the sixteenth-century Reformation, denomination can be traced historically to the emergence of the “free churches” in the United States in the wake of the complexity of the late eighteenth-century Revolution and Civil War.⁸ Free churches, which often refer to churches with liberal viewpoints, find their institutional character in denominations. It is, however, important to indicate that the traditional models of the church have not always been described as having a denominational character. In fact, one of the earliest scholars to investigate the ecclesiology of denominationalism, Sidney Mead, claims that denomination is “not primarily confessional,” and that at the same time “is not territorial.”⁹ Mead does, however, describe it as “purposeful,” in the sense that it represents “a voluntary association of like-hearted and like-minded individuals, who are united on the basis of common beliefs for the purpose of accomplishing tangible and defined objectives.”¹⁰ One of the key purposes of denominations is the attainment of whatever the members hold as true and to convince as many people as possible to adopt their beliefs and goals. Yet, denominations are not to be understood as “sects” in the traditional sense of the word.¹¹ Mead’s claims have, however, been seriously challenged especially on the grounds of non-territoriality. Presbyterian theologian, Barry Ensign-George, questions the claim of non-territoriality of denomination citing the examples of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Church of Sweden.

If territorial means the only organized church body within a specified territory, the (sic) denomination is not territorial. And yet it is clearly the case that denominations generally extend only over a limited geographical area – a reality underlined in the very nature of many denominations.¹²

Ensign-George argues that denomination as an ecclesiological category “provides a form in which multiple faithful possibilities for Christian life can be lived”¹³ Ensign-George’s rather positive assessment of denominations appears to ignore its shortcomings. However, his understanding of denomination as “a legitimate intermediary structure in the church,” that is to say, as “a middle term between ‘congregation’ and ‘church’”¹⁴ provides a new way of reading the concept. The implication is that the designation of the concept is no longer restricted to what we know today as independent churches, but that different groups within a particular ecclesial community could qualify as denominations as well. Ensign-George outlines five characteristics of denomination, namely that it is contingent, intermediary, interdependent, fragmentary and permeable. Following Ensign-George’s criteria, Leuven theologian, Peter De Mey, considers the Episcopal Conferences as an instance of denomination in Roman Catholicism,

⁷Richey, “Denominations and Denominationalism,” 76.

⁸Mead, “Denominationalism,” 291.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 292.

¹²Ensign-George, *Between Congregation and Church*, 114.

¹³Ensign-George, “Denomination as Ecclesiological Category,” 6.

¹⁴Ibid., 4.

particularly as it serves as the intermediary structure between the local and universal church.¹⁵ These criteria indicate that no single denomination can claim full sufficiency, and it is only together that they can “embody the fullness of the church.”¹⁶ As such, they are *partial* representations of the fullness of the church. Indeed, the criterion of permeability appears more like a suggestion than a given character of denominations. Perhaps, Ensign-George’s positive appreciation of denominations compels him to make such claims without giving room for possibility of extremism. Little wonder, he avoids the use of the term “denominationalism,” which does not necessarily connote a negative form of denominationality.

Be that as it may, Ensign-George’s criterion of permeability, as well as the other characteristics remain very important in addressing the objective of this essay since it speaks to the possibility of inter-denominational practices. A careful observation of the Christian landscape in Nigeria shows some shifts as well as resistances. On the one hand, there are instances of inter-denominational relations and practices that further confirm the interdependent character of denominations. In fact, we can equally add the attribute of relationality as belonging to denominations as long as they remain dynamic Christian communities.

As part of an ecclesial community, denominations are also marked by relationality or fellowship on both the vertical (with the Triune-God) and horizontal (with other believers/churches) levels. On the other hand, there are resistances to inter-relationships, with corresponding implications, not only on the self-understanding of the church but equally on the evangelizing mission of the church in the public sphere. But, how did denominations and the resistance to inter-relationality emerge and became part of Christianity in Nigeria? In the historical section that follows, we shall pay closer attention to the Anglican and Roman Catholic missions in Nigeria because of their prominence at the advent of Christianity in Nigeria, in historical and contemporary terms.

The History of Denominations in Nigeria

From its inception in Nigeria, Christianity came as denominational churches following the post-Reformation reality. The missionary interests included territorial annexation of as many places as each could control, transplanting the same rancour and wrangle from their divisive European construed Christianity into missionary context in Nigeria. This territorial interest however, was not purely for religious reasons only, given that the missionaries represented their various denominations as well as the governments of their respective countries.¹⁷

From the churches’ perspectives, territorial securement was not incongruous to the proclamation of the Christian message. In a sense, it was necessary. As such, to be instrumental in the political securement of the territories was a missionary objective. It is thus understandable that Britain, having scrambled Nigeria and secured it for itself, that the Church of England would have established itself in key areas of Nigeria before other churches emerged. Henry Townsend became the first Anglican clergy to arrive Nigeria

¹⁵De Mey, “Is There a Future for Denominationalism?,” 159.

¹⁶Ibid., 157.

¹⁷Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891*.

for missionary purposes in 1842 under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). He concentrated in Abeokuta and established his missionary contacts majorly within Yoruba areas.¹⁸

Within this time, we also see the presence of the Methodist missionary movement to the Gold Coast. Thomas Birch Freeman, and his colleagues, were also marking the Abeokuta territories as conducive for the missionary endeavours. So, also were the Catholics, Presbyterians and other denominations settling in other areas. If one considers the fact that these different territorial churches in Europe rushed to secure and establish territories in the Southern part of Nigeria within the short decades of 1840–1890, then one can identify the same vigour of their politicians for territorial interests. It was a religious scramble for Africa. Different denominations, antagonistic to each other, vied for territories within a geographical area, within a short space of time. This is the picture of the historical origin of denominations and denominationalism in Nigeria. In what follows, we shall focus on the southern part of Nigeria, or precisely, the Igbo people.

The Beginning of Denominations and Denominationalism in Southern Nigeria

When Christian denominations started settling in the southern part of Nigeria, from the 1850s to the early 1900s, the incongruity of Christianity with the indigenous spiritualities was not yet the major challenge. The locals looked at the initial Christian mission with “respectful indifference,” and in a few cases, fatal disdain.¹⁹ The successful twist in Christian evangelization came when the people could see the social and economic benefits of Christianity. “It became fashionable to be called a Christian.”²⁰ Christianity had to be interpreted in solution-orientated praxis for it to be accepted.

A rather major challenge to early Christianity in this part of Nigeria was denominationalism – the inner conflict among the different Christian denominations over territories and doctrines. “What has not been equally documented is the contention that the missionaries were making a virtue of necessity.”²¹ These denominational contentions were not only borne out of doctrinal and leadership incongruities but also out of nationalistic/patriotic tendency. The Church of England’s CMS saw it more as a Catholic invasion,²² and so it appeared. French Catholics, the SMA priests, and the Holy Ghost Fathers were deployed from their French territories of Africa – Senegal, Dahomey, and Gabon to compete with the British Protestants, the CMS, and establish Catholicism for the conversion of African souls.²³ So, while the French and British governments scrambled and competed for occupation of African territories, the French and British missionaries competed for the souls of the people. Major efforts and resources of the missionaries were expended for this aim; to win the rivalry and contention against other denominations. This was a bedrock of what has developed into aggressive denominationalism in Nigerian Christianity.

¹⁸Kwashi, “The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion),” 165–83.

¹⁹See Nwabara, “Christian Encounter (sic) with Indigenous Religion,” 589–601.

²⁰Ekechi, “Colonialism and Christianity in West Africa,” 103.

²¹Bassey, “Missionary Rivalry and Educational Expansion,” 36.

²²Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland*, 71–3.

²³Okafor, “Francophone Catholic Achievements in Igboland,” 307.

Schools, for example, were important tools of evangelization for the missionaries. They were necessary for indoctrination, education, training and as abodes for the outcasts and those living on the margins of the society. However, schools were also important ways of securing and sustaining denominational presence in a particular place. Magnus Bassey argues that

although education was an important item in the agenda of the missions in Africa, the rapid expansion of education in southern Nigeria between 1885 and 1932 was actually the accidental outcome of the missionary and church rivalry rather than the result of an altruistic policy to provide expanded educational opportunities for the African populace.²⁴

This contentious atmosphere instilled in the indigenous people a competitive approach towards education and training, which has become very detrimental to the general populace up to the present.

One could argue that political acrimony is groomed along religious denominational lines. A direct consequence of this was the complete appropriation of the mission schools by the government of the East Central State, after the Nigeria-Biafran War (1967–1970), with neither an agreement nor the competence to operate the schools, arguing on the claims that the denominational schools encouraged religious rivalry and inter-tribal bigotry.²⁵ When the standard of education collapsed after several years, certain civilian governments started a process of agreement to reinvigorate the educational standard of the states, under the auspices of the denominations who used to operate the schools. Yet, these efforts were also attacked on denominational grounds. In Anambra state, for example, the accusation of the Anglican Communion to the state government which has been run by Catholic governors since the early 2010s has been of marginalization against non-Catholics. The state and local tabloids attest to this.²⁶

Although Christian missions brought many positive changes and developments, they did not create a unifying precedence of Christianity in Nigeria. Rather through their scrambling for territories, emphatic nationalistic denominationalism, competitive approaches in missionary works and endeavours, denominationalism became a normality in Nigerian Christianity.

Denominationalism Versus Inter-Denominationality

At this stage of Christianity in Nigeria, it would appear that denominationalism and churchism are more common than denominationality and inter-denominationality. Churchism, in this instance, is an eighteenth-century concept that refers to strict adherence to the doctrines, teachings and liturgical practices of a church. It is easy to draw the conclusion that if denominations have a distinct existence, then that will be the case for denominationalism, as well. By this argument, the same factors that enable denominationality also enable denominationalism; human differences, social and cultural differences, interests and inspirations, fame and pride. The approximate difference could be that while denominationality seems static and forms the framework in which one

²⁴Bassey, "Missionary Rivalry and Educational Expansion," 36.

²⁵See Ahanotu, "The Nigerian Military and the Issue," 333.

²⁶See Okafor, "ICYMI: Anglican Priests Protest Against Obiano."

responds to Christianity, denominationalism is based on the “self.” Namely, the need to be the decisive factor for oneself or a beneficiary of the religious ideals one wants; the need to extricate oneself from doctrines and laws that seem encaging and incompatible with one’s prospects and choices. This is an expression of the need, not just to “believe” in other’s religious experiences and theological decisions, but to rely majorly on one’s own experiences, interests, and convictions. The Christian can actually live above denominationalism. This explains, especially within the Nigerian context, the connection between denominationalism and churchism. Churchism, which represents a rigid and non-relational adherence to the practices and principles of one’s church, becomes a practical result of denominationalism, given the enabling factors described above. Churchism in itself is decisively sectarian even to the point of dismissing historical complexities as well as the common practices that exist among churches.

The effects of this have been disastrous. Communities have been adversely affected by intra and inter-community rivalries at school, market squares and homes, based on denominational reasons. Ohia and Nzewi, for example, narrated how Awka-Etiti in Igbo-land is divided along denominational lines, majorly between Catholics and Anglicans.²⁷ Family bond and love corrode because of church/denominational incongruities. In Nigeria, citizens can be denied tenancy, job admission, due promotions and positions, and even friendship/relationship by another Christian because of the disparity between denominations or churches. Moreover, this reality cuts across all denominations. None lacks the tendency to perpetrate or be the victim of such non-relational, exclusive identities.

However, there are scholars who would argue that the relationality among the different denominations and churches in Nigeria seems better than ever before and holds promise for the future. Hyginus Chigere, for one, argues that the sympathy from other Christians towards the Igbo Catholics victimized by the civil war and the cooperation of different Christian groups, like Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), brought about some level of ecumenical progress in Nigeria.²⁸ Chigere is right that on the level of leadership, ecumenical strides have been made. Yet, it would be incorrect for one to claim that denominational relationality has improved on the level of inter-denominationality among Christian individuals. It could even be argued that with the inception of post-civil war denominationalism, denominational relationality has worsened, based on the influx of innumerable new churches and ministries under the Pentecostal denomination. Fierce campaign against the teachings, styles and leadership of the mainline churches were part of an unrelenting Pentecostal assault of these churches in their bid to effect more conversions. Mainline churches have responded in kind.

But what if Christianity in Nigeria were to forgo the denominationalistic past and support denominationality with inter-denominationality? What if, instead, of promoting denominationalism and churchism, the denominations embrace inter-denominational relationships? We might consider the diversity of churches in early Christianity as instances of denominations and as a human reality of Christianity. But we must not accept the development into denominationalism and churchism, which have created hatred and intolerance among Christian peoples. It is not only possible to channel the

²⁷Ohia and Nzewi, “Contributions of Women in Governance,” 107.

²⁸Chigere, *Foreign Missionary Background and Indigenous Evangelization*, 400.

development towards inter-denominationality, rather this is also necessary for a Christianity that is future-orientated, as it listens to the unifying call of Christ. If this is not addressed with seriousness and delicate imminence in Nigeria, it might lead to the same reality of Christianity in some other parts of the world; where Christianity has lost a great deal of its relevance because people have discovered how to unite, relate and bond better with each other without their Christian denominations. Denominationality, it would appear, becomes a hindrance to Christian unity. Through inter-denominationality in Nigeria, for example, denominationality can rather be a Christian reality promoting unity.

Exposé of Inter-Denominational Christian Experiences or Events

There are questions as to whether denominationalism has finally exhausted its historical importance, whether its continual existence amounts to its “metamorphosis” or “reincarnation.”²⁹ Admitting Ensign-George’s five characteristics of denominationalism already shifts the identity of contemporary denominationalism from self-sufficient to relational. In a space like Nigeria, one discovers increasing emergence of inter-denominational Christian experiences. There are basically two forms of inter-denominationality in Nigeria. The first is represented by Christian communities that identify themselves as interdenominational fellowships, the origin of which could be traced to the establishment of a group like “Full Gospel Businessmen’s Fellowship” and “Women’s International Nigeria.” Apart from these interdenominational Christian groups that came from abroad, there are equally locally founded groups that identify as interdenominational, some of which now have a significant presence beyond Nigeria. We shall later examine one of such groups, the Sisters’ Fellowship International. The second category is represented by annual interdenominational events hosted by individual churches. Included in this category are also the events hosted by the Christian Association of Nigeria, such as the October 1st Independence Day Christian Service normally held at the National Ecumenical Center, Abuja. Our focus shall be on the activities of individual churches, and for this, we shall examine *The Experience* hosted by the House on the Rock Church and the *Unusual Praise* by the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria.

Sisters’ Fellowship International

Founded by Rev. Mrs Nches Iredu, the Fellowship (henceforth, SFI), which has its headquarters in Jesus Transformation City (JTC), Nkpor Umioji in Anambra – Nigeria, describes itself on the official website as a “non-Church denomination” with the slogan of being “a place for everyone.” Interestingly, SFI’s identification as a “non-Church” may be attributed to a perception of church as a properly defined assembly of Christians bounded by doctrinal beliefs. For the SFI, love of God is the only motive behind the assembly: “to ensure the world knows that God’s love is true, real, infallible and unconditional.”³⁰ More so, the SFI is essentially a “women’s organization” with a mission that focuses on two evangelical principles of “love” and “appreciation” rooted

²⁹See Richey, “Denominations and Denominationalism,” 76; Leithart, *The End of Protestantism*, 69.

³⁰SFI website, “About Us,” <https://www.sfiloveinaction.org>.

in particular sections of the Johannine corpus (Jn. 3:16; 15:12; 1Jn. 4:8). While there are many scriptural background and theological understanding of what love consist of and its ecclesiological significance, the same cannot be easily said about the idea of *appreciation*. A quick theological assessment would look towards the doctrine of justification to interpret *appreciation* as the effect of God's unmerited grace and love. On the contrary, SFI's description of *appreciation* falls mainly under charitable actions aimed at assisting people live meaningful lives, both spiritually and materially. However, *appreciation* begins with accepting and honouring God's love, acknowledging the "gifts and talents" of one another, and having what it refers to as "saving knowledge" of Christ.³¹ More so, *appreciation* also extends to the task of building healthy families and marriages. One wonders if this idea of *appreciation* is theologically rooted or anthropologically expressed in friendship and hospitality.

Taken within the context of its "non-Church" yet "inter-denominational" character, SFI's "love" and "appreciation" would imply a spirituality that puts "love in action" by appreciating the gift of one another irrespective of ecclesial affiliation. Many women have their commitment to churches and families revived through their belonging to SFI. Apart from women, SFI has also become a place for the grooming and mentorship of young ladies and teenage girls through its *Young Daughters* programme. The programme is designed to foster the spiritual growth of the young women, and also to assist them in developing their entrepreneurial skills. The goal is to train up "women who love God, are self-aware and financially resilient."³² By so doing, the SFI understands how the economic deprivation of women affects their spiritual and moral well-being.

The Experience

Convened and hosted by Paul Adefarasin, the Senior Pastor of one of the mega Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, House on the Rock Church, *The African Praise Experience* (TAPE or *Experience*) has become a landmark Christian event in Nigeria "headlined by a joyful assemblage of people through music, dance and praises, with the combination of word, worship and wonders."³³ It was started in 2006 and has since been hosted annually, always in the month of December. It is reported that the event, which started with a population of about 70,000 now boost of over 700,000 in yearly attendance, thus making it "the largest musical concert in Africa."³⁴ Its uniqueness, however, lies in the fact that it features only the Gospel music genre. As such, the Experience fields the best in the world and in Nigeria. Popular Nigerian/African artists who have performed at the Experience over the years include Tim Godfrey, Chioma Jesus, Midnight Crew, Sonnie Badu, Nathaniel Bassey, Frank Edward, Tope Alabi and Mercy Chinwo, while some of the international acts include big names like, Travis Greene, Don Moen, and Donnie McClurkin.

TAPE is an interdenominational Gospel concert since the attendance and participation of performers cut across ecclesial affiliations. This is despite the fact that it is hosted by a Pentecostal pastor. Notwithstanding that it does not set itself out as a

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid. – Young Daughters.

³³Editor, "Adefarasin Hosts African Praise Experience in Lagos."

³⁴Official website of *The African Praise Experience*, <http://theexperielagos.com/1G1V/>.

platform for ecumenical fellowship, TAPE inevitably fulfils an ecumenical role in bringing Christians across various divides into prayer for the nation and praise fellowship. While barriers signal markers of identity, they should not be dismantled since differences are part of what makes unity meaningful. However, there ought to be limits to the emphasis on differences, specifically in cases where it obstructs the common good and human flourishing as willed by God.

Thus, beyond the concert, TAPE, is attuned to the socio-political problems of Nigeria. In a subscript at the official website, the Experience claims “to offer all Nigerians the opportunity to experience God in an atmosphere of heavenly bliss.”³⁵ This is inspired by the conditionality of 2 Chronicles 7:14: *If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.* However, the TAPE does not in any way include the penitential act in its programme. The focus is exclusively on the praise of God.

Unusual Praise

Started in 2010, hosted by Divine Mercy Parish, under the Catholic Archdiocese of Lagos, Nigeria, the Unusual Praise has quickly attained the status of the Experience. It has become a rallying point for many Christians irrespective of denominations to praise God together, led by an array of Gospel artists from different Christian communities. While the Lagos event is usually hosted towards the end of the year, mostly in November, the same event, tagged *Mid-Year Praise* is today hosted around the Easter period at the Cathedral Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity Onitsha for the benefit of Christians in the South-eastern region of Nigeria.

The mission of the *Unusual Praise*, as stated, consists of promoting “evangelization by creating an unforgettable praise experience, utilizing live music and praise as a tool to inspire and challenge people from all backgrounds to share the message of Jesus Christ and to live a life centered around the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to build a deeper relationship with Him.”³⁶ It does not have the nationalistic character of the *Experience*, yet one cannot exclude such aspect since prayers for the nation is a constant feature of this event. Interestingly, despite being an open-air, annual/bi-annual event, there is a socio-economic dimension to the *Unusual Praise*, something that relates it to the *Young Daughters* programme of the SFI. In view of the 2019 edition, Nigerian daily news tabloid, *ThisDay* reports that one of the primary objectives of the Unusual Praise is set in one of the branches, tagged *Unusual Entrepreneurship* (UE) programme. This programme aims “to provide funding, business training and mentorship for entrepreneurs in Nigeria.”³⁷ Launched in 2018, the UE programme has been able to support 251 entrepreneurs with the goal of helping 1000 small business owners within 5 years. It must be remarked however that the UE programme is reserved for Catholic members and thus is not as “ecumenical” as the music event itself.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Unusual Praise website, <https://www.unusualpraise.com>.

³⁷*ThisDay* Online News, “Catholic Church Hosts Unusual Praise 2019.”

A Brief Analysis

In the three examples given above, there is an appreciable effort to bridge denominational differences even with the tendency of serving the motive of self-congratulation. One finds this in the events like the *Experience* and the *Unusual Praise*, which are organized by individual churches, the House on the Rock and the Roman Catholic Church respectively. Over the years, there has been no attempt for collaborative organization of such events. Hence, these could be qualified as some sort of ecumenism of profile. Meanwhile, believers who attend the SFI events might substitute it as their denomination since, for adherents, there is little to distinguish between a community that considers itself “inter-denominational” and a normal denomination. In that sense, SFI, perhaps, inadvertently subsumes the uniqueness of denominationality into interdenominationality, with the consequences of blurring religious identities and beliefs. This is a somewhat different from our proposal in this essay since we recognize the uniqueness of denominations while advocating for relationality among them.

Thus, while the opportunities provided by the SFI, The Experience and Unusual Praise introduce an ecclesiological shift that discredits denominationalism, we have to see the ecumenical opportunity that they provide *albeit* their limitations. They prompt us to move to the level of ecclesiological understanding where the ecclesial identities of particular churches or denominations could create room for interdenominational co-fellowship without threat to their own denominational identities. In what follows, we shall elaborate thematically on the challenges and chances of inter-denominationality, one that does not emasculate denominational identity.

Challenges of Inter-Denominationality

There are, however, things that can deflect inter-denominationality away from its positive intentions and outcomes. These are:

Relegation of Denominational Distinctions

Two major issues must be considered in Christianity for a positive inter-denominationality: (1) That denominationality is our Christian reality and (2) That Christianity without denominations does not seem to be humanly realistic. But more importantly, even if it were to become real, would it lead to a better expression of Christianity? With these two premises, the stride for inter-denominationality would become extremely challenging if the denominations are disregarded and their liturgical, leadership, spiritual and structural distinctions are not respected. Beyond the spiritual connection through music and praise prayers, Christianity continues into the core practical realities of the individual Christian, cutting across marriage, family, occupation, and other life decisions. And on this daily practical parlance of life, one’s denominational teachings and styles become relevant. The epitome of inter-denominationality is that balance between one’s ecclesial/denominational choice and one’s choice to live beyond denominationalism.

Distortion of the Differences in Spiritual Approaches

For a progressive and practical inter-denominationality, there is the tendency to minimize or even deride the spiritual approaches of other denominations. After many

years of churchism, attacking other churches, criticizing and portraying them as the major enemy in a fight for number and territories, it is to be expected that prejudice and antagonism would be the least of the expectations in an inter-denominational endeavour. But if on a spiritual level, there is no sincere openness to discover how the other experiences God and where the spiritual connection of a certain prayer style lies, then the push for inter-denominationality would be a fruitless venture.

Incompatible Teachings and Its Consequences

It is also the reality that as there are many denominations and churches, there are also many teachings and interpretations within Christianity, discrepant and inconsistent. This could pose a major challenge if serious relationships are intended. The Christian, for example, who considers the devotion to Mary or the saints as idolatry would struggle on many levels of inter-denominationality with those for whom such devotions are part of their spiritual lives. It is important to note that the inner readiness and conviction to tolerate and be open-minded towards the beauty and positivity in the other denominations is absolutely necessary for a successful inter-denominationality. To the extent to which inter-denominationality is feasible; the extent of praying and sharing the message of Christ with each other, then open-mindedness is possible.

Chances/Prospects of Inter-Denominationality

Having examined the concepts and practices of denominationality and inter-denominationality, particularly in the context of Nigeria, we are confronted with outlining some of the opportunities that they present to Christianity in Nigeria. How exactly does the ecclesial consciousness and practice of inter-denominationality benefit the Christian faith in Nigeria? We shall examine some of these possibilities in sub-sets below, which are inexhaustible, but at this time could generate further conversation on the subject matter.

Ecumenism: Putting “Communicatio in sacris” into Practice

From a Roman Catholic perspective, the principal document on ecumenical relations, *Unitatis redintegratio*, recommends that

it is allowable, indeed desirable that Catholics should join in prayer with their separated brethren. Such prayers in common are certainly an effective means of obtaining the grace of unity, and they are a true expression of the ties which still bind Catholics to their separated brethren.³⁸

By this principle of *communicatio in sacris*, the Church offers a theologically grounded space for the praxis of inter-denominationality, one that goes beyond the doctrinal conversations that happen during ecumenical dialogue. In this sense, ecumenism is approached from the spiritual dimension in which the different Christian communities share in sacred things (*in sacris*), and as Raimon Panikkar affirms, “unless there is communication *in sacris* ... there is no communication but only an exchange of goods and

³⁸Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 8.

words.”³⁹ Yet, this is not a matter of arbitrariness since full communion among Christian churches is still limited by our inability to celebrate the Eucharist together. As such, certain precautions with regard to the procedure are recommended in the practice of *communicatio in sacris*.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, the praxis of *communicatio in sacris* could be theologically extended to the idea of ecumenical hospitality with its rootedness in both Scripture (Gen.18:1b–8; 19:1–3; Rom.12:13; 15:7; 1Pet.4.9) and monastic traditions. It is fundamentally, a matter of “receiving each other” in the presence of Christ in a way that brings about “a reconciliation of people whose divergences often have been lived as antagonisms.”⁴¹ Little wonder interdenominational Christian centres like Taizé and Groupe des Dombes have become communities of ecumenical hospitality. The opportunity offered by inter-denominationality is that it opens up the possibility of taking ecumenical hospitality towards its ultimate end, namely the Eucharistic communion.⁴² Eucharist communion is the full expression of *communicatio in sacris* and this is the goal of ecumenism.

“Signs of the Time” and Its Interpretations/Implications for Local Context

In his well-researched book, *The Rise of the Global South*, Elijah J.F. Kim argues for the unity of Global Christianity irrespective of nationality or denominational affiliation.⁴³ Kim’s arguments confirm the suspicion that Europe’s high level of denominational tolerance and ecumenical commitment may be explained by the increasing decline of Christianity due to secularization and its effects.

Thus, the greatest challenge to Western Christianity is no longer the rivalry among Christian denominations but rather a combination of secularization with the rise of atheism and Islam (though often not admitted). This situation presents Nigerian Christianity (which has a significant percentage of Christians in the Global South) with two basic challenges: (a) to recognize its leading role in the revival of World Christianity, and (b) to learn from the decline of Western Christianity. In the first challenge, the task is to galvanize the Christian population as a force for living out and spreading the message of the Gospel. This must be done collectively, and so, ecumenically. Inter-denominationality becomes, therefore, a good way to begin such mobilization for collective evangelization.

For the second challenge, to learn from Western Christianity does not just imply the readiness to confront secularization, but to avoid considering ecumenical relations as an after-thought. Inter-denominationality puts ecumenism into praxis and ensures that Christianity is not threatened both *ad extra* by secularism, atheism, or Islam and *ad intra* by divisive denominationalism.

At the moment, Nigeria has ongoing social, political and economic crises, which invariably affect how citizens now respond to the Christian faith. Today, there are some signposts to predict the impending crises of Nigerian Christianity. These would emerge from the lack of robust response of the church to the abuse of human rights

³⁹Panikkar, *Worship and Secular Man*, 65.

⁴⁰See Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, nos.8, 15.

⁴¹Kessler, *Receive One Another*, 27.

⁴²See Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, nos.4, 22.

⁴³Kim, *The Rise of the Global South*, xxxiv.

in Nigeria, the contradiction between the lifestyle of Christian leaders and the poverty of most believers, the partisanship of some church leaders, and the increasing levels of dissent within churches.⁴⁴ Churches in their divided states cannot act together for the good of all, and even when they do, the outcome remains insufficient. How long can the church in Nigeria hold together the cracks in the nation while keeping Christians away from each other?

Christianity Beyond Denominations – Spiritual Experiences and Belief in Christ

Theologically, the question that reoccurs in our exploration of denominationality and inter-denominationality is that of the essence of Christianity. What is Christianity about? An honest examination of these questions together with the implications on what it means to have spiritual experiences and belief in Christ brings about a critique of the understanding of denominationalism that is purely exclusivist. To think of Christianity beyond denominations is to at once acknowledge the legitimacy of the differences that denominations represent, but only within the single criterion of unity in Christ. Christ is the centre and at the heart of Christian identity and its associated sense of belonging, the shape of such identity notwithstanding. Everything is reconciled in Christ (2Cor.5:18–19; Rom.11:36).

This informs the success of the examples of interdenominational events that we outlined above. Focused on the praise of God through music, the *Experience* and *Unusual Praise* bring Christians together to focus exclusively on Christ. At such moments, one's identity consciousness is no longer threatened by liturgical settings, doctrinal teaching, or even preaching styles, the same concerns that are expressed by *Unitatis redintegratio*. The open-air setting of these interdenominational events further frees the ordinary believer from the psychological challenge of being in "another church." These events transcend particular belonging to specific Christian community, thus offering Christians the opportunity of a more inclusive belonging to the Christian family.

Unity of Christianity – Mobilization for Political and Economic Transformation

For a long time, theology in Nigeria has not taken sufficient account of the social transformative value of the Gospel. Liberation theology was viewed with suspicion for many years. Worse still, the Pentecostal prosperity theology came with a force that confronted theologians with presenting Christians with placatory assurances in the midst of socio-economic despair. It was an evangelization movement that *de-crossed* Christianity, thus offering optimism without hope (to use a reverse of Terry Eagleton's title). By the time Nigerian Christians lifted up their eyes from the flowery sermons, the political overlords had wrecked their lives even more.

Inter-denominationality offers a panacea in addressing the consequences of such a socially impotent theological trajectory. By offering Christians the opportunity to come together irrespective of differences, they are compelled to re-examine their

⁴⁴Some quick examples would include the crisis over the episcopacy of the Catholic diocese of Ahiara, the movement against prosperity gospel within Pentecostalism led by the media personality, Ifedayo Olarinde (a.k.a. Daddy Freeze) with his Free Nation in Christ Online Church, and the rise of what is now known as "Intelligent Christians" (IC) – cf. Chude Jideonwo and his Retail Religion's The Future of Faith Instagram Series, 11 May–June, 2020.

teachings through mutual accountability. Their coming together and recognizing not only their unity in Christ, but equally their common socio-political travails, Christian leaders would begin a process of mobilizing Christians for social and political transformation. Truth be told, the disunity among Christians is to the joy of the corrupt political class. Christian unity presents a chance for churches to serve as the catalyst for change in the society. Already, the examples of the *Unusual Entrepreneurship* (if extended beyond Catholics) and *Young Daughters* of the SFI integrate the economic dimension in a way that combines spiritual development with social transformation.

Combating the Destructive Effects of Denominationalism

Notwithstanding the understanding of denominationalism that makes room for interdependency and permeability, inter-denominationality is an opportunity to critically combat the negative effects of denominationalism. At its core, denominationalism undermines the catholicity of the church as Jesus prayed (Jn.17:21), because it hardens “schismogenesis” (initial divisions) into denominational identity.⁴⁵ Peter Leithart observes that denominational boundary-making has two debilitating effects on Christianity. First is that it creates the sense of homogeneity such that “churches become outposts of uniform belief as well as uniform social and economic status.”⁴⁶

Yet dialogue over the beliefs often reveal the existence of convergences. And this leads to the Leithart’s second effect of denominationalism, which is ambivalence over theological commitments. For denominations that had, hitherto, constructed their identities in contradistinction with others, the result is confusion when these identities are subjected to theological interrogation. Unlike ecumenism that is often accused of doctrinal indifference, it is denominationalism that “minimizes the importance of doctrine”⁴⁷ since it is grounded on a false sense of homogeneity.

Apart from combating denominationalism’s effects of homogeneity and theological ambivalence, inter-denominationality equally serves as a measure to forestall the prevalence of irresponsibility among churches. Often churches in Nigeria have become irresponsible not only with respect to prophetically challenging the state for the citizens but also with regard to ensuring mutual accountability among themselves. The scandal in one particular church is not seen as the scandal in Nigerian Christianity, and even in some instances, creates a sense of justification of “why we are a better church than them.” Each church recuses itself from being responsible for the good of the other. This is quite regrettable since it presents a picture of an immature church where “we acknowledge that we are brothers and sisters. Then, in the next breath, we are Cain: Am I my brother’s keeper?”⁴⁸ What is grossly missed is the fact that whatever affects each, affects all. Nigerian Christianity does not need to experience decline before living out ecumenical hospitality and mutual responsibility, which are offered in inter-denominational encounters and relations.

⁴⁵Leithart, *The End of Protestantism*, 81.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 77.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 79.

Conclusion

Is non-denominational really not denominational? This question could be of contextual importance especially within the experiential awareness of Nigerians. Hence, the curious concerns arise: Are Christian events termed non-denominational really not denominational? Is there a particular style of prayer or method of worship that is not already denominational-orientated? We are aware of this concern and the practical relevance of the questions. In the examples above, *The Experience* or *Unusual Praise*, the denominational affiliations of these events are evident even when their official information claims non-denominational. Personal decision of an adherent to adopt the SFI, for example, as her own church, in replacement of her hitherto church would not be a surprising reality. In as much as this work commends a respect for denominations, it does not hamper the personal decisions on choices of churches or denominations. Perhaps, “Non-denominational,” in the above context, implies the invitation and openness towards free participation of all Christians to these events.

Be it as it may, our aim is to use the mentioned events, despite their imperfections, as occasions of inter-denominational engagements. It is not denominationality that restricts us; it is denominationalism. In Nigeria, inter-denominationality would be, or rather, should be the future of Christianity. Christianity has become, for good or for bad, an intrinsic part of African life and history. In woes and foes, in glory and growth, the stamp of Christianity cannot be mistaken in Africa. Nigeria exemplifies Christianity in Africa. From its creation as a political state, to its ethno-religious dichotomy, territorial divisions, regional differences in mentality, orientation and western-mindedness, Christianity is part of whatever Nigeria *is* and seeks to be. Christian denominationalism is *ipso facto* part of the failure of Nigerians in creating and sustaining a responsible and just politico-economic society. This failure has reduced Nigerians and Nigeria, with its human and natural resources as the most populous African nation, to a disgraceful low and disrespect in the world.

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