

**UNITY IN DIVERSITY IN CHRISTIAN -MUSLIM
RELATIONS IN NIGERIA AS A PATHWAY
TO AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE**

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Abstract

In this paper, we assess some factors that are obstacles to healthy Christian – Muslim relations in a pluralistic society such as Nigeria. For several years there have been crises between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, most especially in the northern part. Christianity and Islam are two of the three major religions in Nigeria, the African Traditional Religion being the third. Suffice to point out here that Christians, Muslims, and adherents of the African Traditional Religion live together, buy and sell in the same markets, work in offices together, and sometimes even inter-marry in various communities in Nigeria. In this kind of scenario one still wonders the sometimes show of hatred between Christians and Muslims. Tracing historically the two religions under focus it is pertinent to note that both religions are called the religions of the Book and share a common heritage. The research methodology adopted here are socio-historical, and evaluative approaches. One of the research findings is that authentic education of adherents by both religions is the panacea to healthy relations between the Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. This work concludes with the fact that the existing religious climate in Nigeria is a direct result of certain actions, utterances, and insinuations all

of which are preventable. This is to suggest that if Nigerians are sincere in their quest for religious harmony and peaceful co-existence, the first step is to address the issue of factors, which are inimical to religious unity and peaceful co-existence. Subsequently, the final solution becomes easily attainable.

Keywords: Unity, Diversity, Christian, Muslim, Pathway, Dialogue, Nigeria

Introduction

The quest for peace by all in our world today cannot be overemphasized. But there can be no peace without tolerance from inhabitants living together in human society. Peace is an opposite of strife. To eliminate strife and crises within human society is the responsibility of all persons who genuinely want a peaceful society.

Nigeria as a nation with three major religions, African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam have overtime be bedeviled by strife, chaos, and outright crises which have often led to underdevelopment. While the African Traditional Religion, the oldest religion in Nigeria has been quite docile and accommodating to other religions, the attitude of the adherents of Christianity and Islam has not been quite encouraging. For several years now, some adherents of these two religions have continued to see one another as enemies and competitors in their bid to proselytizing within the Nigerian nation. This unhealthy attitude has continued to constitute a cog in the wheel of progress as far as religions are concerned in Nigeria.

This paper aims to assess those lingering issues in Christian–Muslim dialogue in the Nigerian context to ameliorate the crises that such issues have raised. We are quite aware of the bickering going on between the Christians and Muslims in the Nigerian state. This work sets to outline those issues and thereafter suggest ways that would bring about worthwhile dialogue between the Christians and Muslims, which invariably would lead to peaceful co-existence between adherents of the two religions. The research

methodology adopted here is socio- historical, and evaluative approaches

What is Dialogue?

Since the 1970s, interreligious dialogue has made unprecedented advances. In this relatively short period, a number of initiatives have emerged, including dialogue groups, encounter centres, interreligious organizations, academic and popular journals, and academic programmes, where the possibilities of interreligious dialogue are studied. Depending on the participants (laypeople, religious leaders, theologians, and monks), the structure (local/international, small/large-scale, bilateral/multilateral), and the themes to be discussed daily concerns, ethical challenges, spiritual experiences, doctrinal issues, etc, interreligious dialogue can take diverse forms. These can range from encounters between academics in which the exchange of religious ideas is central to those between grassroots groups that are engaged in joint emancipation projects and dialogue, from diplomatic consultations between religious leaders to interreligious prayer meetings in which Buddhist and Christian monks share experience and insights on meditational practices. They can span the spectrum from encounters focused on action regarding concrete local, national, or ethical challenges such as global warming, human rights, etc., to Scriptural Reasoning groups in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims read one another's scripture, from personal conversations to international conferences with hundreds of participants, from spontaneous encounters between people who live in the same neighbourhood to colloquia of specialists planned a long time in advance. These different types of dialogue, each in their own way, promote positive and constructive relations with individuals and communities of other faiths that are aimed at mutual understanding and enrichment.¹

¹Marianne Mayaert, "Interreligious Dialogue" in Cheetham, David, Prat Douglas, and Thomas, David (Eds.), *Understanding Interreligious Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 201-202.

Dialogue as a term implies a conversation or an attempt to construct a bridge between two people or two communities with the purpose of coming to mutual understanding, respect, reconciliation, peaceful co-existence, and collaborative action for mutual growth in all aspects of human life. Dialogue also connotes an exchange of opinions, assumptions, convictions, experiences, principles, beliefs between two representatives of different cultures, customs, traditions, academic disciplines, religious beliefs, etc.²

Diversity is made up of enrichment and not necessarily a reason for a struggle. Also, we are aware of the fact that the breath and plurality epistemologies impede any claim of dominance or exclusivity or absoluteness by any kind of research or search for existence among different communities and countries.³

Dialogue is connected deep down with the search for truth and a striving for wisdom. It excludes fanaticism. A fanatic is someone who, convinced that he/she is absolutely right, locks himself/herself up in his/her position and refuses any critical testing or challenge. Dialogue presupposes precisely the engagement of people with critical minds, who question the obvious and also give room for others to challenge them.⁴ 'What all dialogues have in common is that they always concern a history of *homo loquens*, who is driven by reason, seeks wisdom.'⁵ In that sense, it is not surprising that the existence of dialogue and philosophy have been connected right from the start. Although the adventure of dialogue started in Greece with Plato, the philosophical hermeneutics of Han-Georg Gadamer especially can assist us to gain a better understanding of what is at stake in the dialogue between the religions. Although he did not engage philosophical hermeneutics with a view to interreligious dialogue, reflection on interreligious dialogue is greatly indebted to

²Joseph Bitole, Kato, "Reflections on Inter-religious Dialogue: An African Pastoral Perspective." In Klaus Kramer and Klaus Vellguth. *Mission and Dialogue: Approaches to Communicative Understanding of Mission*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2012, 45.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*, 206.

⁵*Ibid.*

Gadamer. His hermeneutical model of conversion often resounds in reflections on interreligious dialogue. As Sallie B. King correctly remarks: 'Dialogue and hermeneutics are at base about a very mysterious thing: the process of coming to understand the other'.⁶

Pathway to Authentic Dialogue in our World

Dialogue has become such a fashionable word in recent times. We consider it progressive to discuss the need for the dialogue of religions and cultures and how to become competent for dialogue. It is generally accepted that interaction between human beings of diverse origins, leads to a positive result and is for that reason desirable. It naively assumes that people who know each other face-to-face are likely to develop an affinity for each other. But is the opposite not also possible? Here, we mean people who get in touch with each other and know each other's views thus creating the opportunity for dissent and conflict, perhaps even violence. Obviously, more is needed for dialogue than just a coming together and speaking with each other or with one another. This additional feature is known as "good intention", or the a priori positive inclination towards each other, the willingness to listen, the expectation of enrichment and the hope for a personal meeting of minds. Unless the good intention exists, a dialogue is impossible. This positive inclination towards each other is an occidental heritage. It is a reflection and a consequence of the Christian command to love one's neighbour. It embraces whoever happens to be near; that is, potentially it includes everyone.⁷

Dialogue can be dialogue only if the focus is on the otherness, when the other can also truly be other; when the strange is not colonized. In the interreligious dialogue as well, openness cannot mean that the other is completely understood as such. The understanding of the other does not happen in a neutral space; our

⁶*Ibid*, 206-207.

⁷Martin Kampchen, "Dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism" in Klaus Kramer and Klaus Vellguth (eds). *Spirituality of the Universal Church Rediscovering Faith*. Quezon: Claretian Publications, 2014, 201.

prejudices, commitments, and convictions help to determine how we approach the other and his/her tradition. Human beings are situated and embodied beings, and we can never fully transcend our historical and cultural context. 'We never see from a God's – Eye point of view, we never think from a neutral place or tabula rasa, but always from a specific point of view rooted in our culture, our language, our worldview, and our individual life experiences. There is no escaping being rooted in the particular in this way'⁸

Dialogue is a revelation of a Christian–Enlightenment optimism. It claims that conversation pays off because people are different. Conversation is another ingredient of dialogue and is such a useful tool to discover differences and liberate oneself from illusions. It is useful because we expect that beyond those differences there lies something which unites us and which we can discover in our conversations. Whatever we may have in common does not mollify these differences. However, our Christian optimism demands that the common features are given more weight, thereby reducing the perceived differences to insignificance.⁹

One wonders the concept to be used in describing this common bond beyond all differences. Is it the Human Factor, the Divine in Man, the Holy Spirit, or the divine soul in every human being? Only when this common feature dwelling in every human person can be activated and put into constructive use will dialogue make sense. This means that the first condition for dialogue is that it should take place between two partners with equal rights, meaning who are equal because God has equally endowed them with that common heritage. No cultural or religious superiority can be expressed, not even in innuendoes or by uttering obsolete clichés. A constant watch over our language, also body language, is needed to avoid slipping into our clichés of superiority.¹⁰ In the case of Nigeria, Christians must never encounter Muslims with a sense of superiority; neither should Muslims show superiority towards Christians. The

⁸Marianne Mayaert, "Interreligious Dialogue", 208.

⁹Martin Kampchen, "Dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism", 201.

¹⁰*Ibid*, 202.

claim that Christianity is the only religion capable of salvation should not be the case because the Muslims are also God's children created in His image and likeness and therefore, also on the path leading to paradise.

Some areas of Divergence in Christian- Muslim Relations

We do not intend to highlight all the areas of conflicts between Christianity and Islam in Nigeria and other nations of the world. This analysis is just a microcosm of the divergence in the understanding of one another by the Christians and Muslims in our world.

We commence this section with anecdotal history which relates to an encounter in the mid 1960s between Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe who was Nigeria's first president and Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, a one-time Premier and Sarduna of Sokoto. The story related by Johnson Mbillah, General Coordinator of the programme for Christian – Muslim Relations in Africa, is transmitted as follows: The two leaders met to discuss the growing tensions between coalition partners in central government (the Northern People's Congress and the National Council of Nigerian citizens). The tension brought to the fore open divergences between the majority Christian South which was degenerating into ethnoreligious antagonism. In the cause of dialogue to restore some understanding, Dr. Azikiwe is quoted to have said to Ahmadu Bello, "Let us forget our differences." Ahmadu Bello replied, "No, let us understand our differences... By understanding our differences we can build unity in Nigeria."¹¹

From the perspective of Islam, Christianity is one-sided in its preoccupation with spiritual matters; it is exclusively concerned with the salvation of people's soul in the hereafter. But what does it have to say about life in this world, especially about social and political matters? Secondly, the separation of state and religion is alien to Islam; it is a Western and Christian idea. Thirdly, Christianity distinguishes between the things that are God's and the things that are

¹¹Martha Th Frederiks, "Let Us Understand Our Differences: Current Trends in Christian-Muslim Relations in Sub-Sahara Africa" in Marina Ngursangzeli Behera (ed.) *Interfaith Relations after One Hundred Years: Christian Mission among Other Faiths*. Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2011, 49.

Caesar's. How then should one understand ventures carried out in the name of Christianity such as the crusades and colonialism?¹²

Islam understands itself as the final revealed religion, fulfilling and superseding all earlier religions. Judaism is one-sided in its preoccupation with this world; Christianity is one-sided in its emphasis on the spiritual. Islam in contrast is the perfect, harmonious religion of the middle way (cf. Qur'an 5:3 and the reference to *din wasat* at 2:143, which is interpreted in this sense of a mediating religion). Islam concerns body and soul, social, political and religious life, prosperity in this world and the hereafter. Christianity, on the other hand, sacrifices the body and the soul; it deals only with religion (*din*) and ignores politics and the state (*dawla*), setting no store by prosperity in this world, but rather laying all its hope on heaven.¹³

To varying degrees, such ideas are widespread among Muslims. It needs to be acknowledged that several features of the image that Christianity offered in the 19th century lent support to this grossly oversimplified view. Typical in this regard are phrases like 'the saving of souls' in this valley of tears'; a widespread negative view of the body and especially of sexuality, what at times was portrayed as sin's chief domain; the concepts of Christianity as a private religion and of politics as a 'dirty business'; and so on.¹⁴

Majority of Muslims see monasticism and the practice of celibacy for the sake of the faith as a typically Christian phenomenon which leaves its stamp on the entire Christianity. They regard it as an embodiment of a 'flight from the world' (*al-firar min al -dunya*) which the 'healthy' perspective of Islam firmly rejects. It should be noted, however, that this traditional Muslim perspective of Christianity has in recent years undergone a partial change. Muslims often declare their interest in the efforts of the Christian churches to gain a hearing in the sphere of politics and public opinion of issues of

¹²Christian W. Troll, *Muslims Ask, Christian Answer*. Lahore: Multi Media Affairs, 2012,103.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid*,104.

peace and justice in the name of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. Muslim thinkers are interested in Liberation Theology because it issues a call to struggle against political oppression and social injustice.¹⁵

Christian Mission and Islam in Nigeria Today

The shared history of Christians and Muslims indicates that it does not matter who is politically or culturally dominant, Muslims or Christians, perhaps with some exceptions in the ninth century, conflict and confrontation have been a norm. The principle of 'exchange' has rarely been explored. In the early Arab Middle East, which experienced the Muslim conquest and was integrated within the expanding Muslim rule, only Muslims had full rights. This may have partly contributed to the decline of Eastern Christianity. Their migrations, even in our contemporary time (e.g. in Turkey and Iraq) are perhaps a sign of the continuing conflicts (most of it avoidable, as in Iraq). Islam and Christianity have been guilty of taking their notion of truth and reality to extremes and in hating the other enough to wage wars.¹⁶

There is certainly something worthwhile that modern Christians and Muslims in Nigeria need to learn from the ninth century dialogues. Mark Beaumont's work on Christology indicates how Christians presented 'Christ for Muslims' in what he called 'the most creative period of Christian-Muslim dialogue' (9th century). What is interesting is that he compares it with the 20th-century dialogue which follows a similar trajectory and this is where his significant contribution lies. Christians believed there were continuities between the two faiths. Islam on the other hand already had the Christ and their task was simply to build on this pre-understanding. In such an open and honest context even the seemingly intractable problems of Jesus' divinity and crucifixion

¹⁵*Ibid*

¹⁶David Emmanuel Singh, "Hundred Years of Christian – Muslim Relations: Mission to Interfaith Relations" in Marina Ngursangzeli Behera (ed.) *Interfaith Relations after One Hundred Years: Christian Mission among Other Faiths*. Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2011, 39.

could be explained and people were civil enough to hear them speak. They may eventually reject the idea but not before they had properly heard them.¹⁷

The comparative framework for Beaumont's study was intended to serve as a model for dialogue. For him what characterized Christians from these periods was their ability to listen to Muslims and their objections and take their 'concerns seriously'. There existed genuine commitment to engaging with them and although, they might eventually not accept Christian claims, Christian commitment to continue fostering this relationship and creative exchange held promise. This sort of friendly persistence was exactly what Jesus intended in 'the Parable of the Sower' in Mark 4. Jesus spoke creatively in parables not to confuse people and prevent them from comprehending but to secure understanding. The question of acceptance was the prerogative of the listener. Some thinkers go a step further in seeking to understand and secure an understanding of their respective faiths in the spirit of friendship and service. Apostolov, for instance, in his 'Christian-Muslim frontiers' searches for an interface between Christianity and Islam from the new perspective of intercultural theology. The key notions in this approach are 'interface' or the 'zone of contact' where theologies intersect.¹⁸

The notion of 'interface' or the 'zone of contact' (rather than conflict) is quite interesting. It conceives of religions as representing as it were, different circles. Much of these circles are unique to the religions they represent; meaning that the greater space in these stands on its own may owe to the unique trajectories they have traversed in their political, social, cultural, and economic history. However, between these circles, there appear, 'zones of contact' or 'interfaces' which may also be due to historical contacts between them, the natural osmosis of ideas and possibly also the common operations of a just and loving God, the creator of all beings and the spirit of Christ. From the perspective of the idea of exchange through

¹⁷*Ibid*, 39-40.

¹⁸*Ibid*, 40.

such zones of contact, we have the example of W.C. Smith who purposefully worked assiduously to emphasize 'interfaith' and particularly Christianity's relations with Islam. According to him, it was not about sacrificing religious distinctiveness as that was the greater part of religious identities. The traditional approach, for Smith, assumed that Islam and Christianity are two distinct religions and civilizations and as such presented them as separate circles. It is not a surprise therefore, that confrontation and conflict have characterized their history. Their relationship as a result is still largely understood and construed in terms of clash rather than cooperation and acceptance. Therefore, Smith's call, was for 'a new mental map', simply 'understanding' the other and securing their understanding of another's faith but to lead to genuine relations expressed in and through a common theology. This theology would be based on the premise that truth was a 'humane' and 'not an objective' concept. It was not contained in 'beliefs or doctrines' but was 'a function of the inner person.' If the nature of truth was concrete and not abstract then it was something that grew in human engagement with it.¹⁹

Christian Communities and relations with others

There is the need for urgent dialogue and collaborative solidarity from all faith-based organizations, communities, and cultural groups in Africa (and most especially in Nigeria) for the following reasons:

- a). The perceived dechristianisation of some nations which were for centuries considered to be the origin and hub of Christianity, its inspiration, human and material resources for missionary activities in Africa and worldwide;
- b). The general decreasing religious sense in society for several reasons, such as absolute or extreme materialism, socialism, egoistic individualism, and hedonistic tendencies (Benedict XVI 43). The alarming share of ignorance of Judeo Christian principles and values in Nigerian local Christian communities whose population is

¹⁹*Ibid*, 40-41.

demographically increasing but lacking in deep Christian conviction and commitment.²⁰

c). The ideology of absolute human freedom that divinizes a created human being to the extent that those who embrace it ignore and devalue the rights of the community, senselessly exploit nature including fellow human beings; or the conviction that God does not intervene in human society.²¹

The mission is the reason for which an organization or a community was created, chosen, elected such as the Church to do, or the reason why it exists. Jesus Christ tasks the Church to bring the light of the gospel to all humanity without exemption. This task is executed via the tripartite ministry of Jesus Christ and His Church, meaning, the prophetic, liturgical or sacramental and shepherding or *deaconia* or witnessing to Gospel values and law of love of God and neighbour.²²

It is through love that dialogue comes into play; loving not only brothers and sisters and neighbours but strangers, opponents, true enemies, or those we merely perceive to be against our cherished interests. In this context; Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, animists, members of Christian sects, extreme secularists, materialists, people with hedonistic tendencies, all are fellow partners with Christians in the dialogue journey and process. The purpose of dialogue is that there exist several persons who are born, grow up, and educated in a cultural context that completely disregards or ignores the idea or reality of God, the transcendental dimension, to mention just a few.²³

a. The old classic absolute secularists who find it a herculean task to imagine the existence of God;

²⁰Joseph, Bitole, Kato, "Reflections on Inter-religious Dialogue: An African Pastoral Perspective." In Klaus Kramer and Klaus Vellguth. *Mission and Dialogue: Approaches to Communicative Understanding of Mission*. Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2012,43.

²¹*Ibid*, 44.

²²*Ibid*, 45.

²³*Ibid*, 45-46.

- b. The agnostics who purposely or intentionally refuse to decide whether to believe in God or not;
- c. The positivists who take pride in rejecting any reality that cannot be scientifically tested, measured and verified through laboratory gadgetry or bodily senses;
- d. The extreme humanists who divinize the human being as having the absolute capacity to control and know every reality through scientific and technical know-how; thus giving him or her the unlimited power and freedom to do anything in his or her favour and pleasure.²⁴
- e. The Muslims who though believe in God and many of the characters and stories in the Christian Bible have their mindset and conviction on how God should be worshipped from the perspective of Islam.

The process of dialogue does not exclude any person(s) in these categories.

Nigerian Christians need not see the Muslims as enemies but rather as neighbours on the same road to knowing God and working towards the realization of God's kingdom here on earth. They are fellow pilgrims on the path to paradise where all mortals strive to reach to be united with the Almighty God.

Christians in Nigeria need to understand how Christians elsewhere around the world are relating to Muslims and surviving amid any situation. Perhaps Coptic Christianity in Egypt and Ethiopia serves as a good example of intentional disjunction and separation. Indeed Coptic Christianity is a brave survivor in a context dominated by Islam. Its marginalization in Egypt does not make for a pleasant spectacle. Even at that, one of the contemporary responses to this has been a reaffirmation of a distinct identity that is rooted in an ancient culture that does not have another living parallel. This kind of identity serves to assert their unique discourse on Egyptian –ness and Coptic Christian identity that is not shared by Egyptian Islam. Separateness is emphasized to inspire the revival of a distinct identity and communal pride. This type of recollection or coming together

²⁴*Ibid*, 46.

does not have its advantages in a context of overt discrimination and outright hostility but only for a time. It almost seems like Coptic Christianity is reliving a period of first 'contact'. What it needs to further its relevance in Egypt will require an immense sense of faith to transcend to the level of 'cooperation' and 'exchange' with Islam.²⁵

The idea of conceiving Christianity and Islam in absolute circles may have been a welcome development in an era of political conflicts of the Western Christianity with the East, but today we live more or less in a different world. We have the benefits of hindsight. We remember vividly the crusades and the World wars and not forgetting the Iraq war spearheaded by George W. Bush which was actually not necessary because they were simply made to happen. They owe to certain ideological positions sometimes religiously legitimized. They could all have been avoided. There is the need to bear in mind that today, a majority of the Christians live in the East where Christianity is also growing. Christianity can no longer be equated with the West. The great ideologically conflicting axes of the West and Islam cannot be simplistically equated with Christianity versus Islam. This way of thinking has serious consequences for the ancient Christian minorities living in 'Islamic' lands and generally for Muslims and Christians in Africa and Asia alike. In the case of Nigeria just like elsewhere in the African continent, Christians live with Muslims and are often part of the same cultural and civilizational 'circles'. There is often a greater degree of overlap between the Christians and their Muslim neighbours than them and Western Christians. Therefore, emphasis needs to shift to relations as we search with Bennett (2008) for bases for peace and justice and reconciliation.²⁶

Interreligious Dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria

In Nigeria, Interreligious dialogue dates back from the second coming of Christianity to the present geographical entity now called

²⁵*Ibid*, 41-42.

²⁶*Ibid*, 42.

Nigeria. Its first appearance in the 15th century was both brief and uneventful, as the Portuguese traders who practiced their Christian faith alongside their primary business adventure did not pursue evangelization with vigour, and they were also confronted with many unresolved challenges. There was no report of any clash between Muslims and Christians. However, the second appearance of Christianity in Nigeria in the 19th century was ushered in with a determined effort on the part of various Christian denominations- Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) at the forefront to convert Muslims and others. No sooner had the missionaries settled down to business than informal discussions and consultations began. Such discussions sometimes took place between Muslims and Christians and some other times between Muslims and the Colonial rulers who being Christians themselves had always thrown all their official weight behind the missionaries.²⁷

The Muslims in Nigeria found the method used by the Christian missionaries for evangelization as offensive, especially the use of education as bait to de-islamise Muslim homes. The emergent discussions ranged between asking for a three hour on Friday to fulfil an important religious obligation and a provision for the Muslim youth education system that should be devoid of Christian colouration. Such isolated cases of discussions and consultations represented the very early forms of interreligious dialogue in Nigeria. But with the inception of tertiary education in Nigeria and the subsequent proliferation of universities in which religious studies discipline was and is given some recognition, interreligious dialogue emerged as a tool to foster understanding and mutual respect between Muslims and Christians as well as adherents of other faiths.²⁸

Dialogue is first and foremost meant to celebrate a common belief in God. Dialogue brings together the community of believers of men and women who confess to the greatness of God and consciously employ this communality for the spread of peace and justice and love.

²⁷Muritala Aderemi Bidmos, *Inter – Religious Dialogue: The Nigerian Experience*. Abuja: Panaf Publishing, Inc., 2006, 133-134.

²⁸Ibid, 134.

It is meant as a vehicle and a powerful sign in a world characterized by injustice and a lack of faith. By associating with non-Christian communities for some length of time we become aware of the fact that they worship their God or their gods with the same fervor and dedication as Christians do. Dialogue professes the general aim to learn about the experiences and realizations of other religions and in this way find a new depth and breadth in their own religion.²⁹

Understanding the missionary nature of Islam and Christianity is very imperative in any discourse on the interreligious dialogue between the two faiths in Nigeria just as elsewhere around the world. Inviting people to the worship of God is an obligatory duty in the monotheistic religions. In Islam, for instance, the invitation is called *Da'wah* and it is made compulsory on the Muslim Ummah (Community). "Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity. (Qur'an 3:104).³⁰ Also, the question of the mission is fundamental in Christianity. The Christians are instructed as a matter of duty to embark on the spread of the gospel: "But as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God."³¹ The intriguing question applicable to both Muslims and Christians is, what extent have the faithful in Nigeria complied with these golden and divine injunctions about *Da'wah* and Mission? The situation so far is that of awful disgust as some of those who claim to be calling people to the way of God have often conducted themselves in a manner considered a flagrant violation of the tenets of their religions. For example, there have been incidents of clashes between Muslims and Christians during preaching sessions due to a group expressing unprintable words which the opposite group would consider offensive and react to spontaneously and violently too. The 1986 Ilorin and the 1987 Kafanchan incidents are good examples. It is obvious that the ugly incidents took place due to over-zealousness to win converts coupled with the unbridled utterances and violation of

²⁹Martin Kampchen, "Dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism", 209.

³⁰Muritala Adeyemi Bidmos, *Inter-Religious Dialogue: The Nigerian Experience*, 46.

³¹*Ibid*,50.

the divine principles guiding preaching.³²

Islam and Christianity lay down very clear and adequate regulations in pursuance of *Da'wah* and Mission. If these were strictly followed, there would be no case of bloody clashes during preaching sessions. The prospective preachers will be doing themselves and the faiths they represent a lot of good if they would comply with the regulations.³³

Another body that can play a key role in healthy interreligious dialogue is the press. It is a well-known fact that the traditional function of the press in any society is to inform, entertain, and educate. The mass media practitioners, like any other professionals, have a code of conduct that governs their practice. Within the context of their professional immunity or license, they can decide on which of the many events covered by them is newsworthy. By implication, they reserve the right, by virtue of their profession and training, to determine what information or news item to feed their audience with. With regard to religious affairs in Nigeria, it may be important to redefine the role of the mass media practitioners, particularly in terms of what events they will find newsworthy. The mass media reports, news analysis, and features are most likely capable of playing a positive or negative role in the relationship between Muslims and Christians depending on the intention and orientation of the journalist concerned.³⁴

More often than not, the reactions of the Muslims to the actions of a Christian or vice-versa are determined by the mass media reports. It will be difficult for instance, to reconcile the objectivity, which supposedly constitutes the bedrock of the etiquette of journalism and the role played so far by the journalists in the following situations: First, during the Second Republic in Nigeria (1979 – 83) a press report stormed the entire country like a thunderbolt. There was an allegation that the Muslims had been given ten million Naira (N10,000,000) by the then Federal Government, to

³²*Ibid*, 51-52.

³³*Ibid*, 51.

³⁴*Ibid*

build a central mosque in Abuja, the new Federal Capital. The gesture was seen as a favour to the Muslims and contempt for, or neglect of, the Christians. The tension caused by the report was better imagined. Even the prompt intervention of the government to explain the matter could not help the situation. The truth of the matter as given by a prominent member of the ruling party who incidentally was a Christian was that both Muslim and Christian groups were given ten million Naira each to build a mosque and church respectively in the new Federal Capital. The circumstances that led to the speculation came up when the Muslims commenced work on their mosque project in earnest. They had mobilized their resources to contribute more money enough to erect a magnificent mosque. But for the Christian church, information gathered indicates that the Christians had to hold prolonged deliberations to resolve some nagging problems. It seemed that the press had hidden motive as the press was not willing to give an explanation offered by the government over the matter the same prominence given earlier to the damaging speculation. While some Newspapers did not see the need to carry the story, others that carried it did so obviously reluctantly, as the report was tucked obscurely in one corner of the papers.³⁵

Secondly, the part played by the press in the religious crisis in Kaffanchan in 1987 was surely not in the interest of peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians. The Newspapers, Radio and television programmes devoted their front-page headlines, editorial comments, and features to the reactions of the Muslims in Kano, Kaduna, and Zaria. Whereas what transpired in those places represented the Muslims' reaction to the original action of the killing of Muslim students and the burning of their mosque in Kaffanchan on July 6-7, 1987. The public was grossly misinformed by the press as they were fed with partial reports. Such reports by the press led to Muslims and Christians fighting themselves.³⁶

The electronic media too often give prominence to events that are negative and capable of causing hatred and antagonism between

³⁵*Ibid*, 51-53.

³⁶*Ibid*, 53.

Muslims and Christians. Such events as the Maitatsine riot of 1980, the Bauchi and Katsina unrests of 1991 were given wide publicity at the prime period of network bulletins. If the Nigerian press was indeed interested in religious harmony in the country, they would find several events that take place daily in Nigeria that can promote unity and cooperation between the Muslims and Christians.³⁷

The stand of Islam on alcohol is very clear. Alcohol in all ramifications, its brewing, distribution, consumption, entertainment, etc is forbidden to Muslims. Whereas, a substantial part of the nation's resources is earmarked to the brewing industry whereby alcohol is produced in such a quantity as to make alcoholic drinks more accessible than potable water in almost all parts of Nigeria. In the health sector, facilities such as the ambulances, which are bought and maintained with the public funds in which the Muslims are also contributors, carry the Red Cross sign. Theologically, the religious symbolism of the Red Cross is not acceptable by the Muslims. Similarly, the common law practiced in Nigeria is of Western origin, and it is a truism that somehow Christianity seem to be interwoven into the Western culture.³⁸

In Nigeria just as elsewhere in our global community, Christians habitually live in close contact with Muslims. For this reason, Christians often feel the psychological urge to set themselves apart. However, such an identity must never be cultivated for its own sake, meaning for selfish motives. Instead, Nigerian Christians should emphasize their identity so as to discover a new depth and maturity in their religion. This may also mean that Christians absorb certain elements from Islam or other religions and integrate them into their way of living the Christian faith. Just like other tradition, the Christian tradition remains alive and vibrant only by continuing to develop and grow. It must be involved in a constant process of self-doubt and self-discovery. Accordingly, Christians in Nigeria must learn to strike a balance between two seemingly contradictory goals: on the one hand, to maintain an identity separate from the identity of

³⁷*Ibid*,53-54.

³⁸*Ibid*,58-59.

the Muslims and on the other hand, to learn from Muslims for the purpose of renewal of their Christian faith.³⁹

The Second Vatican Council theologians suggested that Christianity “fulfils” the other religions which are so to speak, “pre-Christian”. These were theological crutches that shed away from formulating a genuine pluralism of religions. Dialogue cannot but assume such a genuine pluralism. When engaging in dialogue, Christians need to take Muslims as seriously as they do their own faith. If they fail to do so, they cannot accept and treat their partners in dialogue as full and equal partners.⁴⁰

In conversing amicably with the 'other' person, you must set aside some of your ideas about his inferiority. Indeed, if you genuinely want to comprehend his outlook and to learn something from him, you will quickly find yourself admitting that your defensive beliefs are mere 'defences' and are far from being objective statements. The point being made here is that in interfaith dialogue, participants must abandon their defensive attitude and adopt an attitude of openness. Openness implies readiness to look at the other man's beliefs from his point of view, to place them in the best possible light for understanding them, and to see that, even in some belief or practice which at first seems meaningless or abhorrent, there may be an element of truth.⁴¹

In interfaith dialogue, therefore, the participants should aim at faithfully representing their respective positions in an earnest effort to create a deeper understanding of each other's religious commitments. The two sides are free to express their views, ideas, doubts, objections, and agreements with complete freedom and without inhibitions, but necessarily in an atmosphere of goodwill and understanding. Since Nigeria is a pluralistic and 'inter-religious' society, there is an ever-growing interdependence in every aspect of our material life, interfaith dialogue is therefore to be seen as an

³⁹*Ibid*, 209.

⁴⁰*Ibid*, 210.

⁴¹Joshua Idowu-Fearon, “The Imperative of Dialogue for the Survival of Nigeria: Lessons from Christian-Muslim Relations” in *Leadership* (Online Newspaper) Accessed 14 October 2019.

imperative for the evolution of a truly happy and prosperous multi-religious society. Interfaith is to be accepted as an opportunity to describe and witness to one another. For too long we have described the 'other' from our own understanding resulting in prejudice, stereotyping, and condescension. This is a false witness and the bible commands us not to bear false witness.⁴²

Recommendations;

For a healthy relationship between the Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, there is the need to suggest the following recommendations:

The claim of the uniqueness of one's religion is psychologically easy to understand. In the Old Testament, we encounter a jealous God who is venerated by a jealously loyal devotee. Neither God nor the devotee wishes to accept somebody equal beside them. God reveals himself as God when he emerges victorious from the competition with other gods. This kind of tribalism is inherent in the psyche of everyone in the global community. Distinguishing between various tribes, social groups and economic strata comes naturally to human beings. We believe that only enormous efforts can free humans from it.⁴³

Often times we transfer group mentality from our human society to God. Divine revelation of the different religions expresses itself through languages that are human-made and shaped by history. They speak to us from a particular historical context into our contemporary context. God is shown as a God who does not tolerate other gods beside him. This path towards the realization that there cannot be but one God, only one Divine Being that reveals Himself/Herself/Itself in each religion – this path is long and requires prayer, contemplation, dialogue, and most importantly, the renunciation of selfishness.⁴⁴

There is always a tendency to base one's image of Islam and Muslims on second-hand information from a distant, instead of entering into explorative dialogue with the Muslim neighbour next

⁴²Ibid

⁴³Martin Kampchen, "Dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism", 202.

⁴⁴Ibid.

door. As a way of reducing this hatred between Christians and Muslims in some parts of our country, we must seriously try to identify with our Muslim/Christian friends, try to see people, society, and the world from their point of view, thereby gaining true understanding. To some extent there are possibilities for a process of mutual learning, e.g. through participation in one another's religious festivals. A basic principle, to begin with, is the 8th commandment; to speak well and respectful of one another, thus breaking the vicious circle of "prejudice by tradition."⁴⁵

Conclusion

As we round off this work it may be appropriate to use an analogy one of these researchers saw on a social media platform where one of his friends Adams had an encounter at a bank premise. He went to an e-bank hall and as he was entering the hall, a lady ran ahead of him and pushed him away, so she could quickly join the long queue before him. He refused to react in any way. She thought he would queue behind her, but he was actually not there to withdraw money but to make a deposit. So he walked to the deposit machine and he was the only one there and no other depositor joined the queue till he was through with his transaction. As he was set to leave the hall, the lady left the queue to apologize for her earlier rude attitude towards him. With a sorry smile on her face, she said "I am sorry sir for pushing you away, I thought you were coming to the queue, Adams simply smiled and told her not to bother that it was not a big deal. But since then, the lesson in this story kept coming to his mind. He asserts that we do not have to push away or try to outrun anyone in the race of destiny, relationship, business, ministry, career, religion, etc. We should not always think we are going to the same queue (destination) with others. Unknown to you, though your path may look alike, your destinations are different. In like manner, with the analogy above, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria must never forget their differences but rather must learn to understand their differences. They may be different in worldview but the two religions lead people to the same

⁴⁵Joshua Idowu-Fearon, "The Imperative of Dialogue for the Survival of Nigeria

God via different methods and paths. The acrimony most times between Christianity and Islam leading to disagreements and tensions are from lack of proper understanding of the true meanings of Christianity and Islam on the path of some uninformed adherents of the two religions. For this reason, there is a need for the proper education of persons by the hierarchy of the two religions in Nigeria. Lack of proper education is the reason for the shallow understanding of what Christianity and Islam truly are.

Finally, we share the view of Bidmos⁴⁶ that the existing religious climate in Nigeria is a direct result of certain actions, utterances, and insinuations all of which are preventable. This is to suggest that if Nigerians are sincere in their quest for religious harmony and peaceful co-existence, the first step is to address the issue of factors, which are inimical to religious unity and peaceful co-existence. Subsequently, the final solution becomes easily attainable.

⁴⁶Muritala Adeyemi Bidmos, *Inter-Religious Dialogue: The Nigerian Experience*, 59.