# The Concept of the African Family as a Symbol for Ecumenical Dialogue and an Inclusive Theology: Perspectives from an African Woman Theologian

Felix Barutwanayo
*Boston College (Boston, MA)*

## Abstract

*Diversity is an outstanding characteristic of the world today, experienced at all levels of human relationships. Differences between people may lead to tensions and complexities in communication, even when the parties are self-aware and acknowledge each other's identity. Interreligious encounters are particularly complex, due to the importance to a religious adherent of the worldview that they affirm. What models or symbols of mediation can best promote respectful and mutually enriching relationships across differences in religious identity?*

*In this context of worldwide diversity, Mercy Amba Oduyoye proposes the symbol of the African family as a model for ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. I examine the symbolic significance of the concept of the family in Africa, and the unique characteristics it can offer to the global challenge of interreligious dialogue, particularly dialogue that includes non-Abrahamic religious or philosophies. I conclude that while the ontological and functional meaning of the African family makes it an attractive symbol for ecumenical dialogue, it remains inadequate to support the full inclusion of non-Abrahamic religions and philosophies as well as other marginalized groups.*

## Introduction

Ecumenical dialogue constitutes one of the most prominent topics in contemporary theological discourse because of the diversity inherent in current societies and cultures. More than ever, human beings have become aware of the expectations and responsibilities that living, working, interacting, praying, and worshiping in a diverse world entail in their daily lives. While

many people do not always reflect on how the dynamics of diversity affect them, they ultimately lead meaningful and fulfilling lives with an apprehension of their own identity and the identity of others. According to Wesley Ariarajah, "Self-awareness is said to be one of the important characteristics that separate humankind from the rest of the animal kingdom. Our capacity to reflect on the nature, purpose, and destiny of our lives contributes to the complexities that mark human thought and relationships; it has been the driving force of the heights and depths of our civilization."[1] Human interactions constitute an unavoidable reality, and the practical unfolding of such dealings remains challenging, given the diversity of peoples, cultures, religions, philosophies, and worldviews.

Christian believers in particular need to build relationships anchored in unity because Jesus calls them to be one as He is one with God the Father and the Holy Spirit (John 17:21). As the World Council of Churches suggests, our Christian identity impels us to "seek to build a new relationship with other religious traditions because we believe it to be intrinsic to the gospel message and inherent to our mission as co-workers with God in healing the world."[2] Our presupposition remains that God's will is to heal relationships among all created beings. Considering the importance of religious affiliation, how can the ecumenical project become a reality when our experience proves that religious identities tend to be so fixated that admission of differing or alternative views is rarely tolerated? What strategies or approaches could best promote respectful and mutually enriching relationships?

While concepts and symbols may carry various meanings depending on particular contexts, the concept of the family in Africa appears to cut across cultures even though its configuration's

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[1] S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Strangers or Co-Pilgrims? The Impact of Interfaith Dialogue on Christian Faith and Practice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 33.

[2] World Council of Churches, "Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding," 14 February 2006, https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/religious-plurality-and-christian-self-understanding.

characteristics and dynamics are undergoing significant transformations, especially those based on the perception of gender. The diversity and the expansive nature of the African family has been considered by some people as a symbol of what it means to live in a diverse world. The question that can be raised here is: why this symbol of the family? What unique characteristics can the African family offer to this rather global challenge of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue? How effective would this symbol be within the context of a plurality of religions? With reference to the writings of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, an African woman theologian, the purpose of this essay is to examine the symbolic significance of the concept of the family in Africa as a paradigm for ecumenical and dialogical practices within the context of a pluralistic world. The thesis this essay defends is that while the ontological and functional meaning of the African family constitutes an attractive symbol for ecumenical dialogue, it needs to be improved to fully include non-Abrahamic religions and philosophies, as well as other marginalized groups such as women and young people. The essay will begin with a short biographical note on Oduyoye and proceed to examine the African family in its ontological and functional constitution. Secondly, the essay will evaluate the symbolic significance of the African family for ecumenical and dialogical practices. Thirdly, the essay underscores the inconsistencies of this symbol of the African family in dialogue processes with non-Christian and non-Abrahamic religions and its incapacity to fully include marginalized groups, especially women, children, and young people.

## Oduyoye and her Understanding of the African Family

Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a Methodist African woman theologian, was born on October 21, 1933, in the rural south of Ghana during a cocoa field harvest at her grandfather's farm.[3] Married to Modupe Oduyoye, a Nigerian Yoruba husband from a patrilineal society, "Oduyoye's experience with patriarchal practice in African culture, with its matrilineal and patrilineal iterations, catalyzed her theological mission to discern where women's empowerment in African culture and Christianity could come from and how it might manifest."[4] Her personal experience within the family context shaped her thinking and theological commitment to raising questions and seeking answers relevant to her culture, especially facing poverty and women's lack of empowerment. How does she conceive of the African family?

The word family, derived from the Latin *familia*, designates "a group of close kin" and may refer to "a community of persons related by ties of marriage and descent."[5] The family stands as a fundamental structure whose kernel is the closeness and relatedness of its members. From a biblical understanding, Cornelius Esau asserts that "'family' or 'household' (*oikos*) signifies not only the nucleus family but the Hebrew extended family. It signifies even much more, namely, all the Chosen People, and indeed all the nations of the earth–*pasa patria en ouranois kai epi ges* (Eph 3:14). In the Fourth Gospel, it may even imply the 'heavenly home' (Jn 14:2) or the 'Kingdom of God' (Jn. 8:35)."[6] In Africa, the family constitutes one of the most basic and complex

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[3] Oluwatomisin Olayinka Oredein, *The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Ecumenism, Feminism, and Communal Practice*, Notre Dame Studies in African Theology (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2023), 13.

[4] Oredein, *The Theology of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, 35.

[5] Frank K. Flinn, *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, Encyclopedia of World Religions (New York: Facts on File, 2007), 274.

[6] Cornelius Fontem Esua, "Biblical Foundations of the Church as Family," in *The Church as Family and Biblical Perspectives*, ed. J.-B. Matand, P.D. Njoroge and Ch. Mhagama (Kinshasa: Panafrican Association of Catholic Exegetes, 1999), 37.

institutions because its contours and limitations remain an expansive reality. Oduyoye states, "The traditional African family is an ever-expanding, outward-looking community structured as concentric circles in which relationships are moderated by convention. Bifocal and parallel systems of authority for male and female ensure participation of all."[7] What is suggested here is that the family is not an enclosed reality but contains various layers of relationships, interactions, and loyalties. To understand the functioning of the family, one has to examine how its members are related and connected and the scaling of these relationships and interconnectedness. For Oduyoye, family symbolically signifies "being in one KIN-DOM,"[8] that is, a collection of humans who recognize themselves as having a shared kinship. Although this social institution comprises various persons, "Its unity is not marked by uniformity–rather it is founded on commitment to the founder and hence to her ideals and the well-being of the community that names her name and honors her symbol."[9] Mutual responsibility and shared commitment to its ideals and founding figures are essential aspects of the family. Even though Oduyoye acknowledges that "There are no perfect models for the unity of Christians," she remains convinced that we must continue our search for "human attempts at community that reflect what we yearn for and which Jesus prayed for"—that all may become one like the Trinity (John 17:21).[10]

Inspired by her matrilineal culture, Oduyoye develops an understanding of the African family using the concept of Abusua, which is "an association of households who name themselves by the same name or claim the same descent from the same woman. Chronologically diverse and spatially dispersed, they still count themselves as one. They are one blood because they are

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[7] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol of Ecumenism," *The Ecumenical Review* 43, no. 4, (1991): 465.

[8] Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol," 466.

[9] Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol," 466–67.

[10] Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol," 467.

descendants of one woman."[11] In this case, kinship is based on blood ties and shared ancestry. Oduyoye distinguishes between Western and African understandings of the family as a household. She asserts that in Africa, "a household is much larger than the Western conception of the family as a couple and their biological children. A household may comprise several such 'nuclear families' as well as other members of the Abusua and even apprentices and associates from other Abusua."[12] This concept means that the family household is an open reality in which various people find their place in the different levels of kinship relations. This expansive understanding of the African family household lays the foundations for an inclusive and all-embracing model in managing human interactions. As expansive and diverse, I argue that it can be applied to interreligious dialogue.

In addition to this openness, the Abusua creates the conditions for preserving unity even when members stay apart. In this case, "the Abusua is conceived as an indivisible unity from which one cannot separate oneself. Any attempt to dissociate oneself from the group or any member of it is frowned upon, and the ritual of separation is constructed in such a way as to make it impossible for anyone to fulfill all conditions."[13] This inclusiveness means that the unity of the Abusua supersedes all personal interests. Separation is so complex that no one would even dare imagine its possibility. In the same manner, "one cannot be excluded from the family except by a ritual which symbolizes one's death: exile marked by a gunshot at the ground near one's feet."[14] If members are expected to manifest high standards of loyalty to the Abusua, the latter also ensures that everyone receives sufficient protection and support regardless of who they are. Although

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[11] Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol," 467.
[12] Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol," 467.
[13] Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol," 468.
[14] Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol," 468.

tensions and quarrels remain unavoidable in any human society, "the wholeness and integrity of the Abusua is of supreme importance, hence the premium laid on the acceptance of responsibility for its weaker members."[15] What is suggested here is that people cannot expect as much support from outside the community as the Abusua provides. This understanding of the African family is reiterated by Agapit J. Moroso, who asserts, "as far as the 'authentic' African tradition goes, the human person is not an isolated wandering atom, with no constitutive links with other persons or institutions. Man, *Muntu, Mtu*, *Mundu* is 'essentially a member and not a fragment and is defined by membership of such and such lineage or extended family. He lives and is related in solidarity and fraternity to those who are conscious of the same ancestry.'"[16] This ancestry is why unity and mutual solidarity remain central to meaningful human relationships in Africa. Everyone must manifest allegiance to the family and one another. If the African family requires such a high commitment to unity and solidarity, how can these values serve as a reference in the quest for ecumenical dialogue? How does Oduyoye envision the African family as a functional model or symbol for ecumenical encounters?

# Ecumenical Dialogue and the Symbolic Significance of the African Family

The word "ecumenism," from Greek *oikoumenē* meaning "the whole inhabited world," designates "the effort to achieve unity among all CHRISTIAN churches both through and beyond CREED, cult, ethnic diversity, cultural tradition, and church polity. It is related to inter-religious

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[15] Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol," 468.

[16] Agapit J. Mroso, *The Church in Africa and the New Evangelisation: A Theologico-Pastoral Study of the Orientations of John Paul II*, Tesi Gregoriana Serie Teologica 6 (Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1995), 140.

relations, which promotes dialogue and exchange between religions."[17] In other words, ecumenism concerns itself with relationships within the inhabited world. According to Yves Congar, the ecumenical movement "is born of God and brought to us by the Spirit of God. The distinguishing mark of a work of the Holy Spirit is that realities or men, apparently not destined to meet, find themselves at a given moment led to cooperate toward a certain unity of action."[18] What is suggested here is that the practice of ecumenism constitutes a divine gift meant to challenge human beings to effect better forms of unity and collaboration in the world. As Congar adds, "an ecumenical meeting is a meeting between believers who are heretics to one another. However, despite their irreducible oppositions, they are resolved to remain together in obedience to the call they have heard."[19] For this reason, ecumenism constitutes a divine mission or mandate—one that humanity cannot escape—to fulfill God's design for a unified world beyond individual, denominational, and particular philosophical differences.

The word "dialogue," on the other hand, refers to various interpretations and meanings. According to David Lochhead, "'dialogue' can mean simply 'chatting.' It can refer to a very formal process of conversations at the official level between representatives of different groups. It can refer to a purely linguistic exchange between the dialogue partners. It can also mean an encounter that goes far beyond the merely verbal level."[20] This variety of meanings illustrates how complex the dialogical process can become because it involves a wide range of activities. When the term "ecumenical dialogue" is used, it refers to the process or the activity of engaging through contact, theological conversations or exchanges, or relationships with people from other religious

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[17] Flinn, *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, 251. Capitalization is in the original and indicates terms with an entry in the encyclopedia.

[18] Yves Congar, *Ecumenism and the Future of the Church* (Chicago: The Priory Press, 1967), 27.

[19] Congar, *Ecumenism*, 28.

[20] David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 54.

traditions. The declaration *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II states that "the Church, therefore, exhorts her sons [and daughters] that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men [and women]."[21] Dialogue implies paying attention to the values and spiritual gifts that may come from others, however different from us they might be. This dialogue may also apply to the concept of the family from an African perspective. What can the Abusua model contribute to the global understanding of ecumenical dialogue?

There seems to be a close connection between the model of the African family and the Church as an institution called to ecumenical dialogue. The symbol of the Abusua can be equated with the symbol of the Church as a family. Building on the preceding presuppositions about the African family, Oduyoye asserts that "the oikos of God… may be envisioned as the people of God inhabiting this earth and organized into households of prayer that name themselves with distinctive names. The Christian Abusua is a unit that can communicate and care because they own one source and one symbol."[22] Since Christians acknowledge that they share the same Lord and Savior, "the whole church is ONE ABUSUA–our denominations become expressions of the family by households and history of the development of individual households of the Abusua."[23] This development means that the characteristics of the traditional African Abusua can be applied to the Christian churches and denominations as a whole. Oduyoye insists that "the word 'family' in its African sense as an Abusua be reserved for all those who name themselves by Christ and call each

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[21] Vatican Council II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate*, (28 October 1965) §2, at The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

[22] Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol," 469.

[23] Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol," 469.

'denomination a household.'"[24] The reason for this classification is that "Christians are not the only 'people of God' but only one of the 'seven' or more 'Abusua' [religious communities] into which human religiosity groups people."[25] While this model of classifying religions as households may prove functionally positive in the process of dialogue with non-Christian religions, since it presents Christianity as one among others, one may wonder if all Christian denominations can assent to it given that some, like the Catholic Church, consider themselves as the "true church" upholding the "complete truth" about revelation more than others.[26] As Erin M. Brigham rightly puts it, "Dialogue must be built on a foundation of mutual respect, which allows for an honest exchange of truths, and the truth claims raised by participants in the ecumenical encounter must adequately reflect the context they are representing."[27] The challenge here is, who determines the criteria for these truths and under what authority?

# The Limitations of the African Family Model for Ecumenical Dialogue

Considering the African family as a paradigm for ecumenical dialogue remains a challenge because the recurrent existence of ethnic conflicts, rivalries, and mutual exclusion that plague many African countries questions the efficacy of this model and dictates caution in applying the concept to the worldwide challenge of ecumenism. Although social conflicts are not unique to

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[24] Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol," 469.

[25] Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol," 469.

[26] Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, (21 November 1964), §8, at The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

[27] Erin Brigham, *Sustaining the Hope for Unity: Ecumenical Dialogue in a Postmodern World* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2012), 80.

Africa, it is important to probe the impact of social challenges on Church dynamics. Since believers remain the fruits of their social environment, societal divisions affect the dynamics of relationships in the Church and its ministry. Emmanuel A. Orobator maintains that "as some African theologians have correctly pointed out, the family model is like a 'double-edged' sword: it can be used to generate a model of collaborative and participatory ministry and also to reinforce the existing structures of clericalism and exclusive ecclesial relationships."[28] This 'double-edge' is echoed by Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, who asserts that "this metaphor must be stripped of all the characteristics of patriarchal dominance" and that "the novelty of the gospel must predominate."[29] There must be a transformation before traditional models can be adopted and universalized. For Uzukwu, "the novelty of the gospel introduces a mode of being into the African family experience similar to the way Jesus lived family life in order to reassemble the new family of God or new People of God based on a new kind of relationship."[30] This new relationship implies conversion and commitment to reconcile with those holding divergent views. Although there seems to be a tendency to idealize the African family as an all-embracing and participatory social unit, even within African Christianity, the highly patriarchal worldview makes the full participation of marginalized groups like women, young people, and children largely limited. If the Abusua is to become a paradigm model for ecumenical dialogue, it ought to value the contributions of every member, especially the most vulnerable.

In the context of non-Christian and non-Abrahamic religions, there exist challenges posed by the need for common references or converging perspectives. Christian religions may consider

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[28] Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, "Leadership and Ministry in the Church-as-Family," *Studia Missionalia* 49 (2000): 299–300.

[29] Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 66.

[30] Uzukwu, *A Listening Church*, 66–67.

Christ as a common reference for their faith and a foundation for mutual dialogue. The Judeo-Christian and Muslim religions have the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) as their common reference. However, it becomes almost impossible to find a common heritage between Christianity and other religions and philosophies whose founding figures may not be personal and relational gods or fit into any of the Judeo-Christian or Abrahamic perspectives. Concretely, two Christians may feel closer to one another because of their common identification with Christ even if they remain theologically and doctrinally in disagreement. Similarly, a Christian, a Jew and a Muslim may get closer to one another in dialogue because of their common heritage from the patriarchs, while such a shared heritage may be totally absent or even impossible in the case of non-Christian and non-Abrahamic religions. This lack of convergence is the case with religions and philosophies such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, or Jainism, where only talk about values and the ultimate ends of life might be meaningful. As Michael Amaladoss puts it, "what complicates the issue of pluralism in relation to the religions is the fact that most religions do not present themselves merely as valid human efforts to know Reality or God. They claim to be God's self-revelations and human responses to them."[31] This 'revelation' implies that religious perspectives become both absolute and prejudiced when religions adopt this attitude. Nowadays, some people even claim to have no religious affiliation whatsoever and want to be recognized as such. While the African Abusua could prove helpful with its promotion of tolerance and accommodation, it lacks a functional framework that could cut across all religions or become applicable to all philosophies.

Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder suggest that "in order, therefore, to do justice to the Christian tradition that Jesus is the full revelation of God and the world's only savior, to our human

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[31] Michaël Amaladoss, *Beyond Dialogue: Pilgrims to the Absolute* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2008), 235.

experience that genuine grace and goodness are actively present not only among followers of other religions but are mediated through the various systems themselves… the theology of religions speak not of salvation as a religion's goal but of the various religious ends of the world's faiths."[32] In other words, Christianity can find standard references with non-Abrahamic religions not in the language of salvation or revealed truths but in religious ends such as justice, righteousness, the good, life, death, and life after death. Only then shall we "nurture the humility that will allow us to talk and act as people who know that no particular religion can exhaust the universal reach for divinity."[33] The path of ecumenical dialogue can be embraced truthfully by those who remain open to the wonders revealed through others and embrace them unreservedly.

Nevertheless, it is essential to realize that the symbol of the family, Abusua, should not be underestimated as a paradigm for ecumenical dialogue simply on account of its weaknesses and limitations of applicability. Symbols remain limited because they represent realities that go beyond or transcend them, and the Abusua is no exception. A symbol represents "a sensible realty (word, gesture, artifact, etc.) that betokens that which cannot be directly perceived, properly described, or adequately defined by abstract CONCEPTS. The symbol, by its suggestive capacity, thus discloses something that man could not otherwise know, at least with the same richness and power."[34] The concept of the Abusua stands as an attempt to conceptualize the dynamics of interhuman relationships and the possibilities of extending these dynamics to various religions and cultures. Oduyoye maintains that "whatever our status or condition, we all need to learn from and lean on one another's expertise and gifts. We all need to learn about the breadth and depth of the

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[32] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 380.

[33] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Vade Mecum: Come Walk with Me," in *The Church We Want: African Theologians Look to Vatican III*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 156.

[34] Avery Dulles, "Symbol in Revelation," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Detroit: Thomson/Gale, 2003), 662.

community called Church [Assembly or Ecclesia]. Together, we can create a path that will be widened and furthered by those who join us."[35] The ecumenical dialogue project requires everyone to bring to the table of encounter whatever is unique and distinctive with a readiness to give and receive. Hence, the concept of the Abusua provides an African perspective in the process of responding to the challenge of diversity so that religious and social differences are embraced without surrendering valuable identities. Despite the legitimate limitations that any symbol may possess, the Abusua stands as a working paradigm in channeling and managing religious encounters in a pluralistic world.

# Conclusion

The ecumenical movement remains essential to interhuman relations within the modern multicultural world. This paper illustrated how the pluralistic nature of the world today imposes the search for models to regulate and provide an impetus for respectful human relationships. The concept of Abusua developed in Oduyoye's writings constitutes one of these attempts within the African family context. Her model convincingly presents Christ as a uniting figure and a starting point for mutual recognition and dialogue among Christian religious denominations. Its emphasis on tolerance, accommodation and solidarity can be applied within the context of ecumenical dialogue because it provides a working paradigm for conceptualizing interhuman relationships within the pluralistic world of religions. However, the recurrent persistence of social strife and embedded cultural discrimination against women, young people and children within African societies cautions against the idealization of the family model of the Abusua as a uniting force and a participatory or dialogical framework. Moreover, its application to the dialogue with non-

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[35] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Vade Mecum: Come Walk with Me," 156.

Abrahamic religions and philosophies ought to be improved. Otherwise, the Abusua remains incomplete and inadequate as an ecumenical and dialogical symbol. Nevertheless, symbols need not be perfect to be applied because they only constitute a medium conveying greater and broader realities. Although it may fall short of delivering a perfect paradigm for ecumenical dialogue with non-Abrahamic religions and philosophies, the concept of the Abusua remains an invaluable African contribution to the discourse concerning models and symbols for ecumenical and dialogical engagement in today's pluralistic world.

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