



## INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA: PROBLEMS AND NECESSITIES

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**ABSTRACT:** *Inter-religious dialogue has gained prominence in Nigeria against the milieu of cultural and religious plurality as well as several other issues of violence, vandalism, killings and majorly the disruption of peaceful co-existence of the numerous ethnic groups in the country. The complication of diverse faith, beliefs, traditions, culture, language and mainly the threat of religious fundamentalism and extremism, thus brought about many ugly flashpoints and situations in many areas across Nigeria. This study seeks to unearth the significance and need for commitment of the various stakeholders towards addressing the challenges occasioned by this plurality of religious faiths in terms of the efforts required from religious organizations, traditional institutions, government and non-governmental organizations including Christian organizations and Muslim groups. Since religion plays a great role in the politics, social and security of lives of Nigerians as a nation, there can therefore be no sustainable peace among people of this great nation without constant dialogue among them, hence the necessity for this study. This work employed the use of primary and secondary sources in gathering of information. The paper identified a lot of challenges and issues bothering on intolerance, existing conflict of interest, injustice, inequity, superiority of one religious group over the other, while advocating for the removal of entrenched misconceptions and hatred. The paper encouraged for more understanding, mutuality and peaceful co-existence.*

**KEYWORDS:** Religion, Security, Dialogue, Peace, Christianity, Muslims.



## INTRODUCTION

Religion in Nigeria (known to be the most populous African country with a population of over 225 million as of 2022) is varied<sup>1</sup>. Nigeria is officially a secular state with no official state religion. Article 10 of the Constitution states that “The Government of the Federation or a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite the provisions of the constitution, Nigeria, a complex nation with a rich tapestry of religions, has seen continued episodes of religious tension and conflict. In such a difficult social landscape, inter-religious dialogue and religious freedom play pivotal roles in nurturing harmony, tolerance, and social cohesion. This paper examines the significance and history of religious crisis, inter-religious dialogue and religious freedom in Nigeria, highlighting their problems and the necessities in fostering a peaceful and united society. Inter-religious dialogue is done in order to promote peace, security and most especially to erase the prejudices of fanatical and fundamentalist driven ideas which have battered Nigeria. In Nigeria’s Muslim-controlled northern regions, Christian women and under-aged girls are often forced to convert from Christianity and marry Muslim men. These marriages are either forced by the local government, or by Islamic extremist groups like Boko Haram. Specifically, according to a report from the U.S. State Department, “those women and girls ‘abducted by Boko Haram’ were subjected to forced marriage and sexual abuse, including rape and sexual slavery.”<sup>3</sup>

Religious dialogue supposes that there is originally an existing conflict of interest and threat to peace. Since independence, Nigeria has been contending with religious crises occasioned by the ethnic composition of the country and this is founded on the circumstance of our individual, cultural and religious differences. But as Ejikemeuwa rightly observed, that does not mean that we cannot understand each other and live peacefully, notwithstanding our individual and religious differences.<sup>4</sup> Thus, religious dialogue has to do with deliberating the views of dissimilar religious parties for the singular purpose of understanding each other better and more so to promote peaceful coexistence among groups of different backgrounds either from government, non-governmental institutions or even religious actors. For the purpose of this study, Nigeria has been characterized by violence and bloodshed as seen since independence in 1960 and claims that have linked the diversity of religion to the impoverished state of the nation, the killings, and the chaos.

What does the law in Nigeria say about religion? The constitution of Nigeria provides for freedom of religion to every citizen and the right to worship or even to belong to any religion of your choice without any mistreatment. Let it be clear that in Africa, religion affects virtually everything we do, the way we cohabit and live and even most times the decisions we make as a people. Mbiti was right when he opined that Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. Religion, according to him, is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned<sup>5</sup>. The intricacies of this study are further illuminated by Borrmans in his book, who asserts that “as a Christian, there is no way I will understand a Muslim very well without really knowing his faith background and that this can only be achieved perfectly through dialogue, and that dialogue is concerned with exchange of ideas and opinions and an encounter that takes place on equal ground with mutual confidence, frankness and without ulterior motives”.<sup>6</sup> To support this paper, when and how did the two major religions of Christianity and Islam evolve in Nigeria?



## Historical Background to the Spread of Islam

Islam is one of the largest religions in Nigeria and the country has the largest Muslim population in Africa.<sup>7</sup> Islam in Nigeria dates back to the eleventh century when it first appeared in Borno, through merchants from North Africa and the Senegalese basin. It was the first monotheistic Abrahamic religion to arrive in Nigeria. The northern half of Nigeria historically fell under the rule of various Islamic states and empires such as the Kanem–Bornu Empire, the Mali Empire, the Songhai Empire, and the Hausa Kingdoms. Later Islam emerged in Hausaland and the non-hausa states through the Sokoto Jihad or what may be known as Fulani conquest, a successful Islamic revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century led by Usman dan Fodio<sup>8</sup>. In 2018, the CIA World Factbook estimated that 53.5% of Nigeria's population is Muslim.<sup>9</sup> Inter-religious dialogue becomes even more necessary considering the diversity and multifarious nature of Islamic ideologies itself. For example, Muslims in Nigeria are predominantly Sunnis of the Maliki school of thought. However, there is a significant Shia minority and The Ahmadiyya movement that also has a sizable presence in the country primarily in Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Osun, Kwara, Yobe and Sokoto states with divergent views of the same religion<sup>10</sup>. There is also the heretical sect that is known as Maitatsine and Quranists. These disaffected adherents ultimately lash out at the more traditional mosques and congregations, resulting in violent outbreaks in several cities of the north in the past. It is also observed that most of Northern Nigeria is governed under Sharia law, while the rest of the country is governed under secular law.<sup>11</sup>

## History of Christianity in Nigeria

Portuguese missionaries introduced Christianity to the southern half of Nigeria during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and it grew to be a dominant religion in Nigeria alongside Islam during British colonial rule beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2011, Nigeria had the largest Christian population of any country in Africa, with more than 95 million people in Nigeria belonging to various denominations<sup>12</sup>. Christianity is the major religion in the southern and central region in Nigeria with a fewer presence in northern Nigeria. Yet it has witnessed continual attacks by Islamic extremists. Christians in Nigeria comprise an estimated 49.3% of the population<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, of that percentage, recent estimates put 74% of the Christian population to be Protestants, 25% Roman Catholics while the rest belonged to other Christian denominations<sup>14</sup>.

## Statement of the Problem

The consequences of religious conflict and tension in Nigeria have remained a grave concern because it has repeatedly led to colossal loss of lives, properties and other valuable resources. For instance, a non-partisan Christian organization, International Christian Concern (ICC), has included Nigeria among the most dangerous places for Christians in the world. The organization noted that Islamic extremists and militants have been killing Christians in the country particularly in the northern region and dispossessing them of their lands in the last few years. This was contained in the organization's 2023 report on Christian persecutors in the world. The report partly read,

“Nigeria is arguably the most dangerous place to be a Christian in the world today. In the North, a very hostile group of Muslim extremists has attacked and devastated the minority population



of Christians. In the Middle Belt, armed Islamic terrorists, known as Fulani militants, have been killing Christians and stealing their land at a prodigious rate for the last 20 years”<sup>15</sup>.

Thus it is the view of this study that to avoid subsequent religious crisis and conflict, certain questions needs to be understood with a view to addressing this ugly inclination and they are as follows;

### 1. Understanding Nigeria’s Religious Diversity

Nigeria is often described as a religiously pluralistic society, with a significant population of both Muslims and Christians, alongside various indigenous religious practices. This diversity has the potential to be a source of strength, cultural richness, and mutual respect if well utilized. However, it has also led to instances of religious tension and conflict.

### 2. Religious Freedom: A Cornerstone of Development and Democracy

Religious freedom is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of any thriving democracy. It encompasses human capital development, the freedom to practice, transform one’s society, and share one’s religion without discrimination or coercion. Human capital development is one great contribution made by religion. For instance, Christianity contributed and still adds to the development of Nigeria. The missionaries were concerned about the emancipation of the poor Africans who were the reason they established industrial schools, to train them on various skills. According to Nwankiti, the first industrial school was established in Abeokuta in 1851 and the first students who were sent abroad by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) went to study brick and tile making, navigation, horticulture and industrial management<sup>16</sup>. Today we have religious institutions with banks, universities, secondary schools and other cottage industries wrapped within them, particularly established religions. Thus in Nigeria, protecting religious freedom ensures that both the society and individuals can live in accordance with their beliefs, contributing to the development of a pluralistic and democratic society.

### 3. Building Trust and Social Cohesion

Inter-religious dialogue is not solely limited to religious leaders but should engage grassroots communities and even government. In doing so, it builds trust and social cohesion by emphasizing shared values and a common commitment to peace. Communities engaged in interfaith dialogues often develop strategies to address social issues, ultimately contributing to a harmonious society. Asadu was right when he adduced that “Christianity is an agent of transformation and that a critical study of Christianity shows that its influential powers are quite irresistible. It has not penetrated any human society or institution without making a remarkable impact”<sup>17</sup>.

### 4. Inter-religious Dialogue: Building Bridges of Understanding

Inter-religious dialogue serves as a vital tool in building bridges of understanding and trust among religious communities. It encourages open and respectful discussions among people of different faiths, promoting empathy, mutual learning, and coexistence. For instance, the contributions made by Christian missionary work in Nigeria in the development of the nation, cannot be overemphasized. Professor Ali Mazuri, a Muslim, aptly captured it in his paper titled, 'Churches and Multinationals in the spread of Modern Education', where amongst other claims, he was able to prove that Christianity is real; has made enormous achievements that are very



important in every layer of the Nigerian society and has continued to help in the general growth of Nigeria<sup>18</sup> In Nigeria, inter-religious dialogues have the power to reduce religious stereotyping and misconceptions, fostering a sense of unity among citizens. Last but not the least,

#### 5. Countering Extremism and Intolerance

Nigeria has faced challenges from extremist groups that exploit religious differences to fuel violence and conflict. Inter-religious dialogue becomes an effective countermeasure that can bring religious leaders and communities together to condemn extremism and foster peace. The active promotion of religious freedom can counter radicalization by addressing the root causes of religious tension and discrimination.

#### Issues of Religious Dialogue in Nigeria

There are a number of factors that have heightened religious tensions in Nigeria thereby calling for dialogue. The first is the competition for space between the two main religions of Islam and Christianity. There is also the perception that Nigerian rulers use the state to promote their religion or faith at the expense of others. Thirdly, there is a culture of insensitivity to the feelings of minority religions in the country in so doing necessitating religious conflicts. In the past, we have experienced conflicts such as the Maitatsine riots in Kano in 1980 in which at least 4,179 people lost their lives, there was also the killing of more than 1,000 people in Zamfara State in January 2000 following the introduction of sharia in the state.<sup>19</sup> Nigeria is currently battling extremist groups such as Boko Haram, the Fulani jihadist herders and faces increased tensions between Christians and Muslims, as well as along tribal lines. “Between mass murder and land stealing, millions of Christians have been displaced. Since May 2011, Boko Haram alone has been recorded as being responsible for more than 38,000 deaths. As against this truth, Nigerian leaders tell the Western world that this is a complicated problem between herders and farmers with tribal overlays. But the truth is that we are witnessing a genocide of Christians in the North and Middle Belt, accompanied by an immense land grab.”<sup>20</sup> Christianity is widely practiced in the southern part of the country, and Islam is the major religion in the north. According to H.E. Amb. Bulus Lolo, a former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Nigerian government advocates peaceful coexistence between and within faiths. Religion in his words is about tolerance, understanding and peace.”<sup>21</sup> But unfortunately, Nigeria has agonized greatly due to violence by those in quest to manipulate religion, and one wonders what the government is doing to counter this ugly development. A case in point is sharia law, as applied today in Nigeria, violates the principles of secularism and endangers non-Muslim religious communities in the northern and Middle Belt regions of the country. Despite Nigeria repeatedly claiming to be a secular nation with religious tolerance, 12 northern states in Nigeria have adopted Islamic Sharia criminal law, meaning that Christians do not participate as equal members of society. Given its inherently religious nature, Sharia is problematic when applied particularly and when non-Muslims are charged under criminal Sharia law.

There is also ignorance of the teachings of the various religions that people are practicing or seek to be defending. For example, in Islam, the Quranic verse that instruct Muslims to kill unbelievers or pagans wherever you find them also instruct them to be merciful and protect them known as the verse of the sword 9: 5-6 (Surah at-taw bah) verse 9: 5 says,



“But when you fight and slay the pagan’s wherever you find them, seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait but if they repent and establish regular prayers and practice regular charity, then open the way for them”.

Verse 6 says,

“If one amongst the pagans ask thee for asylum, grant it to him so that he may hear the word of Allah: and then escort him to where he will be secured. That is because they are men without knowledge”.

So many interpretations has been made on the quranic verses above and according to Malam Saidu Abdulrahman of Ikeja Airport Road Bureau de change Mosque, in Lagos, he believes that while some Islamic followers with good knowledge of the religion see the verses from the perspective evangelism and turning people to converts through the message of peace, some of the verses have equally been misconstrued and by so doing spreaded conflict and terrorism as well as encouraging some followers of Islam without an in depth knowledge of what the religion preaches<sup>22</sup>.

The absence of proper recognition for each other’s religion is yet another factor making religious dialogue almost impossible. Ideally, inter-religious dialogue is expected to help each other understand their own religion and to discover the areas in which their religion is unique, but this is not the case. Each religious person must agree that differences exist and make an effort to understand each other without compromising their own religion or watering down other religions. Everyone should be allowed to practice his own religion anywhere with freedom and not to impose a particular religion on any person in Nigeria, more so given that Nigeria is a secular nation with freedom of worship and religion guaranteed by the constitution. Thus the adoption of Sharia Law in 1999 by some northern states as a state law was a total violation of the people’s right and particularly Nigeria’s secular status in line with our constitution.

Nigeria, an ethnically and religiously diverse population, also parades and engages religious leaders who have been working together for peace. Although this paper is of the opinion that there are great strengths in the campaign against violent extremism informed by religious variances, yet there are other factors that makes peaceful coexistence of religious groups impossible such as widespread poverty which has been cited by inter-religious actors in Nigeria as major concerns for the cohesion of society and local communities. The gaps between the rich and the poor is working against religious dialogue, by consequence, this gap leads to frustrations and discouragement amongst average Nigerians many of who turn to utter criminality, banditry, suicide bombers as often seen in the Muslim north, radicalism, unknown gunmen etc.

Ethnicity is yet another issue making religious dialogue almost impossible. Religious conflict in northern Nigeria has increased serious minority self-determination drive since the commencement of the fourth republic in May 29, 1999, and this could be attributed to the power struggle between elite of the component parts of the country, even in the north ethnicity have created a gap between the Fulani northerners and the Hausa northerner’s in terms of religion. There is also the endless recurring conflict and violence in Jos, Plateau, a state with over 50 indigenous languages and comprising relatively a good number of Hausa-Fulani, Igbos



and Yorubas who live there. The crisis in Jos has developed into a protracted religious and communal crisis leading to the loss of more than 7000 lives. According to Chuks Okocha,

We were taken aback by the turn of events in Jos, we thought it was just a political crisis but from all indications it is not so. We are surprised at the way some of our church properties were attacked and the clergy murdered in cold blood. The plan was properly executed and the question we are raising is, why were only the churches attacked and the clergy killed? Why were politicians and political party offices not attacked?<sup>23</sup>

Kaduna state which is often referred with two symbolic names on the bases of its demarcation, “ Mecca, for the majority who are from the northern part of Kaduna, and Jerusalem, for the minority who occupy the Southern Kaduna” have also been a flash point for religious crisis, divisions and claimed numerous lives since 1992. Historically, the Hausa-Fulani have historically wielded governmental powers and control of the state politics and economic structures at the expense and detriment of the Christian minority from the south who are often referred to as pagans. These differences which intensified uneven development, economic disparity, political marginalization and intimidation of the minority Southern Kaduna Christian community have not helped in the actualization of religious dialogue. For example, the 2023 election in which the incumbent governor Narsir El-rufai of the All Progressive Congress (APC) vehemently excluded the Southern Kaduna Christians from producing the Deputy Governorship slot of the party in the state as is the norm and agreement so as to douse the division and marginalization in the state does not promote religious harmony. In the past, there has been ethno-religious crisis in Kaduna, Zaria and Zango-Kataf local government area of Kaduna state out of the fear of domination and religious intolerance in the past. Such disputes as the clash between the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) who were protesting the introduction of Sharia law by the state governor and the Muslim Youths supporting Sharia in year 2000, is fresh in the mind as to how ethnicity is fanning the embers of war and driving religious crisis even more deeper<sup>24</sup>. According to Chauldhari, the term inter-religious dialogue refers to positive interactions between people of different backgrounds, communities, faith coming to mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences.<sup>25</sup>

However, many blameless lives have been cut short, belongings worth millions of naira lost, guiltless Nigerian villages and communities displaced and turned to refugees in their father’s homeland all as a result of religious chauvinism. Therefore, Nigeria is still contending with challenges of religious coexistence and cohesion as well as conflict and other resource issues. Nigeria being a religious country has yet to recover from many years of bloodshed, with violence rooted in blindness to basic human rights, respect, equality and un-acceptance of one another, hate speech, ethnicity, misinformation and incitement to violence have been allowed to persist. The point is that efforts have been ongoing in ensuring that religious dialogue is carried out in Nigeria, a country with over 216 million people<sup>26</sup>, comprising over 500 ethnic groups in an atmosphere of truth and mutual respect. While it is noteworthy that the aforementioned factors have led to the breakdown of law and order, providing opportunities for criminality, banditry, kidnapping and other forms of insecurity in the land, yet this challenges are not insurmountable as there are great prospects within and outside the country that can be leveraged from the abilities of religious leaders, government and communities.

At present, there is evidence that suggests both local and international partnerships at the level of government, inter-faith partnership and even inter-cultural efforts aimed at promoting



religious dialogue in Nigeria. Although many observers see religiosity of Nigeria as a source of conflict and therefore a weakness, there is no arguing the fact that religion can also be a strength for conflict resolutions and even a pathway to managing and resolving conflicts. For example, a delegation from International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) visited Nigeria in search of opportunities to expand its involvement in peace building in the country through the use of inter-religious dialogue in 2015 during the Muhammadu Buhari administration as president of Nigeria. The delegation led by KAICIID Deputy Secretary General for External Relations, Ambassador Alvaro Albacete, and Senior Adviser, Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer, with Ambassador Yahaya Lawal and Dr. Dodik Ariyanto from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) met with more than 20 senior religious leaders, government officials and civil society representatives during a week-long trip to Abuja. This pronounced effort was organized with the assistance the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and KAICIID's local partner, the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR).<sup>7</sup> the team led by Ambassador Albacete said that KAICIID aims to work with international and civil society partners to support interreligious dialogue in Nigeria. "KAICIID and its partners are committed to implement short and long term activities to support the field of interreligious dialogue and to contribute to peace and social cohesion in Nigeria".<sup>27</sup>

The history of inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria will therefore not be complete without given credit to the contributions of Prominent religious leaders across different denominations and religion such as the former Catholic Cardinal of Abuja, his Eminence John Onaiyekan, who has consistently advocated for peaceful coexistence of the Nigerian people. Onaiyekan always preached against the tensions between the religions in Nigeria and the urgent need for dialogue. In one of his speech, he said "My hope was for Nigerians to look beyond Boko Haram being Muslim and see it as a threat for the whole country, regardless of any affiliations".<sup>28</sup> His Eminence, the Sultan of Sokoto, who welcomed and continue to fully support the call for religious harmony is another proponent of religious dialogue. I remember hearing him highlight the need for timely and necessary intervention of international organizations in promoting inter-religious dialogue and he opined that "what we have to do is to save humanity from itself. Churches and Mosques of all kinds are places of worship, not of hatred and distrust."<sup>29</sup> Late Prelate of the Methodist Church and one time President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Sunday Mbang was another prominent crusader for peaceful coexistence amongst religious groups as well as other political leaders as the former Nigerian Military Lt Colonel Yakubu Gowan who leads the Nigeria Prays Group.

## CONCLUSION

Nigeria has faced challenges from extremist groups that exploit religious differences to fuel violence and conflict. Inter-religious dialogue thus becomes an effective countermeasure by bringing religious leaders and communities together to condemn extremism and foster peace and development. The idea of this study is thus that the active promotion of religious freedom can counter radicalization by addressing the root causes of religious tension and discrimination which will be the panacea for religious freedom and peace.

Despite the immense worth of inter-religious dialogue and religious freedom, Nigeria faces other noteworthy challenges, comprising political manipulation of religious sentiment, discrimination, and violence and the way forward is to amongst other necessities: Promote





education. It is expected of the various stakeholders to emphasize religious literacy and education to dispel stereotypes, under-development and misconceptions. Secondly, there is the need by the legislative arm of the country to enact and implement laws that protect religious freedom and prevent discrimination. This paper also encourages community engagement as this will promote local-level interreligious dialogues and community-led initiatives to sensitize the people on the need to coexist. There is no doubt that amongst all the factors considered as the way forward, the media must take responsibility in promoting responsible reporting and messaging in the regular and social media that seeks to promote a harmonious relationship between religious groups while discouraging and campaigning against the incitement of religious hatred in Nigeria.

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