



“To Love a Muslim is Christian”: Religion Education in Africa through the Life Trajectory of Joseph Peter Kenny, O.P. (1936-2013)

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Abstract

The academic study of religion in Nigerian tertiary institutions started about 1948 at the then University College of London, Ibadan, when the British Methodist minister/missionary Geoffrey Parrinder (10.04.1910-16.06.2005) established and headed the Department of Religious Studies. It was clearly theologically inclined as the principal scholars were either European missionaries or members of the local Christian clergy. The work of Joseph Kenny, a Dominican priest – originally American by birth and a Nigerian citizen by naturalisation – marked a significant departure from theologically focused *religious* studies to the comparative study of religions. Kenny came to Nigeria in 1964, started teaching at the Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Major Seminary in Ibadan in 1971, and subsequently joined the Department of Religious Studies, the University of Ibadan, as a lecturer in 1979. He worked across three major religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam – evidently the only scholar to achieve a mastery of all the three traditions – exploring common themes, translations and theologies and their implications for religious dialogue in Africa where indigenous religious cosmologies underpin the cultural structures and ontologies. This paper explores the significance of religion scholarship as pioneered by a scholar who is both an insider and an outsider, and who mentored many African scholars of religion and members of the local clergy for more than two decades from 1979 to 2002 when he retired as a professor at the University of Ibadan.

Keywords: Joseph Peter Kenny, Islam in Africa, Religion Education, the University of Ibadan, Order of Preachers, Life Trajectory.

Introduction¹

When Joe was six years old and I was five, we climbed a signboard in Chicago to watch a column of Army vehicles pass by. This was during World War II, and the vehicles were part of the US mobilization for war against Nazi Germany. Upon seeing the vehicles, I said, "When I get big, I want to be an Army man." Joe promptly replied, "When I get big, I am going to be a priest."²

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² Dr. Henry James Kenny, younger brother to Joseph Peter Kenny (email communication 12.12.2016). I am thankful to Dr. Henry J. Kenny and Dr. Fr. Stan Ukwe, O.P. for the assistance in sourcing for information for this essay.



Arguably, Nigeria is one of the most complex countries in the world where religion and its role in the organisation of the polity have increased with time. There are many reasons for this complexity, one of which is the almost equal balance between two foreign, aggressively competitive and almost equally intolerant monotheistic religions of Islam and Christianity. British colonial policy and practice in Nigeria played an ambivalent, even dubious, role of promoting the spread of Christianity in the southern part of the country while at the same time actively hindering the evangelisation of the northern part, thereby equally promoting Islam. Believing that Islam creates docile Muslim subjects while Christianity produces agitated and anxious, even troublesome subjects, the then governor-general of Nigeria, Frederick Lugard (1965 [1922]) prohibited Christian missionaries from venturing into the northern emirates for conversion purposes. According to Julius Adekunle (2009: 6), "The reason for this was to preserve and protect the British system of Indirect Rule and to make it more successful. This was another way of enforcing their [sic] divide and rule policy over the people of Nigeria". The British practice created and reinforced a religious dichotomy between Islam and Christianity; it also created a political and psychological sense of privilege and right among northern Nigerian Muslims (Ukah 2013: 48). Northern Nigerian Muslims have a sense of entitlement often manifested in the rhetoric of right to rule Nigeria traced to the colonial practice instituted by Lugard and the theology of Uthman Dan Fodio (1754-1817), the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate. According to the memorandum of Jihad published by Uthman Dan Fodio, "the status of a town is the status of its ruler: if he be Muslim, the town belongs to Islam; but if he be heathen the town is a town of heathendom" (Fodio c.1803: 240). Furthermore, "[The King] is the Shade of God [...] on the Earth, for verily if he has done righteously, he has the Reward and grateful remembrance, but if he does evil, the Bondage awaits him and his people suffer" (Fodio: c.1811: 57). In this political ideology of theocracy, the fate of a city or country is tied to the faith of its ruler; further, the fate of the ruler is tied to religion, in this case, Islam. Over time, there evolved mutual disrespect, distrust and lack of communication across the population's religious divides.

At nominal political independence in 1960, there was rarely a Muslim who was sufficiently grounded in the religion of Christianity and a Christian adequately schooled and versed in Islam to provide a basis for mutual understanding and informed dialogue. Immediately after independence, two powerful processes became noticeable in northern Nigeria i) Islamisation and ii) northernisation. The first was to proselytize the frontiers of the Islamic emirates by bringing the peoples of the Middle-Belt of Nigeria, many of whom were still adherents of indigenous religions, under Islamic rule and influence. The second process was to prevent the dominance of southern citizens, and by extension, Christian influence, in the north as well as the federal level of government. The philosophy of practice of the Saruana of Sokoto, which was behind these processes, was "poised to dip the Qur'an in the sea and looking forward to the plaudits of the World Muslim League for delivering the whole Nigeria to the Islamic *umma*" (Kenny 2010a: 304). The critical study of religion in Nigeria has grown apace as both religions increased their respective shares of adherents. Often, however, this study has been informed by sectarian partisanship and tenacious prejudice on both sides, with each religious community fencing off those perceived as intruders and proselytizers. In academic departments of religious studies in Nigeria, it is difficult for academics to "address religious facts calmly", critically, disinterestedly (Debray 2008: 415).

This intense context of the politicisation of religious identities and membership was where Joseph Peter Kenny chose to live and work, first as an American Catholic priest and missionary, and later as a Nigerian citizen belonging to the Nigerian Dominican Province of St. Albert the Great, with its provincial Headquarters in Lagos, Nigeria. Writing religious biographies is not what I have done before, so a caveat is in order here. The importance of the life and works of Joe Kenny (or Alhaji Kenny, as many of his students and colleagues fondly called him in Nigeria) is to examine the scope of his scholarship and revisit some of the central ideas that informed his lifelong scholarly pursuit to build an intellectual and communicative



bridge between two warring religious traditions.³ Because this is not a profile of praise, the issues of interest in the life and works of Joe Kenny are that he was i) an educator, ii) a knowledge missionary, iii) a historian and scholar, iv) church musician, v) a linguist, vi) a practitioner of radical poverty. He published books and essays (not translations) in English, Latin, Arabic and French. Joe Kenny was officially a missionary, but an unusual one; he characterised the incursion of foreign Catholic organisations in northern Nigeria as “evangelical and missionary jihad”, and so, like a trend in the interpretation of Plato’s writing in the *Republic* that blames vice on ignorance (see Gooch 1971), chose a different path of knowledge missionary (Kenny 2010a: 303).

In The Beginning

Joseph Peter Kenny left very little of biographical information in his writings, which makes a reconstruction of his family tree and early life a bit of a task to accomplish. Even after retiring from the University of Ibadan in 2001, Joe Kenny had all the time to indulge in the exercise of producing a memoir but curiously, he did no such thing. Perhaps, being the self-effacing person that he truly was, he thought of such an effort and exercise as a form of narcissism that was contrary to his performance of humility and radical poverty the Order of Preachers was historically well known. Conceivably, were Kenny alive, he might disapprove of the effort to ‘excavate’ and scrutinize his past in search of lessons for the present generations of scholars of religion. That he can no longer speak for himself means we are obligated to speak for him as clearly as possible. *De mortuis nihil nisi bonum* —‘of the dead, nothing but good’⁴ — notwithstanding, perhaps, there is something of value and worth in engaging with the records and facts of Kenny’s life and works.

Joseph Kenny’s grandparents came from Ireland to Chicago, the United States of America, in the 1880s. His grandfather was a builder and, together with his sons, developed a large-scale construction company in Chicago. Kenny’s grandmother was the daughter of an Anglican father and a Catholic mother. Consistent with Catholic doctrine and practice, the children were raised as Catholics. His own parents were born in America and so became American citizens automatically. Kenny’s father left school after grade six in order to help sustain the family. He held many jobs, one of which was serving as a firefighter for 26 years. After retirement from the Fire Department, he studied for, and passed, an exam as an Engineer for the City of Chicago, something normally requiring a college degree. In that capacity, he directed operations in a major steam plant in Chicago.

Kenny’s strong Catholic ancestry accounts for Joe Kenny being schooled in Catholic institutions. Born on 12 January 1936, in a suburb of Chicago, Joseph Kenny attended Christ the King grade school staffed by the Sisters of Mercy, and then Quigley Preparatory School in Chicago, which is the Archdiocesan minor seminary--a five-year pre-seminary education. According to Joe Kenny’s immediate younger brother, Dr Henry James Kenny (interview, 12.12.2015), this school “was a rigorous program and he applied himself diligently. [He] was an extremely conscientious student. I remember him burning the midnight oil on his homework while at Quigley Seminary Prep. Quigley had an especially challenging curriculum, which went

³ As one of his students for more than five years in the early 1990s, I had several personal brushes with him. As the quintessential Thomist that he was, Joe Kenny had wanted me to write my B.A. long essay on St. Thomas Aquinas, but I chose to research Lying and Truth-telling in the Christian tradition instead. He was unhappy with me for some time. While I have admired and learnt from his academic production, I think he was a much clearer writer and thinker than an oral communicator of ideas and thoughts. Perhaps, he knew this, and so committed to writing almost every lecture he taught and sermon he preached. The point here is that he had a very idiosyncratic, but effective, way of doing things; he was not afraid of being eccentric or different insofar as he achieved results.

⁴ A variant of this Latin saying is ‘*De mortuis nil nisi bene [dicendum]*’ (‘Of the dead, nothing [spoken] unless well (truthfully)’), which means that it is inappropriate, impious or disrespectful to speak ill of the dead (because they can no longer defend themselves).



well beyond the high school level”. From there he proceeded to the major seminary of the Chicago archdiocese at Mundelein. He spent two years in the major seminary before transferring to the Dominican seminary in Iowa.⁵ The Dominican Order, also known as the Order of Preachers, the English translation of the Latin “*Ordo Praedicatorum*” (O.P), established in 1216 by St. Dominic, was a three-prong mix of contemplation, apostolic activity and a strong quest for knowledge and education (Showers 2011; O’Connor 2018 [1922])).⁶ The Dominican Order is famously known for its triple mottos: *Laudare, Benedicere, Praedicare* (To praise, to bless and to preach); *Veritas* (Truth) and, *Contemplare et Contemplata Aliis Tradere* (To study or contemplate and to hand on the fruits of study). He started his novitiate in 1956. The novitiate is a period a person enters a religious order to acquaint themselves of the demands and routines of the lifestyle before proceeding to take the vows if they persevered. Kenny made his first profession of vows in 1957 in Winona, Minnesota, and his final vows in 1960. The Order of Preacher, unlike other Catholic fraternities, take only one vow, obedience. The vow of obedience, Dominican theology assumes, presupposes and subsumes the vows of voluntary chastity and poverty. He was ordained a priest in 1963 (Kenny 2010a: 303). During his formative years as a Dominican, he earned a Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees in philosophy from the Aquinas Institute, River Forest, the USA in 1959 and 1960 respectively. He also earned a Master of Arts in Theology at the Aquinas Institute, Dubuque, in 1964.

According to Kenny (2013a: 304), “From my entrance into the Order [of Preachers] in 1956 until my ordination in 1963 I had no interest in coming to Nigeria or Africa”. As it turned out later, what changed his mind and made him come to Nigeria also changed the course of the academic study of religion in Nigerian universities. This was in January 1964 while he was concluding his Master of Arts degree in Theology at the Aquinas Institute, Dubuque, he listened to a talk by Edward Lawton, O.P., the first Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese in northern Nigeria, to Dominican theology students.⁷ The bishop delivered two instructions from the Vatican about the apostolate of the (American) Dominicans in Nigeria. Early, the Dominicans had come to Nigeria from the Province of St. Albert the Great in the United States in 1951. They set up their first parish and operating base at Yaba, Lagos, called St. Dominic’s Catholic Church. In 1953, the Holy See assigned them to the Prefecture of Sokoto made up of the Province of Sokoto and the Province of Katsina in the then Northern Region. The first instruction was the newly-arrived American Dominicans should make their unique contribution to the life of the Church in Nigeria by establishing a Nigerian Dominican Province. By this instruction, the Americans were to indigenise the Dominican order over time by recruiting and training young Nigerians into the priesthood and brotherhood of the Order of Preachers. The second instruction “was that they should provide some specialists in Islam, well versed in Arabic, in order to help the Church understand and relate with the very important Muslim community in Nigeria” (Kenny 2010a: 304). Ten months after Bishop Lawton’s instructions, Joe Kenny arrived in Kano, northern Nigeria, on 13 November 1964. Officially, he was sent as a resource person on behalf of the Holy See to be knowledgeable in Arabic and Islam in order to work towards building an understanding and peace between the country’s two largest religious blocs: the Christian and Muslim communities.

Joe Kenny played pivotal roles in the achievement of these Vatican directives. For the next six years (1964-70), he underwent the second phase of his missionary training. The first step was

⁵ St. Dominic de Guzman, who was born in 1170 in Caleruega, Spain, founded the Dominicans Friars, officially known as the Order of Preachers in 22 December 1216.

⁶ <http://www.op.org/en>

⁷ The Prefecture Apostolic of Sokoto was erected on 29 June 1953. Edward Thaddeus Lawton, O.P. was appointed bishop on 15 January 1954 until his death on 19 December 1966. He was succeeded by Michael James Dempsey, O.P. on 13 July 1967 until his resignation on 3 December 1984. The third bishop was Kelvin Joseph Aje who was appointed on 3 December 1984 until his retirement on 10 June 2011. The fourth Catholic bishop of Sokoto is the politically active public intellectual, Matthew Hassan Kukah (10 June 2011 – Present), former student of Joseph Kenny.



to learn Hausa, an important lingua franca across the whole of West Africa. The Hausa language is a Chadic language spoken by more than 20 million people as first language across nine countries (namely, Niger, Nigeria, Ghana, Benin Republic, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Togo, and Sudan). An additional 20 million people speak the language as a second(ary) language (see Newman, 1996; 2000; Bauer 2007; Eldredge 2018). To immerse himself in the Hausa linguistic and culture zone, he was assigned to an outpost of the Dominican Apostolate in Malumfashi, in Katsina Province, a town with a population of about 50,000 inhabitants (Last 2018). For two years, he grappled with a new language but also soaking in the religious and political culture of the town at the same time. According to Kenny (2010a: 304), “As I worked on the Hausa language, I had the chance to see and hear the Sardauna of Sokoto several times and experience the Islamic atmosphere of Sokoto”. His first acquaintance with Islam was through direct contact and interaction with the ancient Islamic institutions of northern Nigeria.

Having already earned two master’s degrees, one in Philosophy and the other in Theology, during his priestly formation, in 1966, just as the Biafra-Nigerian Civil war was breaking out, Kenny proceeded to the University of Edinburgh in Scotland for his doctoral studies in Arabic and Islamic Studies. In between this period, he was juggling three different academic programmes in four different countries: Scotland, Italy, Egypt, and Tunisia. He earned a diploma in the Arabic language from the University of Tunis in 1967; the same year, he earned a certificate in the Arabic language from the Pontifical Institute of Arabic Studies in Rome. In 1970, he earned a doctorate in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Edinburgh and returned to Nigeria.

Knowledge Missionary

According to the German sociologist, Martin Riesebrodt (2010: 36):

All Christian missionaries believed that their religion alone represented ‘the Way, the truth, and the life’. They saw all other religions as either fundamentally false or hopelessly corrupt. Furthermore, they saw themselves as representatives not only of a superior religion but also of a superior culture.

In recent decades, the role of missionaries in Africa has been undergoing a series of critical review, especially in their connection to and with the colonial enterprise and mayhem on the continent (Comaroff and Comaroff 1989; 1991; Chidester 2014; Leach 2019). Many people characterise Joe Kenny as “a missionary to Africa”, but it may be more apt to think of him as a missionary to Islam and to Muslims who never succeeded in directly converting a single Muslim to Christianity. He was a different kind of missionary who was more interested in unveiling and propagating local Islamic knowledge to the Christian communities of Nigeria. On his return to Nigeria in 1970, he worked in Sokoto for a few years, concluding that “A short time in Sokoto convinced me that I could not cross the cultural and religious divide and develop any meaningful rapport with the Sokoto religious establishment” (Kenny 2010a:304). This realisation became his turning point in his missionary self-understanding. He was not to convert Muslims to Christianity but to create a knowledge base and understanding between Nigerian Muslims and Christians. In 1971, he was appointed a visiting lecturer at the Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Major Seminary in Ibadan, southwest of Nigeria, and the following year he became a visiting lecturer at St. Augustine’s Seminary in Jos, Plateau State. These were Kenny’s first teaching appointments in Nigeria, the beginning of a long and illustrious career in the production and dissemination of religion knowledge. As it turned out, Joe Kenny was already beginning to implement the Vatican’s mandate of training local Catholic clergy in Islamic history, theology and inter-religious relations or dialogue. Assigned to the Dominican Priory of St. Thomas Aquinas in Ibadan, in 1976 to “lead the first experiment of an Inter-African Dominican Institute of Theology” (IADIT), a project that was designed to bring African Dominicans from all over Africa under a single theological institute. For three years he grappled with this “experiment”, but it was “doomed to fail from the start” because of the complicated



nature of Anglophone and Francophone African intellectual traditions. As the project crumbled, Kenny decided to return to northern Nigeria once more. With the backing of the Vatican Secretariat and *Missio*, he was “to start a centre in Jos to coordinate [the] study of Islam and outreach to Muslims throughout the northern states” (Kenny 2010a: 305). Perhaps, Joe Kenny was the first to realise the full ramifications of the serious intellectual challenge which Islam posed to the Nigerian Christian community. The Catholic Bishop of Jos in 1976, Gabriel G. Ganaka⁸, would have nothing to do with Kenny’s proposed project of outreach to Muslims. Again, like the IADIT, the outreach project was stillborn, and Kenny prepared to head back to the Dominican parish in Yelwa, in the former Sokoto State. Before Kenny’s scholarship, many Nigerian Christians and Muslims thought of interreligious dialogue and mutual relationship as weakness and compromise of mission and vision; a betrayal of faith conviction and salvific mandate. Hence, even from within the Catholic hierarchy, Kenny’s initial efforts were rebuffed and discouraged. His success in the long term stemmed from his independence as a Dominican, and not a diocesan, priest and his initial status as an American, and not a Nigerian.

As Kenny was poised to head out to Yelwa, a representative of the University of Ibadan approached him with an offer to occupy a vacant post to teach Islam in the Department of Religious Studies. As a Dominican under the vow of obedience, he could not accept the offer without the approval of his superior, that is, the Dominican Vicar for Nigeria, Ambrose Peter John Windbacher (23 March 1914 – 08 October 2001).⁹ Windbacher gave his approval and Kenny accepted the job at lecturer 1 position. Between 1 November 1979 and 1981 he occupied the Lecturer I position and became a senior lecturer in 1981, a position he kept until 1994 when he was promoted to a full professorship position. He retired from the services of the University of Ibadan on 30 September 2001, after 22 years in a public university in Nigeria. About his experience at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Kenny said the members of the rival Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies opposed Christians teaching Islam; they ridiculed a colleague of his, Sam Babs Mala, who taught Islam because he had no knowledge of Arabic. After a prolonged disagreement between the two departments, officials of both departments and the university administration “agreed that Religious Studies [Department] could teach Islam in a comparative context. If uncomfortable with me, they, at least respected me. Nearly all my classes had some Muslim students” (Kenny 2010a: 306). Muslim scholars respected him because of his mastery of ancient languages such as Hebrew and Latin as well as Arabic and the depth of his philological immersion in ancient Islamic texts. In addition to his professorship position at the University of Ibadan, Kenny was a visiting professor at Les Facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa, DRC, from 1987 to 1999. On retirement from the University of Ibadan, he became a professor at the Dominican Institute, Ibadan from 2001 until 2011.

It is important to reflect on why one academic department would contest and oppose what a different department teaches and wish to approve of it before it is taught to students. Nigerian Muslims are generally uncomfortable to have a non-Muslim teach Islam in any public educational institution.¹⁰ As Chidester (1996; 2014) argues, the invention of the comparative study of religion was driven by the ideologies of empire. European anthropologists and missionaries were primarily interested in the religion of the ‘Other’ as a way of furthering the

⁸ G. G. Ganaka was bishop of Jos from 5 October until his death on 11 November 1999 (see <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/djosn.html>, [accessed 15.01.2016])

⁹ Although Fr. Windbacher (ordained in 1954 and came to Nigeria in 1955) died at Oak Park Hospital, Oak Park, Illinois, his remains were returned to Lagos and buried at the St. Dominic’s parish church ground in Yaba, Lagos, on 21 November 2001. He served as the Vicar Provincial of the Dominican Order in Nigeria between 1975 and 1983. This is remarkable reversal of the popular practice of Africans who die abroad and their remains are flown to their ancestral home for interment as a sign of reunification with the ancestral realm, a condition that meets one of the criteria for induction into ancestorhood and reincarnation (Idowu 1971/1973: 178-189; Ikenga-Metuh 1987: 145-159). It may be argued that by being buried in Nigeria, Windbacher and the other American Dominicans buried in Nigeria become African Christian ancestors.

¹⁰ Nigerian Pentecostal Christians are equally uncomfortable with a Christian learning and teaching Islam.



agenda and domestication of the non-European. When missionaries studied African indigenous religions, they were concerned with how to convert members of the religion to Christianity rather than understanding the force and working of the religious worldview of the people. Muslims also believe that the purpose of Islamic knowledge is nearness to God, rather than a disinterested understanding of how people worship God. Understanding Islam, according to Muslims, promotes the proper worship of Allah and true religion (Kenny 2013a: 95). Furthermore, many Nigerian Muslims believe that Christians are impure, and so, not supposed to even mention the name of Allah or touch the Quran. In parts of northern Nigeria, some non-Muslims have been lynched by Muslim mobs for allegedly touching the Quran, an act these Muslims consider a profanation and sacrilege. How does anyone teach or study Islam without touching or quoting from the Islamic sacred book? Members of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies respected Kenny because of his unparalleled knowledge of Arabic (and other ancient languages¹¹) and his non-polemical, expository, and comparative methodology in researching, teaching and writing about Islam.

Academic Conversion: “To Love a Muslim is Christian”

Joe Kenny’s first published essay was in 1961: “Lutheranism and Church Law”. Quintessential Kenny, characterised by the economy of words, the first paragraph of this essay contained four sentences.

The original intention of Luther's reformation was the correction of the abuses which prevailed in the Church of his time. There was the quest for money through the distribution of indulgences. There was an exaggerated emphasis on external works to the exclusion of the motivation which should animate them. There was an insistence on many positive Church rules to the detriment of liberty of conscience.¹²

The last essay Kenny published was in 2013: “Islam in Nigeria through 50 Years of Independence”¹³. Written in the format of Plato’s dialogue, it is a conversation between two Nigerian Muslims, Abduh and Amir, about the most important duties and travails of Muslims and Islam in Nigeria. The last paragraph reads in part,

Abduh: “We need religious education. But beyond that, our youth need the expertise to excel in all sectors of our society. We now have a number of private Muslim schools and universities, but we can do better. We need more institutions that produce graduates of world-class competency. [...]”

Amir: “Our nation is in a sorry state. We have the resources, we have the means to jumpstart its development. What is holding us back from this jihad?” (Kenny 2013a: 100).

For Kenny, developing society through the mobilisation of religion knowledge and learning is a proper form of jihad, a religious duty of utmost importance.

Kenny was as prolific as he was profound in his scholarship. Between his first and last published essays, he produced more than 231 books and essays in English, Arabic and French. These may be fairly grouped into ten categories, viz.: i) Christian theology and philosophy, ii) Liturgical theology and worship music, iii) Translations of biblical texts into Hausa, iv) history of the Catholic church in Africa, v) Islamic history, spirituality, theology and philosophy, vi) Translations of classical Arabic texts into English, vii) Christian- Muslim

¹¹ Joe Kenny was fluent in writing and speaking in 13 languages, two of which are Nigerian languages: English, Arabic, Latin, Deutsch, Spanish, Hebrew, Dutch, Yoruba, Hausa, Italian, French, Portuguese, and Greek.

¹² <http://www.dhspriory.org/kenny/LutheranChLaw.htm> (17.01.2016)

¹³ Originally written and presented the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) seminar on “Know your Muslim Neighbour” in Abuja on 20 April 2010.



relations and dialogue, viii) Comparative religion (mainly Christian-Muslim concepts and personages); ix) (Medical) Ethics and economics (Islamic banking), x) Philosophy of (higher) education (Kenny 2010b; 2013b:69-78). Kenny, however, had a very different grouping of his writings, namely: Thomism; Christian Studies; Islamic History; Islamic Law; Islamic Philosophy/Theology; Christian-Muslim Relations. To these, he added compilations of materials: Dominican Liturgy (chants and texts); Thomas Aquinas in English; Philosophical Texts; Patristic Texts; Texts for Muslims interested in Christian beliefs.¹⁴

More important in these scholarly productions is the significant shift that marked a turning point in the career and life trajectory of Kenny. He started with the concern of church government, doctrines and history in the United States and ended with the concern and call to develop Nigeria, particularly by mobilising Muslim resources, Islamic ideas and systems. He recognised the value of religious and religion education in building a long-lasting civilisation and development, which he rightly calls a “jihad”. In the first essay he identified why the Catholic Church rejected Luther’s reform (Luther rejected the divine origin of the episcopacy and the papacy); in the last essay he argued for why Nigerian Muslims should reject blind faith and rediscover the best of philosophical traditions as key to unlocking the secrets of scientific innovation and societal development.

For someone who worked on many projects at the same time, some of them commissioned by the Holy See, some by professional associations and others by the Dominican Order in Nigeria or elsewhere in the world, it is challenging to neatly classify Kenny’s academic productions. Between 1961 and 1966, Kenny’s publications were on church history and doctrines. His first publication on Islam was in 1967, with “Islam – Christian Dialog: A conversation” (Kenny 1967). Already, the Nigerian context and concern were imprinted on his academic life and trajectory. This was also the same time that he was embarking on his training in Arabic language and doctoral studies. In 1970, Kenny wrote seven essays, all of them on Islam or Muslim-Christian relations. His doctoral dissertation titled “Muslim Theology as presented by Muhammad b. Yusuf as-Sanusi especially in his al-àqida al-wusta” (with edition of Arabic text and translation) was submitted to the University of Edinburgh in 1970. One important essay from 1970 was titled “Reassessment of Apostolate among Muslims” (Kenny 1970). Published in January 1970, the same month that the Nigerian-Biafra genocidal war ended, this essay clearly marked a crisis of conscience and vocation in the author and adoption of a position, which much of the Nigerian Catholic hierarchy, and indeed many high-ranking Nigerian Christians would reject. According to Kenny (1970),

Some authors reject the idea of anonymous Christians and salvation without knowledge of biblical revelation [...]. Others hold that these millions by the moral choices in their lives have accepted God without knowing anything about the grace of Christ. [...] This is the position taken in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church of the Second Vatican Council, [...] and the position I will assume in developing what follows. For Muslims, of course, it is no compliment to be regarded as “anonymous Christians” or as belonging to the invisible Church. Nevertheless, the question at hand is not one of concepts Christians and Muslims can agree upon, but the view regarding Muslims which a Christian may adopt within the framework of his own faith and beliefs. Approaching non-Christians with the assumption that for the most part they already belong to the people or Kingdom of God causes considerable soul-searching among missionaries. “If they already have what we came to bring them, what are we here for?” But with some reflection on

¹⁴ <http://www.dhspriority.org/kenny/> (accessed 18.01.2016)



the Gospel, the answer is not long in coming; "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10. 10).¹⁵

Perhaps, this is fundamental to why Kenny never tried to convert a Muslim to Christianity; he came only to enlighten both Christians and Muslims to a fuller knowledge of universal truth of transcendence. Arguably, 1970 was the year when Kenny started rethinking and reassessing his understanding of mission and his role as a missionary among Nigerian Muslims. He did not want to convert them to Christianity but to bring life, intellectual life and knowledge, to them in a fuller sense. Kenny's *reconversion* in relation to Islam and Muslims is not unique in the history of scholars of religion or even Christian missionaries who rethought their vocation and mission on encountering Muslims. The famous British scholar and philosopher of religion, John Hick recounts how, on encountering the multi-faith communities of Birmingham in 1967, his Christian missionary assumptions were undermined, and he reached a conclusion that, although the externals of many religious traditions manifest differences,

at a deeper level it seemed evident to me that essentially the same thing was going on in all these different places of worship, namely men and women were coming together under the auspices of some ancient, highly developed tradition which enables them to open their minds and hearts 'upwards' towards a higher divine reality which makes a claim on the living of their lives (Hick 2002: 160).

Kenny must have reached a similar position just about the same time, partly facilitated by the just concluded the Second Vatican Council and its liberalising theology of religions, and partly because of his first-hand experience of the Muslim community culture of northern Nigeria. By 1971, Kenny was already publishing essays directed "Towards better understanding of Muslims and Christians" (Kenny 1971/72) as well as examining what important Catholic philosophers and theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, knew and wrote about Islam and Muslims.¹⁶ His deep understanding and conviction about Islam and Muslims led him to post on his door at the Dominican Priory in Ibadan a statement that reads, "To love a Muslim is Christian".¹⁷

Even with this deep conviction about Islam and Muslims, Kenny recognises that Islam poses serious challenges to the Nigerian nation-state. In "The Challenge of Islam in Nigeria", Kenny (1992) identifies six areas in which Islam represents a formidable force towards the practice of Christianity in Nigeria. The first and perhaps most disturbing is Muslim persecution and discrimination against Christians; the second, according to Kenny is Muslim proselytism, the use of inducement to produce religious conversion such as in promotions, the award of contracts or marriage. The third is the intellectual challenge in the form of attacks on Christian beliefs; the four is the seduction of supernatural power by Muslim imams. The fifth is related to the problem of materially induced proselytism, the seduction of the good and materially comfortable lives of many Muslims; and lastly the challenge of dialogue and mission among Muslims, and how to reconcile these two approaches. These challenges have escalated since Kenny's essay see (Ukah 2009). Kenny maintained a balanced or nuanced understanding of Islam; according to his brother and also supported by several of Kenny's published work, he neither maintained that "Islam is a war-like religion", nor that "Islam is a peaceful religion".¹⁸ He was phenomenologically sophisticated in allowing the facts of history, theology and everyday practice of believers to speak for themselves and allowing his readers to reach their own conclusions. Recognising the multi-faceted challenges of Islam is not, for Kenny, a cause

¹⁵ Quotation from the online version, <http://www.dhspriory.org/kenny/Reassessment.htm> (accessed 18.01.2016)

¹⁶ See Joseph Kenny, O.P. "Thomas Aquinas, Islam and the Arab Philosophers", <http://www.catholicapologetics.info/apologetics/islam/thomas.htm> (accessed 18.01.2016)

¹⁷ Interview with Henry James Kenny (25.01.2016)

¹⁸ Interview with Henry James Kenny.



for alarm or fear but a call to “reach out to Muslims in dialogical evangelization and cooperation for peace, justice and development” (Kenny 1992:58). The necessity of interreligious dialogue and cooperation in the development and peaceful co-existence of Muslims and Christians in Nigeria was a central pillar of Kenny’s scholarship. Perhaps, Kenny remains the only Nigerian Christian clergy who have visited the Islamic Republic of Iran in pursuit of interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Travelling as a Nigerian citizen with his Nigerian passport, Joe Kenny made two trips to the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2012 to engage Muslim leaders of Iran in active pursuit of dialogue, inter-faith relations and understanding.

AveJoe: The Price and Weight of Radical Poverty

Joseph Kenny was a successful academic, an accomplished priest¹⁹ and a renowned bee farmer, but a very poor person by choice. As a professor, he consistently wore bathroom slippers to class; he would only wear a pair of leather sandals when travelling outside Ibadan or outside the country. He made and washed his own clothes himself, according to his next-door neighbour at the priory in Ibadan because he did not want to burden anyone but more importantly, he felt he could perform those tasks better than anyone else could. Kenny was a perfectionist. He did not drive or own a car but had a Honda (Benly) motorcycle that enabled him to ride from the Dominican House in Samonda, Ibadan, to the University of Ibadan, where he taught. In line with the Rules of the Dominican Order (which is an adaptation of the Rule of St. Augustine²⁰), Kenny donated all his salary and earnings to his religious community. His dense international networks brought in so many resources to the Dominican Order in Nigeria. His best friend and mentor was the famous American sociologist, novelist and Catholic priest, Andrew M. Greeley (5 February 1928 – 28 May 2013), through whose assistance, Kenny brought tons of books and library equipment to build the now-renowned Dominican Institute in Ibadan. In line with his spirit and practice of radical poverty, just before his death, Kenny left an explicit instruction that in lieu of flowers for his funeral, donations should be made to the Dominican University of Nigeria Development Fund (USA), a cause he championed all through his life.²¹ Before joining the Order of Preachers, Joe Kenny has been trained to live simply. The family background was key to his formation in the practice of poverty: “With six living children, we found it hard to make ends meet, and she [Kenny’s mother] learned to be thrifty and not wasteful”.²²

On 28 January 2013, which coincides with the feast of St. Thomas Aquinas in the Catholic liturgical calendar, Joseph Kenny died after a brief illness with cancer at a facility managed by The Little Sisters of the Poor in Washington DC. He came to Nigeria as an American citizen but died as a naturalised Nigerian citizen.²³ According to Kenny’s younger brother, Henry²⁴, Kenny’s faith and dedication came from “our mother’s milk”. Joseph Kenny was fondly called “AveJoe” (like in Ave Maria) for his unalloyed devotion to Mary, Mother of Jesus. Kenny’s mother — Margaret Kenny, who died on 13 September 1993 — attended the Visitation High School in Chicago staffed by the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters, where she “absorbed [the] Catholic tradition and theology. She, in turn, passed a firm foundation of faith onto her children, including Fr. Joe, who in turn, passed it on to those of you in Nigeria”²⁵.

¹⁹ In addition to his academic writings, Joe Kenny published online more than 1000 sermons preached as priest covering the three different Catholic liturgical years (See: <http://www.dhsprory.org/kenny/Sermons.htm>)

²⁰ See “Rule of St. Augustine”, <https://opeast.org/about/our-order/rule-st-augustine/> (accessed 26.io.2019).

²¹ <http://opcentral.org/blog/in-memoriam/fr-joseph-peter-kenny-o-p/> (13.01.2016)

²² Joseph Kenny, Funeral Sermon for his mother, 16 September 1993, <http://www.dhsprory.org/kenny/funerals.htm#2> (20.01.2016).

²³ He naturalised about the year 2000 (Thanks for Dr. Dr. Stan Ukwe, O.P. for specifying the year.)

²⁴ His two brothers, Henry, Paul, and sisters, Catherin and Margaret, survived Joe Kenny. Because Joe was one of six siblings, it is likely that one of them was deceased earlier than Joe did. A bit disquieting is the fact of no mention of the father at all in any of the extant texts by Joe Kenny.

²⁵ Email interview with Henry James Kenny, 12.12.2015.



In a funeral homily preached on 16 September 1993, Joe Kenny described his mother in these glowing words:

Mother had a painful life and a painful death [...] She also had a beautiful life and a beautiful death. [...] As the eighth of the nine children of Peter Henry and Catherine Parks, her privileged childhood was shaken by a serious mastoid operation and the death of her younger sister Kathleen. Educated by the Adrian Dominicans at St. Columbanus and the Sinsinawa Dominicans at Visitation High School, she was well prepared to enter the secular environment of Normal Teachers College. Capped by a degree from Loyola, she entered confidently the then anti-Catholic world of the Chicago Board of Education, eager to prove her competency as a teacher as well as answer any blunt or subtle jibes to her faith. Well-read and well informed, she whipped off protest letters to newspapers and radio and TV stations any time they smeared the Catholic faith. As a teacher, not only was she able to turn out students of high academic standard; she gained a reputation for being able to win over and soften the most difficult kids.²⁶

What was in “mother’s milk” was the faith she bequeathed to her children. “She made sure we went to Mass on Sunday [...]. The problems and crises of each child, and later each grandchild, she took as her own. They became her own prayer, pain and sleepless nights”. Looking back on the life trajectory of Kenny, it is easy to see how he took after his mother in, not just defending the Catholic faith, but defending Islam and, by extension, all religious faiths and traditions.

Kenny and the Academic Study of Religion in Nigeria

For 22 years, Kenny taught at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, and was Head of Department between 1 August 1995 and 31 July 1998. He was the editor of *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* from June 1985 to December 1995. This journal remains one of the longest running journals in any Nigerian university to date. He bought and installed the first computer in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan and in so doing changed the way student results were computed and stored. Because he mastered two different religious traditions and designed courses along with a comparative view of these two traditions, he changed the deeply theological way religion studies was and is done at the University of Ibadan. At the time Kenny joined the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan, the teaching staff in the department were all Protestant clergymen, many of them with links to the Protestant Immanuel College of Theology at Samonda, Ibadan. What amounted to the teaching of religion studies was deeply influenced by Protestant theology and spirituality. Some described the management of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan of being an outpost of Immanuel College of Theology, an ecumenical Protestant seminary. Before Kenny joined the University of Ibadan, “Comparative Religious Studies” was understood as the study of African indigenous religious cultures and ideas as defined and established by Geoffrey Parrinder who founded the Department of Religious studies in 1948 and trained Bolaji Idowu who followed in the study and hellenisation of Yoruba indigenous religious ideas and ritual (p’Bitek 1979; Shaw 1991). Christian Religious Studies meant the study of Protestant theology and scriptural interpretation as developed by S.O. Abogunrin, D. A. Alao and John O. Akao, with a sprinkling of African indigenous religious traditions.

Kenny’s presence and scholarship altered the flavour and methodology of studying and teaching religion. Kenny taught courses with titles such as “Islam”, “Islam in West Africa”; “Comparative Themes and hermeneutics in the Bible and the Quran”, and “Common Themes in Christian and Islamic Theology”. Courses such as these underscored Kenny’s comparative

²⁶ <http://www.dhspriority.org/kenny/funerals.htm#2> (18.01.2016)



methodology and historical approach to the diverse traditions within Islam and Christianity. More importantly, Kenny created an atmosphere of dialogue that engendered trust between scholars of Islam and Christianity in various Nigerian universities. Of the 70 Catholic bishops in Nigeria, more than half passed through Joe Kenny's class on the history and theology of Islam, and/or Christian-Muslim relations and dialogue. The minimal respectful relationship that exists between Nigeria's Catholic and Muslim communities is partly the foundational work cultivated by Joe Kenny. The Muslim community in Nigeria demonstrates marked respect for the Catholic Church because it realises that the church has invested resources in understanding Islamic history, philosophy and theology. Not being a great orator, the profundity of Kenny's thoughts is obvious in the uncomplicated but profound ways in which he committed them in writing and always made them accessible in many forms; he debunked the (African) myth that to be a successful erudite scholar means being conceptually and intellectually inaccessible and turgid. Through his scholarship, he made obscure Islamic and Western historical texts and ideas ubiquitous. Kenny's practice of radical poverty is evident in his deconstruction of complex ideas, concepts and histories and sharing them with large, knowledge-hungry audiences of students and colleagues, irrespective of religious, national, or ethnic affiliations.

The place and significance of Joseph Peter Kenny in the academic study of religions in Nigeria, and by extension Africa, is assured for a very long time to come. Any history or study of the comparative and dialogical study of religion in Nigeria will certainly recognise the work of Kenny, not as an American Catholic missionary and proselytiser, but as a bridge – builder and trendsetter who worked hard in the production and dissemination of cross-cultural and interreligious knowledge necessary for mutual respect and coexistence in a multi-religious society such as Nigeria and much of Africa. Kenny complements the historic works of Parrinder and Idowu and forms a formidable pillar in the tripod stand upon which the academic study of religion in Nigeria is constructed.

Joe was a strong advocate of our being able to explain our Catholic beliefs, and not criticizing others' beliefs. He said if you don't explain your reasons for beliefs in a discussion with Muslims, they think you are a fraud or fluke. He said they expect you to defend your faith. With regard to Islam, he said to let the record speak for itself, so his effort was to lay out the facts as best could be determined.²⁷

Joseph Kenny was a Catholic because he was born into a Catholic home. He acquired strong faith and firm devotion to Mary, Mother of Jesus, because he drank it from his "mother's milk". In his scholarship, he affirmed life, peace, justice and development above sectarian interests.²⁸ Just like St. Augustine of Hippo, who in a similar manner wrote about how he drank the devotion to "my Saviour, Thy Son" from "my mother's milk"²⁹, the influence of Joe Kenny's mother is key to understanding the trajectory of

²⁷ Henry James Kenny, email communication, 16.12.2015.

²⁸ His affirmation of life and human values is evident in his relationship with the West African Bioethics Training (WAB) programme. He was an early and strong supporter of the WAB program. He identified strongly with the strategy of engaging local institutions in a multidisciplinary endeavour that encompasses all religious, traditional, cultural and socioeconomic stakeholders in Nigeria. He was an advocate of bioethics training in Nigeria and was very active in all WAB programs. (<http://bioethicscenter.net/web/index.php/news-center/wab-news/75-fr-joseph-peter-kenny-o-p>). Joe was very close to our Aunt, who was a registered nurse and like a second mother to our family. She was a devout Catholic and would often take Joe to the beautiful church of St. Columbanus that was in her neighbourhood (Henry J. Kenny, email communication, 26.01.2016). His interest in bioethics could have come from this early association.

²⁹ *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, translated by Edward Bouverie Pusey, (N.D), (<http://sparks.eserver.org/books/augustineconfess.pdf>), p. 21



his spiritual formation, dedication to the Catholic Church and her teaching and his practice of poverty. He joined the Dominicans very likely as a continuation of the mother's acquaintance with the Dominican Order. Like the influence of St. Augustine's mother, Monica, whose "fanatical determination that he [Augustine] should be a Catholic Christian became for her an obsession — the burning mission of her life" (Woolcott 1966: 274), Margaret Kenny was a defining influence, a shining light and force in the life, spirituality and vocation of Joseph 'AveJoe' Kenny.

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