

# Islamic Jihad and the Quest for Religious Tolerance in Northern Nigeria

*Thaddeus B. Umaru*

## **Abstract**

The paper aims to highlight the significance of peacebuilding through articulate and in-depth analysis of religious themes like Islamic *Jihad* and how such can foster harmony in a religiously diverse society. The development and spread of religion has been characterised by exclusion, conflicts, violence, schisms, persecutions, crusades, *jihad* and war as evident in the history of both Christianity and Islam. Religion as a powerful impulse in human existence continue to shape and define the socio-political, economic, ethnic, cultural and spiritual lives of people; at times with devastating consequences. Exclusive claims to the truth, radical religious strife, poor interpretation of religious text (s) and tradition, the quest for more converts, political relevance/ dominance, mutual discrimination and the desire to conquer more territories has brought about bitter experience of painful-suffering, untold hardships, rivalry, destruction of life and property, and seeming endless gruesome murders, all in the Name of God, Religion and or ideology? This paper focuses on the classical understanding and or misunderstanding of Islamic *Jihad* and how such perception forms, informs and affect relations with non-Muslims in Northern Nigeria.

## **1. Introduction**

The call to proselytise is very evident and compelling within the Islamic and Christian traditions, seemingly without the cognitive awareness of the religiously diverse nature of our contemporary world. Evangelisation i.e. the Christian call to spread the Gospel of Christ to the ends of the earth and Islamic *Da'wah*: the public call to or the propagation of Islam and the quest for more converts are central to Christian and Islamic religious activities throughout the world. Christianity and Islam are two monotheistic religions with large following and a strong urge to proselytise. Christians

and Muslims together form more than half of the world population. Interestingly, there seem to be a growing deep chasm of misunderstanding, competition, and what could be described as subtle hatred that permeate and separates Christians and Muslims in many parts of the world (Cf. Volf, 2011, p.1). Meanwhile, the Scriptures of both religions admonish adherents to missionary activity to canvass for more converts to profess belief in God as Christians or Muslims respectively. In various ways this missionary injunction and invitation is expressed through preaching, evangelism (crusade), teaching, witnessing, *Da'wah* and *jihad*. Intriguingly, the zeal to fulfil this obligation have unfortunately impelled some to develop extremist-fanatical attitude to their faith expression to the point that; if anyone does not share their religious world-view, such a person is considered an unbeliever or a *kafir* that needs to be converted to the 'true faith' even if by force of violence.

What is it about religion that can, and have push some people to be so passionate to the point of being able to deface the one who does not subscribe to the same faith expression 'in the name of God?' How is it that some people can become so religiously sentimental to the point that they seem to be robbed of the ability to see reason to accept the fact that the 'other' is free in their religious choice and expression? Is it possible to witness quietly to one's faith amidst other faith traditions without putting any undue pressure on the 'other' while recognising the right of the 'other' to be different? The challenge here is on how to go about *Da'wah* or Evangelisation devoid of tension, misunderstanding and conflict, such that respect, religious freedom and harmony becomes the hallmark of our acts of religious proselytization. This paper examines the Islamic theology of *Jihad* and argues that, emphasising the classical Islamic teaching on *Jihad* and religious tolerance are paramount in our quest for peace and socio-religious harmony in (northern) Nigeria.

## 2. *Jihad* in Traditional Islamic Theological Hermeneutics

The sincere effort by Muslims to make significant progress in the path of following God is known in Islam as *Jihad*. *Jihad fi sabil Allah* in Islamic theology and spirituality mean striving in the righteous path that leads to God (Kamali, 2013, p. xi). The term *Jihad* stems from an Arabic root word *jahada* which denotes striving or to exert great effort. This consist in the effort one puts into doing something good, to oppose or prevent evil and to stand for justice. Such endeavour may be directed towards oneself or to the outside world (Kamali, 2013). Classical Islamic theological hermeneutics

teaches that *jihad* has to do with the personal spiritual struggle and growth of the individual in the way of God. It is the earnest spiritual struggle of a Muslim to control the self, refine one's ego and conquer ignorance, discipline one's base desires and to excel in the work undertaken to the best of one's ability (Kamali, 2013). According to Islamic scholar Abdulaziz Sachedina, *jihad* in its ethical denotation is the human struggle on the part of a Muslim to establish a moral order on earth, and a principal commandment in the Qur'an (2001, p.113). Thus, for a Muslim to pray five times a day throughout their life time, fast from dusk to dawn during the holy month of Ramadan, work to earn a living to support the family is considered to be engaged in *jihad* since such activities are certainly not possible without great effort (Kamali, 2013. p. xii).

Furthermore, *jihad* has a social dimension for the benefit of all in society. For example, the one who works hard to combat poverty, disease, struggles to build housing for the poor, fight corruption and abuse, stands for justice, fairness and equity based on surrender to God and following His injunctions is on the path of *jihad*. Reflecting on historical precedents set by Prophet Mohammad, *jihad* refers to the religious obligation incumbent on all Muslims to follow and realise the will of *Allah*, to lead a virtuous life and to extend the Islamic community through preaching, education, writing and fighting injustice and oppression and to create a just society (Esposito, 2010, p. 48). This is referred to as the greater *jihad* (Dakake, 2013, p. 99).

Islamic scholars, commentators and exegetes further clarify that, apart from the purely spiritual meaning of *jihad*, there is the lesser form of *jihad* which involves physical fighting or military engagement known in Arabic as *Quital* i.e. the physical defensive resistance to an external aggressor or danger (Hayward, 2013, p. 52). *Quital* (fighting, combat or holy-war) is permitted in the Qur'an as part of defensive struggle against serious threat, oppression or persecution towards the Islamic *Ummah* (faithful or community). However, it does not mean *jihad* is all about physical fighting (2013, p. 52). Moreover, the permission to fight an enemy is balanced in the Qur'an with a strong urge to make peace (Cf. Esposito, p. 49). For example, in *Surah Al-Anfal* 8:61 reads ...*but if the enemy incline towards peace, do you also incline towards peace and trust in Allah*, and *Surah Al-Hujurat* 49:13 ...*O mankind we created you from a single pair...and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other not that you may despise each other; not to conquer, convert, subjugate, revile or slaughter but to reach out toward others with intelligence, understanding and peace* (Cf. Armstrong, 2001).

It has to be noted that the earliest Islamic community grew out of a particular historical context in the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula, amidst polytheists; where political, tribal wars, violent conflicts and squabbles were customary. Accordingly, the new community of believers (Muslim *Ummah*) sought to create its own identity, religious authority (government) and religious public moral order within a specific socio-political ambiance that was constantly evaluated, calling on the faithful to persevere, proclaim and defend the Islamic faith (Sachedina, 2001, p.113). The message of the prophet calling for socio-religious reforms in that environment posed a new challenge that was unwelcome by the religious, political and business establishment prevalent in the region; hence the Islamic *Ummah* came under fierce persecution and had to flee (Esposito, 2002, p. 29-30). Consequently, Qur'anic verses dealing with the right to engage in a defensive *jihad* (war) were revealed after the emigration (*hijra*) of the prophet and his followers from Mecca to Medina. They were forced at that time to fight in defence of their lives and the Islamic community (Esposito, 2010, p. 48). The Qur'an however, is very specific on emphasising the defensive nature of this form of (war) *jihad*. For instance, in *Surah Al-Hajj* 22:39-40 it reads *...to those against whom war is made, permission is given to fight...they are those who have been expelled from their homes for no cause except that they say Our Lord is Allah....* and *Surah Al-Baqarah* 2:190-3 *...fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress for Allah loves not transgression. ...but if they fight you, slay them...until there is no more persecution. Let there be no hostility except to those who practise oppression.* The Qur'an it can be argued gives three reasons for *jihad* as physical combat (holy war): to fend off aggression, protection of *da'wah/ummah* and safeguarding the freedom of religion (Cf. Shaltut, 2013, p. 18). Scholars like Joel Haywar (p. 40) further maintains that, it is clear the 'Verse of the Sword' (*Surah At-Tawbah* 9:29) was of a context specific relating to the purification of Mecca and environs; of all Arab polytheism and idolatry so that the Ka'aba becomes the central sanctuary for the worship of the One God.

In general, most Islamic scholars agree that even though the Qur'an permits *qital* (holy war), it does not mean that Muslims are allowed to wage war against others simply because they are non-Muslims or profess a different religion. They assert that *Allah* protects those who believe and in waging lesser *jihad*, specific instructions are given on how to wage such wars. The places and those to be exempted from any form of assault (for example,

women, children, old people and non-combatant) in carrying out the lesser *jihad* are clearly stated (Dagli, 2013, p.77). Furthermore, monasteries, churches, synagogues, priests and monks are to be protected (Cf. *Surah Al-Hajj 22: 39-40*). *Jihad* is not called for the destruction of faiths other than Islam. Besides, one of the essential aspects of *jihad* is the protection and preservation of places of worship belonging to the monotheistic religions (Dakake, p. 115). Moreover, all the People of the Book (especially Jews and Christians) are to be treated as fellow believers in the One God within their respective religious communities (Dakake, p. 120).

It can therefore be argued that classical theological interpretation of *jihad* enjoins every Muslim to engage in a spiritual *jihad*, a candid struggle in the path of righteousness that leads to Allah. A *jihad* of witnessing to the Islamic faith through personal efforts in striving to spread the faith via preaching, teaching and working to promote justice and good moral order in society. Meanwhile, the lesser *jihad* or *quital* comes into force only in times of persecution, oppression or attack on the Islamic community.

If however, the above is the traditional Islamic theological hermeneutic on *jihad*, how is it that more emphasis seem to be given to the lesser form of *jihad* than its classical understanding such that Islam is perceived by some non-Muslims especially in (Northern) Nigeria as a religion of the sword, forced conversion, violence and destruction? How is it that *jihad* as war (*quital*), fighting the cause of *Allah* to convert *kafirs* (unbelievers) to the religion of *Allah* seems to be the central message of some Islamic preachers in (Northern) Nigeria. Why are non-Muslims attacked unprovoked, their places of worship destroyed and the so-called *kafirs* are killed and some are forced to convert to Islam or face death?

### **3. Poor/Extremist Interpretation of Islamic Jihad**

The Qur'an teaches that no one can be compelled to accept a religion, be it Islam or any other faith because; there is no force in religion (*Surah Al-Baqarah 2:256*). This affirms the absolute freedom of an individual to choose and practise their faith. Religious belief involves interpretation of text and tradition in order to build understanding which in turn stimulate faith response in the person. Conventionally, such interpretation of religious text (s) or tradition is the responsibility of trained (and many times untrained) religious preachers. Lucid interpretation of Scripture demands that interpreters are schooled in the basics of critical analysis and history-contextual exegesis (see. Hayward, p. 30). A science that seeks to unearth the

meaning of text within the situation that led to such revelation, and the consequent contemporary application of such a verse or verses.

However, both the Qur'an and the Bible have been read, misunderstood and misinterpreted by people who do not have any basic training in contextual/critical analysis, textual criticism and the art of theological hermeneutics. Such have given an 'out of context' interpretation cum extremists teaching on particular aspects of Scripture and continue to fuel such fundamentalist reading and teaching of the sacred texts with devastating consequences. For example, some Qur'anic verses that have been misinterpreted and used by some extremists to cause hate and conflict includes: *Surah Al-Imran* 3:85 (*If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, never will be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter will be rank among those lost*), *Surah Al-Baqarah* 2:190-1, *Surah Al-Anfal* 8:39, *Surah Al-Tawbah* 9:5 (verse of the sword, Hayward, p. 31), *Surah Muhammad* 47:4. These verses have to be read and understood within their history-contextual and hermeneutical perspectives and be interpreted within such ambiance (Cf. Umaru, 2013, p. 136-7). Apparently, some Islamic clerics/preachers have proclaimed messages of hate that openly call on Muslims to wage *jihad* against *kafirs* because killing unbelievers for any reason is a duty, and the struggle between believers and *kafir* requires consistent violent *jihad* (Cf. Esposito, 2014, p. 29). Such oration coming from a distorted understanding and misinterpretation of Scripture (Qur'an) have caused untold hardship within the Northern Nigerian experience.

Religious communities in the region have suffered and are paying dearly due to poor-extremist interpretation and the application of the subject 'Islamic *jihad*.' Such actions continue to inflame tensions, foster disharmony and violent conflicts within/between these communities. How can such vicious messages which many times have led to atrocious acts be repealed? Is it possible for religious authorities to regulate religious-preachers? Religious leaders might wish to consider critically the responsibility of emphasising the need to equip religious-preachers with the basic training necessary for a more articulate scriptural hermeneutics. For anything short of this only exacerbate the existent precarious situation especially in northern Nigeria.

#### **4. Islamic Jihad from the Experience of Non-Muslims in Northern Nigeria**

The mention of the phrase *JIHAD* many times sends chilling waves down the spine of numerous people especially non-Muslims across northern

Nigeria. This is because the term *jihad* has become associated with forced conversion to Islam, killing, maiming, burning of churches and the destruction of life and properties of non-Muslims as have been the unfortunate experience of many who do not profess Islam in northern Nigeria.

Islam it can be argued is generally perceived among numerous non-Muslims in (northern) Nigeria as a religion of intimidation, force and fear. A faith that thrives through violence and the sword, with no respect for the rights of the 'other' to be different in their religious beliefs and or expressions. Consequently, *jihad* from the perspective of some non-Muslims means to bully, coerce and terrorise non-Muslims to convert to the religion of *Allah* or face death. Those who have experienced first-hand the seeming unending cycles of religious violence in northern Nigeria do not think Islam is in any way a religion of peace and harmony. For some of them Islam is synonymous to violence and killing, and Islamic *jihad* is all about destruction maiming and killing of non-Muslims. Some of these people would have lost family members, businesses, or property, places of worship and of course, irreplaceable valuables to one crisis or the other, some may even have been compelled relocate. Furthermore, the on-going onslaught and attack on Christians and their churches, the public call for *jihad* and the push for an Islamic Caliphate or state by the groups like Boko Haram is considered *jihad* against Christians even though both Christians and Muslims have been assailed by the same extremist group. Besides, the fact that some Islamic extremists around the world threaten non-Muslims to convert to Islam or face death is a startling example of religious oppression (Cf. VIS, 2014). Nonetheless, *jihad* remains an Islamic injunction on all Muslims and forms the core part or Islamic spirituality and practise (Cf. Bartoluci and Corman, 2014, p. 13-14).

For those who have been caught in one crisis or the other, the mere mention of Islam or *jihad* brings back awful memories of their loss and the bitter pains of the suffering they have endured or are going through. Hence trust is lost, existing fraternal community life is torn apart and harmony is destroyed by suspicion, stereotype and bias. This further breeds hostile feeling towards the other affecting every aspect of societal life. For instance, every political, socio-economic or cultural engagement is sometimes viewed with suspicion; as a *jihad* plot to continue to dominate, subjugate and convert the (religious) 'other.' Thus society is divided between 'us' and 'them,' tensions

are high and an unfortunate situation of crisis becomes an opportunity to retaliate and unleash violence against the other with such unbelievable ferocity. In most cases, innocent people are left to tell the horrific tales of their ugly encounter as they bear the brunt of such appalling condition, all in the name of God, religion or Ideology?

There is need to restore trust and confidence in building a homogeneous Northern Nigerian society where people of diverse religious beliefs can coexist. Muslims in the region can foster this cause by asserting the classical and more coherent interpretation of *jihad* to counter extremist philosophies. Islamic religious societies/organisation such as Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), Jama'at-ul-Nasril Islam (JNI), Muslim Student Society (MSS), Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), might wish to collaborate further in making vital contribution to a process of reorientation and re-education for more articulate interpretation of Islamic tradition and teaching on Islamic *Jihad*.

##### **5. Can Non-Muslims be enriched from the Classical Understanding of Islamic *Jihad*?**

Islamic and Christian traditions both admonish adherents to an exemplary life style in accord with the tenet of their faith. The spiritual effort or *Jihad* by Muslims who ardently struggle on the way of righteousness can become a source of inspiration for non-Muslims. Non-Muslims can learn and be enriched by the Islamic theological teaching on *Jihad* for the good of all in the society. When for example non-Muslims experience Muslims as striving to live a life of discipline and commitment to the classical principles of *jihad*, by respecting the dignity of the religious 'other' and building social cohesion centred on justice, freedom and the protection of the rights of everyone in the community. It becomes part of the vivid living out of the spiritual *jihad* that challenges non-Muslims to reciprocate such exemplary living. This furthermore has the propensity to engender fraternal dialogue, an engagement that has the bridge-building effect and the cooperation needed in a religiously diverse society of northern Nigeria.

Additionally, living by the dictums of classical interpretations of *jihad* can weaken conflicts, foster friendship and strengthen fraternal rapport that impels people to become stake holders for peace in a diverse community. When for example non-Muslims also strive to be honest and sincere in their dealings with others, stand for justice and avoid misdemeanour; they can be said to participate in a *jihad* that builds and strengthens their immediate

community. Christians for instance, who during lent continue the struggle of Christian living in response to the call to holiness can be said to be in personal spiritual *jihad* that purifies the soul on pilgrimage to God and in service to the community since the immediate society (neighbours) benefit from such responsible life style.

The true meaning of *jihad* can provide common ground for encounter, dialogue, learning and mutual respect for the religious beliefs of the 'other.' Since people of different faith affiliation live together, such religious diversity should not trigger rejection or prove an obstacle, for variety and of course multiplicity of religious beliefs can enrich society as people can learn from each other in harmony (Cf. Francis, 2014).

#### **6. Islamic Jihad in Contemporary Pluralistic Nigerian Society**

Contemporary Nigeria is a diverse society plagued by various socio-political, economic, ethno-cultural, intra and inter-religious challenges. *Jihad* as a spiritual struggle and a particular religious practise has to aim at harmonising such a plural environment to attain its maximum potential in harnessing and addressing these conundrums hindering the needed peace and development of the region. Moreover, most Nigerians express believe in one religion or the other. Therefore rational and coherent Religious hermeneutics can make significant contribution in creating a homogeneous (northern) Nigerian society. This can happen for example when the classical traditional meaning of *jihad* translate into a consistent religious struggle i.e. *jihad* against the politics of discrimination, better social interaction, ethnic and economic justice, equitable distribution of resources. A *Jihad* that focuses on tackling issues of poverty, poor literacy, poor development, corruption and corrupt practices among people, and a *jihad* that promotes diligent respect for the rights and freedom of every Nigerian. The thrust of Islamic *Jihad* in the present and the future must focus on the spiritual as well as socio-political challenges that confront society in an attempt to improve the standard of living. Meanwhile, sustained peaceful coexistence between people of diverse religious believes must remain central to the praxis of Islamic *jihad* in opposition to those who tend to preach hate and destruction of life.

However, can there be peace without religious tolerance, understanding and respect for religious 'other?' How can a vision of peaceful coexistence be achieved without concrete efforts at peace making? What can Islamic authorities do for instance in Northern Nigeria to tackle and address the sometimes extreme stance of some religious preachers?

Islamic authorities/clerics in Nigeria might wish to consider highlighting the greater *jihad* with emphasis on moderation, contextual and historical analysis of text (s) to counter extremism. Contemporary *Jihad* can centre on ways of making peace between communities that have been hurt and divided because of years of violent conflicts to foster fraternal living with the 'other,' to engender harmony and peace in society. Moreover, the hermeneutics of Islamic *jihad* today should focus on the common good of all in society, where belonging to a specific religious tradition gives rise to service with conviction, generosity and concern for the whole of society without making distinctions (Cf. V.I.S, 2014).

This can be achieved through consistent process of promoting 'Counter Narrative,' a practise that seeks to refute the extremist position or interpretation of religious text and tradition. A praxis that repudiates narrow minded-immoderate analysis of scripture, to project a loud voice of more lucid, coherent and comprehensive exegetical explanation of religious texts and tradition. This is accomplished through skilful preaching, scholarly publications, seminar/symposium, intellectual religious engagement and the use of superior articulate arguments, dialogue of religious sharing, printing and distribution of flyers. Furthermore, the use of and the impact of the media (radio, television), newspaper and the internet cannot be under-estimated. Also, it is essential to invest in the discipline of giving proper religious education and learning to adherents of both religious traditions (Christianity and Islam) on the tenet of their faith and the 'other's.' Religious leaders, preachers and clerics have to assume the responsibility of ensuring that the voice of truth is never silent. They might also wish to consider collaborating with theologians and scholars especially in the discipline of textual exegesis in the advancement of 'Counter Narrative' to uphold and promote classical interpretation of scriptural (Qur'anic) text and religious tradition. The goal however, must remain to provide sound religious learning that frees people (adherents) from coercion or persecution, to have an upbeat opportunity to think freely and chose their faith/religious expression based on informed decisions (Cf. Gooma, 2012, p. 159).

## **7. Recommendations and Conclusion**

Coherent interpretation of religious themes, text and tradition can contribute immensely to nurture tolerance and harmony in a religiously diverse society. Tolerance means respect, acceptance and appreciation of

the rich cultural diversity within an environment (Umaru, p. 218-19). Tolerance is enhanced when we respect the dignity of our difference through our openness to diversity, knowledge, and communication, freedom of thought, conscience and beliefs (Cf. Sacks, 2002, p. 45-57). It is not an attitude of merely putting up with the 'other' or choosing to endure in spite of dislike for them. Rather it is the recognition and respecting the fact that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, and conscience to choose and practise their faith without hindrance (Umaru, p. 219).

Islamic *jihad* and the quest for peace in Northern Nigeria demand a clear understanding of the traditional meaning of classical *jihad* expressed in comprehensive hermeneutics of toleration to engender harmony and peace. Peace however, is not something which can be bought. It is a gift to be sought, crafted and nurtured patiently through the actions, great and small of everyday living. The way of peace is strengthened when for example; we realize that all humans are created in the image and likeness of God, of the same stock and members of the one human family (Francis, 2014). This has to be reflected in the preaching and teaching given to religious faithful in both the Islamic and Christian traditions.

*Jihad* today has to focus on fostering tolerance with others. Call it '*Jihad* of Toleration.' This requires religious authorities to vehemently condemn in strong terms extreme-intolerant religious positions and attitudes which make peace with others impossible, by providing an alternative discourse through 'Counter Narrative.' *Jihad* is not all about converting the 'other.' Peace cannot be entrenched in a multi-religious and multi-cultural society like Nigeria without religious tolerance, respect and acceptance of the right of the 'other' to be different. It involves guiding/helping different religious and ethnic nationalities to get to know, accept and respect each other. The quest for peace and harmony in (Northern) Nigeria must be central in the process of Islamic and Christian acts of proselytization. Hence the need for courageous and responsible religious leadership as the Qur'an admonishes ...*O you who believe, stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves or your parents, or your kin....*(*Surah An-Nisaa* 4:135). The voice of religious tolerance cannot be silent, it must be vocal!

It is therefore incumbent on Islamic leadership in Nigeria comprising all the *Ulamas*, Emirs and Imams under the leadership of the Sultan, through the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, and the Jama'at-ul-Nasril Islam to work together to provide the needed 'Counter Narrative' on the

theme of Islamic *Jihad* to refute negative ideologies, while putting forth the more appropriate Islamic teachings of tolerance, peace and harmony. Such efforts are surely capable of yielding positive results.

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