

## THE PLACE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN PROMOTING PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

By

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### Abstract

*In every society, Religion is a vital tool that can be for human development when properly channeled. Unfortunately, instead of being an agent of unity, religion has become an agent of division. Many lives and properties have been lost in the name of religion. Africa in general and Nigeria in particular has experienced series of religious crises which have destabilized the government and the economy. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to substantiate the claim that proper religious dialogue is the answer to the incessant religious conflicts that we have experienced and are still experiencing. The paper makes some recommendations and concludes that there cannot be any meaningful development without proper interreligious peace and harmony.*

**Keywords:** *Religious Dialogue, Peaceful Coexistence.*

### Introduction

This paper examines some religious issues that have caused crises in Nigeria leading to National instability and unrest. In fact, crises have created problems to the extent that lives and properties had been wasted. The situation is even serious in a pluralistic nation like Nigeria. However, whenever the crises arose, efforts have been made to curtail it through the application of the principle of inter religious dialogue. Hence, much success has been achieved in addition to people having more knowledge about each other's faith. This has thus enabled people to recognize each other's worth and thereby tolerating one another.

### Concept of Religion

Religion pertains to God and belief, it is derived from the term "*religio*" which refers to four Latin verbs, *relegere, religare, reeligere, relinguere...* Religion is intrinsic to life. Its intrinsic nature to life is so real to the African man that Idowu (1973, 1991) in an effort to define religion declares "religion is here". It is so certain among Africans that Mbiti (1969), for the same reason, writes that it (religion) permeates every facet of the human person especially, among the Africans. Longman Modern English Dictionary defines religion as a system of beliefs and practices relating to the sacred and uniting its adherents in a community. Makinde (1996) observes that religion is one of the ideologies that are held in high esteem by its adherents. It is a thing of personal conviction which could hardly be chanted. He states further that although choice of religion may be wrong, everyone adheres strictly to his religious belief and would not want anything to tamper with it.

### Concept of Dialogue

The word dialogue has its etymology from two Greek words, "*dia*" and "*logos*". "*Dia*" means "two" and "*logos*" means "word". By implication, dialogue is a conversation between two people. Buber in American Encyclopedia stated that the term dialogue does not necessarily

involve words, but is a way of recognizing another being as no mere objects or “it but as a thou”, for Socrates, dialogue as a way of life.

Oxford advanced learners dictionary (2003) define dialogue as conversation in a book, play or formal discussion between two groups, countries especially when they are trying to solve a problem and disagreement etc. Adeyinka (2009) describes dialogue as a written composition in which two or more chapters are represented as conversing. Fredrick (1983) in Adeyinka (2009) points out that dialogue means exchange of ideas and opinions from the above; it could be observed that dialogue in any form is a tool used to resolve conflicts in a given society.

Dialogue is not just any conversation between two people. A requirement of dialogue is that it should be a conversation in which the testimony on the other side is admitted as an indispensable source of knowledge on a given subject. It involves sharing of understanding and experience in community building.

Paulos (1991) in Adeyinka (2009) explains that dialogue is *dia-leghe* : that is speaking, discussing, reasoning through all aspects of a problem thereby correcting each other and moving forward. It is an attempt to establish a two-way traffic in what was hitherto a one-way street, an attempt, to find positive values in religious and secular culture. Dialogue is a contact established between people of different and even sometimes opposite sex who are attempting to overcome their mutual disagreement. It is an ecumenical encounter capable of bringing people of different faiths together in an atmosphere of love and respect for one another's faith in order to solve burning issues of life. Religious dialogue is never a comparative doctrinal belief. It is a discipline that seeks to highlight areas of argument and disagreement in our faith. It can be a fundamental transforming process.

Dialogue is a process in which individual and group learn how to wipe out fears and distrust to each other so as to develop new relation based on mutual trust (Omidiwura, 1999). Dialogue in a general sense, is sharing of convictions, beliefs, ideas and opinions with the aim of communion in truth. It concerns outlooks and values which are not merely scientific proposition but deep cherished personal tenets, in one way or another pertaining to religion. Hence, dialogue is more than a scientific exchange or comparison of religion. It is far remove from the inter-religion debates, to share in order to commune with the truth, presupposes a loving respect for the other person, and a hope that a meeting is possible.

The first requirement of dialogue is tolerance and religious liberty. For the purpose of this study, dialogue could simply be persived as ecumenical encounter that may be capable of bringing together people of different system and respect for one another's faith (Omidiwura, 1999). Shittu and Adeyemo (2005) use Yoruba adage to describe dialogue saying: "semi kin bio logun ore" when you offend me by asking you is a precaution for friendship. This implies that dialogue is the best way of maintaining peace in a given society. It could be understood that it is only through dialogue we can live in peace and progress.

### **Concept of Religious Dialogue**

Religious dialogue is not a mere conversation. It is a conversation with a set goal to achieve. This section seeks to highlight some important points dialogue can achieve. These are not exhaustive as this section is concerned. Dialogue is essential in settling disputes and conflict thereby bringing peace and tranquility. It facilitates mutual understanding among understanding adherents of different faiths, thereby enhances lasting solutions for the existing mutual love and friendship among prejudices and bias (Omidiwura, 2015).

Religious dialogue dispels previous prejudices and suspicions and creates trust and confidence in members of different faiths, thereby fostering respect for others' doctrines and faith. It pulls together spiritual resources of different faiths and helps member to know one another well. Religious dialogue in overall promotes unity and love among citizens in other to foster national development.

Rev. Fr. Tanko (1991) is of the view that:

*"As religiously committed persons come together to dialogue with the purpose of enriching, deepening and broadening their own religious life through the mutual understanding of one another convictions and witnesses".*

Inter-Religious dialogue is a forum purposely created to generate contacts, discussion and interaction between two or more different religious groups with a view to bringing about an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence.

The Catholic Secretariat for non-Christians considers it as "a meeting of hearts and minds between followers of different religions. The objectives of dialogue should be to discuss and reason together those aspects of the problem that pose threats to the peaceful co-existence between different religious groups.

### **Essential Factors to Consider for successful Dialogue**

Dialogue previously has been argumentative with a view to identifying the weak points of others for the purpose of condemnation of their faiths. This has led to refusal of making available the holy books to each other. If dialogue should take this posture then there would be no dialogue. This idea is supported by Mulder (1977) in Larry Lenning (1980) as he put:

*At best Christians and Muslims have tried to attain knowledge of other religion but often with purpose of defence and attack, at worst they have looked at each other with sorts of mis-representations, all kinds of warped images in their mind.*

Therefore entering into genuine dialogue will require certain guidelines for a fruitful dialogue. Firstly, those who want to participate in a dialogue need to be versed in their faith so that there will be genuine sharing of thoughts devoid of wrong information. This is supported by Anderson (1984).

*It is a profound mistake, to imagine.. .that those who want to participate in a fruitful dialogue must endeavour to come to it with the blank minds, or relativize their personal convictions or destructive testimony.*

This idea was corroborated by Martin Buber in Anderson (1984). Secondly, there should be mutual respect for one another in a dialogue as well as frankness, openness and sincerity. This points is supported by Lenning (1980) thus:

*Dialogue is a meeting of human beings in a mutual respect, frankness, openness and sincerity, may be the tool needed to overcome negative defenses and mistaken ideas Christians and Muslims often have of each other.*

In the same vein, in dialogue participants should be moved out of confessional boundaries and to be critical of what they confess so as not to be dogmatic. Kloster (1969) in Anderson (1984) stated that real dialogue has been challenging. As he put it:

*Dialogue challenges both partners, takes them out of the security of their own prisons, their philosophy and theology - confronts them with reality with truth—a truth that demands all...thought in*

The primary aim of dialogue is not aimed at winning converts, if it is thought in that view, it will bring arguments, suspicions and lack of openness as Anderson (1984) relates this view thus:

*There are however, many people today who insist that the very nature and spirit of dialogue are completely destroyed if either of the parties has any covert thought for conversion of the other. Dialogue, they assert is simply and solely a matter of sharing a means of getting to know one another better, of gaining a greater understanding of the faith by each lives and exploring some of the pressing problems that face us all in contemporary world, in the light of what each of these faiths may be able to contribute to their solution.*

Furthermore, participants should create avenue to correct each and diffuse some wrong opinions and misrepresentation concerning each other's faith by equipping them with the knowledge of their faith. There should be peaceful way of presenting facts to avoid imposition and domination. In dialogue, each participant should eventually attempt to experience the partners' religion from within. Dialogue should be a religious encounter in faith or hope of love.

### **Causes of Religious Crisis**

Nigeria had witnessed many devastating religious crises or disturbances involving Muslims and Christians. From 1980 to date, incessant eruption of disturbances in different parts of the country had been recorded. Prominent among the disturbance according to Bidmos (1993) are Ilorin riots in 1986, Kafanchan in 1987 and Bauchi in 1991 as well as the most recent ones. Plateau, Borno, Kaduna killings in 2018, it becomes pertinent therefore to identify some of the causes of these religious disturbances. Efforts are made here to mention some and briefly discuss on them:

#### **(i) Religious intolerance**

The major factor responsible for religious crises in this country is religious intolerance. This is displayed by both Christians and Muslims at various places. Inability to accommodate or tolerate the doctrinal difference of a religion by the other had led to misunderstanding which had erupted serious disturbances. Example of the Shari'ah or Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) is relevant here. All the explanations given by the Muslims that shari'ah issues concern the Muslims only do not go down well with the Christians. They (the Christians) find nothing price by the economic benefits of or the interest-free loan scheme of the organization. Instead, the IMF loan with huge interest was preferred. The hatred of OIC was as a result of religious intolerance and hatred for Islam, for OIC is an Islamic organization and anything Islam is not wanted by some people however good it may be. We are all living witnesses to the uproars that greeted the issues of OIC and recent crisis on shari'ah issue.

#### **(ii) Religious imbalance/ injustice.**

Government either at the federal, state or local levels had it sometime or the other being accused of religious imbalance or injustice in the appointment of people into political offices. The people in the position of authority favoured the people of their faith or religion at the expense of other religious group. Such action had always been greeted with hot feelings and reactions that atoms with religious disturbance.

Such imbalance or injustice is also noticeable in some schools and colleges where balance opportunities are not given to Muslims or Christians students. There are situations where adequate provisions will be made available for Christian students to study the religion and worship in their religious way while similar opportunities will not be given to Muslim students or vice versa. The most annoying situation is when they are taught religions contrary to their faith or are forced to worship a way different from the parent's belief. This action contravenes the constitution and the national policy which states in part thus:

*No child will be forced to accept any religious instruction which is contrary to the wish of his parents.*

iii. **Provocative Statements**

One other important factor responsible for religious crisis is provocative statements expressed by some religious leaders or groups. Some religious leaders or groups are of the habit of antagonizing or abusing another religion in the preaching's and sermons. The adherents of such religions attacked in such sermons would want to reply at any available opportunity. For example why Christians believe in trinity, Islam believes in the oneness of Allah. Also, while the Christians believe they are sons of god, Muslim believed they are servants of Allah. Any attempts therefore to rebuke the doctrinal belief of one will not receive the pleasure of the other and will be vehemently resisted.

iv **Lack of Adequate Knowledge**

Some adherents of Islam and Christianity who claimed to be preachers and practitioners of the religion lack adequate knowledge of their respective religion. They only pretend to be well versed in the knowledge of the religion while they are not. Such people are so fanatical to the extent of not wanting to see or hear people of other faith. They have therefore incited the followers against the adherents of other faith. It is pertinent to mention here that a fair background knowledge of the opposite religion is required of a good religious practitioner.

v **Incitement of Mass Media**

The mass media reports either on the print or electronic media had on several occasions incited or aggravated religious crisis in this country. Experience has shown that press reports, news analysis, editorial report and features had carried religious matters which were capable of fuelling religious crisis in the country. The report of mass media practitioners or journalists had played negative role in the relationship of Muslim and Christian. Rather than being objective in the report, they are being biased and sentimental, hence their story are not the time the true picture of what had happened.

The Nigerian journalist should as a matter of fact adhere to their professional ethics by deciding on which of the reports or event to cover by them and news that are worthy. As Bidmos (1993) opines, if the Nigeria press interested in religious harmony in the country, they will find

numerous events that take place on daily basis which can promote unity, peace, harmony and cooperation between the Muslims and Christians.

### **Problems of Dialogue**

Our peculiarities in every belief system either in practice, history, and culture can create problem for dialogue. Several dialogues have one of the identified most warning problem which is FEAR. Fear of one's religion, especially if the other religion is the dominating one in an area. The minority too are afraid of dialogue with the hope of suppressing their right. The religious leaders are afraid that dialogue may lead to syncretism or ambivalence. Sometimes there could be the belief that dialogue may undermine a group's political involvement in the administration of a nation (Omidiwura, 1999).

### **A necessity for Christian-Muslim Dialogue**

According to Oyedele (2001), Christians and Muslims must take cognizance of the characteristics and challenges of the religiously pluralistic society in which they operate. The fact is that both Christians and Muslims meet together at different levels and places, both public and private. Tanko (1991) is of the opinion that "during wars, Christians and Muslims of one Nation fight together against Christians and Muslims of other nations for the protection of their nation". Here there is unity of purpose.

Arinze (1988) observes that where Christians and Muslim ignore one another or worse still, rivals one another and engage in unfriendly actions, they can damage their nation together. The papal add representatives of world religious during the 1986 World Day of prayer for Peace is noteworthy. He remarked that:

*Unity among adherents of different religions for peace and harmony is disabling while disunity will lead to destruction adding that there is no basis for disunity as all mankind have the common origin and that we can reach the target God has set for us through his unit (Pope John Paul, 1986).*

Both Christians and Muslims believe in the golden rule "treat others as you would like them to treat you". It is the commandment of God that we should follow peace with all men and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). If it be possible, as much as it lieth in you, live peaceably with all men (Rom 12:18).

A fundamental fact Christians should bear in mind as they engage in dialogue is the unity of the human race in God's plan. The triune God imprints His image in each person whom he creates and orients every person to himself. The Biblical account on creation therefore becomes the background for our relationship with peoples of other faiths. We share a common world and a common humanity; we also have life from a common transcendent source. The vertical council affirms this and illustrates it with biblical guide from Acts 17:26.

Our conflicts often arise from tribal, economic, political or cultural factors. Admittedly religion can fan, and in some cases, be exploited as a tool in aggravating these conflicts given the fact that some people can become nervous and extreme when their religious cords are tickled. We observe that politicians from the various faiths hold conferences together and pass resolutions irrespective of their creeds. This kind of situation submerges religious distinctiveness in order to bring about good governance as well as ensure the total well-being of the State. This was well demonstrated during the struggle for independence. One observes

from the national anthem that emerged with independence, religious differences were played down.

Metuh (1985) in Ninyio (2001) observes that brotherhood in the family of one God was given the dominant place for the survival of our great country and this is evident in the first and last stanza of our independence national anthem.

## **Ways of Achieving Purposeful Inter-Religious Dialogue**

Having explained the position of religions on inter-religious dialogue and having established that there is need for religious dialogue in this country, particularly when religious crises had claimed the lives and properties of some Nigerians in the recent times, it becomes pertinent to suggest ways through which purposeful inter-religious dialogue could be achieved. Efforts need to be made at various quarters, governmental and non-governmental, to employ dialogue in solving religious problems in our society. Hence, the following ways could be employed:

- **Government Approach**

Government at federal, state and local levels need to give religion necessary recognition it deserves. Laissez-faire attitude of government should be discarded. At all levels of the government, religious forum or council for both religious groups should be further strengthened. This will help in a long way to promote and maintain peaceful co-existences of Muslims and Christians in the country.

- **Religious leaders role**

Religious scholars, predictions and leaders of both Christianity and Islam need to gear up their roles. They should be moved by the religious climate which has turned from peace and love to violence and destruction of lives and properties. They should remember that the role is to build not to destroy, hence the need to play the role well so that they will not be held responsible by God for his garden or misdirect their followers. No serious religious crisis can be experienced if there had not being the support of leaders directly or indirectly. In view of the above, it becomes challenging for religious leader to play their role very well and appropriately by organizing religious dialogue on issues that could create misunderstanding among the followers and adherents of their faith.

- iii. **Academic and school programs**

Interreligious dialogue needs to be channeled through academic and school programs. The academic program is briefly discussed under the following

- **Conferences or seminars:** There is the need for scholars and academics in the field of regions to come together in this type of conference to share views on news with a view to promoting religious peace and harmony as well as peaceful coexistence. Efforts of National Association for the Study of Religion and Education (NASRED) and Nigeria Association for Study of Religions (NASR) in this direction are commendable.
- **Journals:** Religious Studies journals need to be floated across the country where a user of inter faith will be communicated. Although they are few journals for this purpose, they seem to be insufficient. Efforts should be made to provide more reputable journals of religions in which scholars of religion can display their professionalism and fulfill their academic obligations. In the area of school programs, school curriculum and syllabus should be

designed to allow pupils and students to take subject or course on inter-religious relationship in addition to cooperative religious designs for students of religious studies.

**iv. Public enlightenment or campaign**

Interreligious dialogue requires being given public enlightenment and campaign. The generality of people in the country needs to be aware of what peaceful religious coexistence means. Therefore there is nothing stopping the government from establishing a directorate for mobilizing general members of the public on interreligious education for the purpose of peace and harmony. The directorates may need to bring religious scholars of both religions to public discussions and symposium on inter-religious matter and issues. These discussions and symposium may be transmitted on electronic media, Radio and Television to give wider coverage to audience and viewers. More so, tracts, handbills and book on inter religious relationship written on Islam and Christianity needs to be produced and distributed.

**Recommendation**

Most rudimentary dialogues in the past took defensive stance. Therefore, for successful dialogue, participants should desist from such posture. However, participants should explain some misconceptions others have on certain doctrines at their faith. This should be done in love for future of Nigeria especially for the stability. Argumentative talks and debates should be avoided.

There should not be the fear of suspicion, since the participants are coming with open minds, frankness and humble hearts to enrich and broaden their knowledge. This will make a successful dialogue. There shouldn't be comments about other people's faith which one is not grounded enough to comment on. Instead, one should seek for clarification in areas that are not clear.

In dialogue, participants should avoid comparative analysis of personalities, character and critical analysis of fundamental beliefs. With participants grounded in their beliefs, there would be no fear of religious syncretism and proselytism.

However, the by-product effect of dialogue such as influencing one's belief after understanding the basic belief of other faith should be taken in good faith. Since religion is the conviction of one's mind, victimizing one who decides to change his mind after the dialogue should be avoided since it is his personal opinion.

**Conclusion**

Christians, Muslims and Traditionalists should live together as neighbours. Living together bring God's blessing, every religion preaches peace and peaceful co-existence. In so doing, we will draw the riches of scripture/doctrines and traditions of the religions in promoting relationship with one another. In the light of the above, the future of Nigeria will be secured.

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