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**Christian – Muslim Relations in Nigeria: The
Problems and Prospects**

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Abstract

Inter-religious relations imply possible and practicable cordial relationship that exists between religions in a society. Its instrument is interfaith dialogue aimed at cordiality, togetherness, tolerance and acceptance that will be the true sign of a new era in the religious history of humanity. On both international and national levels, attempts have been and are still being made to establish dialogue or good relations between Muslims and Christians with a view to avoiding the mistakes of the past, and creating a better world, and a better Nigeria for the present and future generations. The paper explores the remote and possible causes of the present widespread problems in Christians and Muslims relations in Nigeria; and to reflect on the possible impact on the Nigerian nationhood. Basic findings of this study show that Nigeria's stability, democracy, and national cohesion are threatened by extremism and conflict arising from Islamic and Christian fundamentalism is believed to be predicated on the Nigerian political and economic malaise and social dislocation of recent decades. The paper recommends and concludes that all religious adherents must embrace Inter-religious dialogue which demands religions nurture, faith, trust, dialogue, communication, reconciliation, and mutual understanding of one another thus guaranteeing communal good for Nigerians.

Key Words: Inter-religious; Nigeria Christian; Muslim

Introduction

Inter-religious relations may be considered a challenge to one's faith but one cannot run away from such a challenge. Through this challenge, we may find that our faith can grow. Most adherents may force this challenge upon themselves considering it to be a very rational observation, that is, one which may turn them around from believing that their religion is the only right one and been unable to acknowledge that there is truth in all other religions. On the contrary, they should be able to contemplate that if these other religions have survived for thousands of years and are followed by hundreds of

millions, even a billion people, there must be some truth in them or if not, they would not have spread and lasted to date. Man owes it to himself to search everywhere for this 'Universal Truth'. This Truth is a message about God in the world that goes beyond the specific language of any particular theology or religious tradition. Thus every religion of humanity is the inheritance of every individual human being. It is generally remarked by some observers that Nigeria, like some African nations is presently feeling the biting effects of the global recession in all spheres of human life.

Importance and Problems of Inter-Religious Relations

It is a truism that learning about other people's religions can lead to a greater understanding of Religious Truth. For one thing, the process of explaining our own faith to people of other faiths may help us grasp it better. When people share their faith with others, one may be surprised by the similarities that become evident and serve to point out the Universal and more basic Truths that we may not be able to disagree on because we have all been affected by them (Osasona, 2002). An understanding of other beliefs can help strengthen our own faith when we realize how strongly we disagree with the other beliefs. In the least, an understanding of other people's faiths can aid in our relations with people who differ from us in their understanding of life, the world, God and the nature of humanity (Ugwoji, 2008).

The perception of the Supernatural by different religions can be described with the following analogy: for instance, imagine God at the center of a circle with people of different religions standing around the circumference. We are all looking at the same object but each of us will only see one side of it. There is another Indian story that also speaks to this notion. According to this story (Onimhawo and Ottuh, 2009), six blind men went to see an elephant. One touched the leg of the elephant, and said, "The elephant is like a tree." The second touched the trunk, and said, "The elephant is like a snake." The third touched the elephant's side, and said, "The elephant is like a wall." The fourth touched the ears, and said, "The elephant is like a fan." The fifth touched the tusk, and said, "The elephant is like a spear." The

sixth touched the tail, and said, "The elephant is like a rope." Thus they began to dispute amongst themselves as to the figure of the elephant. A passerby seeing them quarreling, asked what the dispute was all about. They told him everything, and asked him to arbitrate. That man said, "None of you has seen the elephant. The elephant is not like a tree; its legs are like trees. It is not like a wall; its side is like a wall. It is not like a fan; its ears are like fans. It is not like a snake, but its nose is like that. It is not like a spear; its tusks are like spears. It is not like a rope; its tail is like a rope. The elephant is the combination of all these." When we share our various views of God with each other we can gain a more complete picture.

The many differences in religions are more often than not, things that do not matter so much. Some people are more comfortable with certain rituals and others are not. Some mentalities are better suited to one philosophy while others find a clearer understanding through another. There have always been different religions and it is folly for us to imagine that it will ever be any other way. Everyone feels that their own beliefs are truer than everyone else's. Everyone's beliefs work for them hence they would hold to it, but the same belief does not work for everyone. Religions are like languages that we use to speak to each other about God and to express one's religious sentiments.

Religions in Nigeria: History and Problems

The existence of religion can be traced back to human civilization (Jones, 2005). Some religions have died out but others have grown up to take their place. New prophets and new religions are bound to continue to spring up in the future. As earlier stated, three major religions exist in Nigeria: Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion. All religions have a history of radical revivalism. The three religions do not consider each other as friends but rivals. Although the Muslims acknowledge Christ as a prophet, they hold strongly to the teachings of the Qur'an which they believe comes directly from God. They live strictly according to the Qur'an and they find it necessary to conquer and bring all the infidels into the true faith, which is Islam.

Some Christians on the other hand feel offended by the teachings of Islam and hold strongly to the position that, outside Christ, there is no salvation; all Muslims and traditional religionists will go to hell unless they receive Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour. Related to this is a battle of supremacy between the Muslims and Christians in the political and economical spheres.

Several religions in Nigeria co-exist, thus helping to accentuate regional and ethnic distinctions. However, Islam dominated the north and held strong numbers in the South Western, Yoruba part of the country. Islam is an important religion in West Africa. Nigeria is one of the largest Muslim populated nations in West Africa (Jones, 2005). Islam was introduced to northern Nigeria as early as the eleventh century and was well established in the major capitals of the region by the sixteenth century, spreading into the countryside and toward the middle belt uplands. Shehu Usman dan Fodio established a government in Northern Nigeria based on Islam before the advent of Colonialism. Islam also came to South Western Yoruba-speaking areas during the time of Mansa Musa in Mali Empire. The Yoruba colloquially referred to Islam as "*Esin-Mali*" or some will say "*Esin-Mole*", which means religion from Mali. Muslims in Nigeria practice the Maliki School of jurisprudence and are mostly Sunni Muslims; The Shia Muslims of Nigeria are primarily located in the Sokoto State (Francis, 2005).

Christianity is the second largest religion in Nigeria, according to the most recent survey (*CIA World Fact Book*, 2010). Protestantism and local syncretic Christianity are evident in Yoruba areas, while Catholicism dominated the Igbo and closely related areas. Both Protestantism and Catholicism dominated in the Ibibio, Annang, and the Efik kiosa lands. The 1963 census indicated that 47 percent of Nigerians were Muslim, 35 percent Christian, and 18 percent members of local indigenous congregations (Berret, 1983). If accurate, this indicated a sharp increase since 1953 in the number of Christians (up to 13 percent); a slight decline among those professing indigenous beliefs, compared with 20 percent; and only a modest (4

percent) rise of Muslims (Ottuh and Onimhawo, 2003). There has been growth in the Christ Apostolic Church (the first Aladura Movement in Nigeria) and the Aladura Church, an indigenous Christian sect that was especially strong in the Yoruba areas and of evangelical churches in general, spilling over into adjacent and southern areas of the middle belt. In general, however, the country should be seen as having a predominantly Muslim north, a mixed Christian and Muslim Southwest and Middle belt, a non-Muslim, primarily Christian South East and South-South, with each as a minority faith in the other's region.

The problems which have often resulted into frictions and tensions in Nigeria include the evils of fanaticism and bigotry, intolerance, exclusivism, ignorance, etc (Ottuh and Onimhawo, 2003). These among others, are what constitute the impediments to genuine dialogue and co-operation (*The Daily Times* of Wednesday January 15, 1985). From the brief history we have given above, it can be seen that the misuse of and ignorance of historical facts have often led to frictions. The Muslims and Christians who know the historical facts do not want to forget the ugly incidences recorded in these histories. The Vatican council was aware of this when it urges both Muslims and Christians to forget the past. But it is also pertinent to ask both Muslims to remember the past history and try to ruminate on the positive side of it. They should remember how Muhammad and the early Christian leaders lived cordially. They lived the way they did because they did not forget the basic tenets of these religions. So, the first cause of tension we identify is ignorance of history, and where it is known it is used negatively. Thus, ignorance of and negative use of history led to tension and friction between Muslim and Christians (Ottuh and Onimhawo, 2003).

To be a religious fanatic is to be wild and excessive about matters that pertain to one's religion. And to be a religious bigot means, one who is blindly and obstinately devoted to be particular creed (Ottuh and Onimhawo, 2003). Thus it follows that all acts, words portraying these attitudes are tantamount to religious fanaticism and bigotry. To be a

fanatic or a bigot is to be an extremist. This attitude which has often times been displayed by both Muslims and Christians have not helped dialogue and co-action. For example, the sharia issue raised by the Muslims during the time of constitution drafting process was as result of fanaticism. The Muslims from all indications wanted Nigeria to be declared an Islamic state. The report about Nigeria's membership of O.I.C. an Islamic body is a proof of fanaticism (*The Daily Times* of Sunday Dec. 8th, 1985).

Muslim – Christian Relations in the Past and Present

History revealed that although Muhammad did not know much about Christianity, he showed much respect for Christianity. He admired the constant prayers of Christian monks. It was revealed that there was a time a group of Christians came from Najran in Southern Arabia to see Muhammad and allowed them to celebrate their Christian liturgy in his mosque in Medina (Mala, 1985). It is interesting to discover from history that there was a cordial relationship between the Muslims and the “people of the book” as the Koran refers to the Christians at the time of the Prophet:

Dispute not with the people of the book save in the fairer manner, except for those of them that do wrong; and say, we believe in what has been sent down to us, and what has been sent down to you; our God and your God is one, and to him we have surrendered {Qur'an 29:46}.

A deep spirit of mutual respect and co-operation between Muslims and Christians was obvious in the letter of Pope Gregory which he sent to An-Nasir, the king of Bujaya in Algeria, in 1706 (Nwanaju, 2005). In that letter Pope Gregory acknowledged the message of An-Nasir who requested that the priest servanus be consecrated as bishops. An-Nasir also sent some gifts to the Pope and released some Christians who were held captive. Pope Gregory prayed for the king of Bujaya, and assured him of his love for him. The very fact that there were already some Christians held captives showed that at some

point in history, the Muslim-Christian relations suffered some ruptures after the death of Prophet Muhammad.

On the Christian side it is on record that “when the first Muslims were being persecuted in Mecca, a group of 83 Muslim men and women took refuge in Ethiopia. Because of the Ethiopian Emperor’s kindness to these Muslims Muhammad offered special prayers when he heard of the Emperor’s death. From this, one can deduce that Muslim-Christian relations began to suffer friction and tensions after the death of Muhammad and the early Popes and Kings. This rupture in Muslim-Christian relations happened when the Arabs started their conquests in the Middle East and North Africa. At the time in question, Christians were still living among Muslims in the predominantly Muslim countries like Syria and Egypt. In the land conquered by the Arabs Muslims did not force Christians to change their faith. The saying, “Muhammad with the sword in one hand and the Koran in the other”, was not true in this situation. The true position was that Christians were allowed to continue as such but were not full citizens of the Islamic empire (Nwanaju, 2005).

The Christian community was extinguished in the 12th century by the extremist Muwahhid movement that came to power. This was in sharp reaction to the crusade movements in Europe. The crusade movement which was meant to stop further Muslim expansion, to recapture land taken from them by the Arabs and to open up the way for the pilgrims who complained that their access route to Jerusalem was being blocked, was violent men who manhandled not only the Muslim but also Christians in the Middle East. The Muslim-Christian relations at this point became so ruptured that all attempts made by the Franciscans and the Dominicans positive preachers to rectify the relationship ended in fiasco. Since then, the Muslims and Christians kept their distance until the 19th century and the era of colonialism.

According to Mala (1985), there is a prelude to understanding the Nigerian situation. Firstly, Christians and Muslims have co-existed since the late 19th century, although it was in the late 20th century that most people in the eastern parts of the country first encountered

the Muslims. Secondly, the two communities are the group that dominated the decision-making bodies in the country. Thirdly, the major ethnic groups are always identified by the religion to which most of their members belong, for instance, the Hausa-Fulani and Ibo people are identified as, and are in fact predominantly Muslims and Christians respectively. Lastly, the political, economic, social and religious structures in Nigeria as in most part of Africa are such that Muslims and Christians have no alternative but to co-operate, and are co-operating together, in order to build a peaceful, strong and united country. In this brief survey, the scope shall not be limited to Nigeria since we are fully aware that Islam and Christianity came to Nigeria from outside (Kenny, 1982).

There was stiff resistance to the missionaries who attempted to Christianize the Muslims. As a result of these, there is great educational imbalance between Muslims and non-Muslims in the country today. But in Yoruba land, Muslims had a few scruples attending Christian schools. Christianity was closely associated with modernization and Islam with traditional society. So the people opted for these religions on these grounds. As a result, it was not surprising that many Muslim students became Christians. But the *Ausar-ud-deen* and the *Ahmadiyya* did not stay arms folded; they opened Muslim schools combining Islamic and western education.

The frictions in Muslim-Christian relations became very obvious during the preparations for independence. While in the south, movements were formed for independence, in the North, the Emirs and politicians were not yet ready for independence. The response to the demand of the West African Students Union in 1942 for co-operation in gaining self-government was: "Holding this country together is not possible except by means of the religion of the prophet. If they want political unity let them follow our religion" (Kenny, 1982). In the North, non-Muslims refused to join the Northern People's Congress (N.P.C.), the ruling party, because the leaders openly identified the party with Islam. Even the first Northern Nigerian government in 1951, dominated by N.P.C. did not appoint

Christians as ministers and even took steps to curtail missionary activities in the educational and medical fields (Churkwulozie, 1983). Although, all were concerned about consolidating the independence status of Nigeria as at that time, there were still traces of tensions between Muslims and Christians.

With the tremendous success achieved by the churches especially the Catholic, the Sudan Interior Mission, the Sudan United Mission and the Anglican, among the non-Muslim areas of the North, the Muslim rulers became afraid, and therefore began to harass, and curtail the work of these churches in these areas. It is on record how Ahmadu Bello, the Sarduana of Sokoto and Premier of the North, also Vice-President of the World Muslim League conducted conversion-oriented rallies and building mosques and Quranic schools with grants from Arab States (Shulman, 2009). For instance, the 1966 coup which brought an Igbo, J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi to power was interpreted as a kind of war between the Christian South and the Muslim North where the assassinated Sarduana hailed from. This situation which had become intricate and complex was having at its base, the tension that had always been between Muslims and Christians. In September 1966, the Igbo massacre in the North which sent the Igbos home to the East was the last straw that broke the camel's back. There was a big gulf, religious or otherwise, between a part of the South, and the North (Nwanaju, 2005).

A second coup of 1966 brought Yakubu Gowon, a Northern Christian, from the Middle Belt, to power. Gowon divided the country into 12 states and Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, Governor of the then Eastern State, who did not buy the idea, seceded. In the "task-to keep-Nigeria-one", that ensued, Ojukwu, to gain outside support construed the war as a "Jihad of Muslim hordes." According to Kenny (1982), the religious overtones of the conflict had foundation in that the rioters in the North directed their fury particularly against Christian churches, and no compensation was ever made or action taken against organizers of the riots. Moreover during the massacre any Igbo who declared himself a Muslim had his life spared. During the war, the tension was at its low

ebb since all were now very anxious to restore national unity and solidarity. The post-war period experienced some changes for the better for both Muslims and Christians.

With the introduction of the Universal Primary Education Scheme, the teaching of religious education was made a compulsory subject in schools with paid Muslim and Christian teachers. Another major development that happened was that in Yoruba land, the government took over all schools with the former religious proprietors still retaining the schools "administration". During these years, the post-war spirit of apparent unity and peace was soon to open up new areas of tensions in Muslim-Christian relations. An example of such was the protest mounted by the Muslim Students Association against what they called discriminatory government policies which favoured only the Christians. These students complained that Christian religious instruction was being forced on the Muslim students, that public holidays declared for Muslim feasts were not being observed by the Christian schools. With the coming to power of Murtala Muhammad in 1973, Muslim-Christian relations took a new turn. Murtala, though a Muslim, established diplomatic relations with the Vatican. Despite his good intentions he did not live to see the Nigeria of his dreams. He was assassinated in an abortive bloody coup. After the assassination of Murtala, in February 1976, Olusegun Obasanjo, a Baptist, took over. Certain events started happening at this time which made the Christians suspect that all was yet to be well. For instance, the mass condemnation of Gowon a Christian even without trial, the erection of a Mosque and Qur'anic school in Kano in memory of the deceased Head of state, were cases in point (Nwanaju, 2005).

Another major tension came when the issue of *Sharia* was raised at the time when the country was drafting a new constitution in preparations for a return to civil rule. A majority of the Muslims argued that the Sharia courts be provided for in the new constitution. In the national seminar on Islam and the draft constitution in August 1977, the official position of the Muslims on this issue was laid opened. The Muslims wanted *Sharia in toto*. This is because according

to them, the Muslim is subject to no other law than the Sharia. Christians who sensed danger in this move provided counter arguments (Ottuh, 2005).

Muslim-Christian Relations in Nigeria: Towards A Lasting Solution

Both Muslims and Christians have made attempts at dialogue in the past. These attempts were being made on different fronts unilaterally either by Christians on the one hand or by the Muslims on the other hand. Such efforts were made by the Anglican and Methodists churches as far back 1952 when they sponsored a survey of Islam in West Africa carried out by J.S. Trim Ingham (cited in Ottuh, 2005). The result of this project was the birth of the Islam in Africa Project (I. A. P.) with the aim to assist the churches to understand Islam. It all started when delegates from many African churches met in Ibadan, Nigeria in 1958. One of their requests was for “more intensive, study and action in respect to the presentation of the Gospel to Muslims in Africa”. In response to this request in 1959, the Islam in Africa Project was founded. It was built on two principles: to encourage and educate Christians of Africa to fulfil their responsibility towards the Muslims and to liaise with all the churches to ensure unity in approach to Islam. On the Muslim front, attempts have also been made, although unlike the Christians, these moves were not official. Worthy of mention are the then Sultan of Sokoto, Abubakar III who had always been genuine in relating to Christians and his son, Muhammadu Maciddo who had always co-operated with Christians, despite the sharia issue.

On personal levels, efforts have been made by both Muslims and Christians to relate by dialogue. But these moves as we have noted were not official as such. The first official dialogue meeting that took place between the Muslims and Christians was held on the 28th November 1974 at the Pastoral Institute in Ibadan under the joint chairmanship of F. A. Job and Lateef Adegbite, the then Western State Attorney-General and commissioner of Justice. Although the meeting was charged initially with a mood of tension and

defensiveness on either side, several papers were given on the dignity of man and role of religion in society. In this meeting, a committee of five was set up and a journal, *Nigerian dialogue*, was launched to publicize the content of the meetings. Another official attempt was made in December 1978 when at Jos, under the auspices of the National Catholic Bishops' Conference Churkwulozie organized a dialogue meeting at a national level. In the meeting, it was advocated that Christian-Muslim committees in every state in the country should be set up. Such committees were never created, and even where they had existed, like the Jos, as at that time of this dialogue meeting, the committees were dormant (Churkwulozie, 1983). Just as dialogue between Muslims and Christians has been going on both on official and un-official levels, and in different areas, so also there had been several levels at which common actions by Muslims and Christians had been happening. On the local level, Muslim-Christian relation had been necessitated by the mutual desire to solve the burning issues of life. This could be noticed in community projects social activities, initiations, marriages, burials; these had always been avenues for common actions by Muslim and Christians. Moreover, there are social ties that exist between Muslims and Christians. Family ties, friendship, political affiliations have created such situations as to make an alternative to co-operation between Muslim and Christians incomprehensible and un-imaginable.

When God wanted to create man as recorded in the Christian Bible, He said, "let us make man in our own to image, after our likeness" (Gen. 26). A critical examination of the Trinitarian formula would reveal that God had long sanctioned dialogue. God started dialogue and wanted it to continue in love. In Qur'an 29:46, it is said, "Our God and your God is one, and to Him we have surrendered", so what is the basis for the tension between Muslims and Christians? The Christians are admonished in 1cor. 16:14: "let all that you do be done in love". Christ told the Christians in the Bible; "Judge not, that you be not judge. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Matt. 7:1-2). Hence there is no reason for judging our brother and sister of

other faiths. The Quran is very clear in the following and other passages on relations between people in the world; “O mankind; surely we have created you from a male and female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other, surely the noblest of you with God is the most dutiful of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware” (Qur’an.49:13).

Like the past military regimes have done, the government, especially the federal government should always try to steer the middle course. The federal government should never give the impression by actions or words, that one religion supersedes the other. The admission of Nigeria into the Organization of Islamic Conference shows that the federal government was not cautious enough on this issue. Nigeria is not an Islamic state and one wonders the rationale that motivated an official government delegation to attend and seek admission into the Islamic Conference Organization. The federal government, as much as possible should avoid such actions that would create the impression that Nigeria is an Islamic state. The federal and state government should always create conducive atmosphere for all religions to operate hitch free in the country. It is true, however, that on such major feast days, as Christmas, Easter, Id-al-Alha, Id-al fitri, Mewled al-Nabiyy, Independence Day, the President or Head of State had always stressed religious tolerance. The government at all levels should now stress good relations which is more meaningful in the Nigerian context.

Moreover, polemics often adopted by religious leaders to cast aspersions on some doctrines of other religious should be abhorred. This is why education is needed even at the local level because if the apparent exegetical differences in these doctrinal trends are well elucidated, then there will hardly be any room for misunderstanding. One has to understand one’s faith first, in order to be able to appreciate the differences in these faiths. Similarities should be stressed rather than the differences. With such understanding archived with good education, the Muslims and the Christians will be better placed to enter into dialogue. It is a fact that the formal dialogue meetings that have been had between Muslims and Christians have

not achieved much success because the educational groundwork was lacking.

Africans naturally exist according to the principle of communalism which can never be alien to them. An African would always return to his roots. In an authentic, undiluted and unadulterated African, there is always that accommodating spirit. Notwithstanding, the historical cause of intertribal wars and other dissensions leading to bloodshed, the philosophy of individualism ought to have no place among Nigerians. By accidents of birth, Nigerians have found themselves in the different religions; some professes Islam, others Christianity, others the African Religion, some others still in other religions. Thus the Muslims and Christians are Africans, and if they understand who they are as Africans, then we shall have few problems in Muslim-Christian relations.

Conclusion

Spiritual and religious traditions are sources of values that can defend dignified life for all; these traditions need to be explored. Nigerians need new ways to understand particularity, universality and plurality; one must learn to live his faith with integrity while respecting and accepting each other as they are. Cordial Muslim-Christian relations in Nigerian can be a reality. In the beginning, there was peace. At a point, there was a rupture which has been affecting Muslim-Christian relations till date. Records of such histories are preserved so that they serve as reference codes for the present and future generations. But some Nigerian Muslim and Christians are learning but not learning fast; others are not ready to learn. This issue therefore can only be hypothetical: if the Muslims and the Christians are ready to learn from the positive part of history and adopt the recommended attitude towards Muslim-Christian relations, then Muslim-Christian relations can be a reality.

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