Managing Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: The Inter-Religious Mediation Peace Strategy

Mashood Omotosho*

Abstract

Nigeria with over 150 million people consists of muslims and christians who live across the country. The religious divide in the country criss-crosses more than 250 ethnic groups as well as deep political divisions that cross religious lines. Over the last decade, numerous 'hotspots' around the country have suffered from pervasive violent religious conflict, with devastating impact on the citizenry and the peaceful co-existence in the Nigerian state. The February 2000 anti-Sharia crisis in Kaduna, the religious riots in 2001 and 2004 in Bauchi State, the dispute over a perceived insult to islam during a beauty pageant in 2002, the riots over Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in 2006, and the August 2009 Boko Haram onslaught which led to major mayhem in the Northern parts of the country are all disturbing signs of this situation. It is not surprising therefore that the Federal Government of Nigeria and some non-governmental organisations have decided to pay special attention to this challenge by putting in place innovative structures designed to provide effective solutions to the phenomenon of violent religious conflicts in Nigeria. No doubt, the inter-religious mediation organ represents an energetic and indispensable vehicle for achieving lasting peace among divergent religious groupings in the country. The questions that beg for answers therefore include: What are the salient requirements for a successful policy of inter-religious mediation strategy in terms of religious conflict management, prevention and peace building? What are the most practical alternative ways of enhancing the capacity of the inter-religious mediation group to effectively resolve religious conflict in the country? In a nutshell, the study investigates the various religious conflicts vis-à-vis the peace strategy of the 'inter-religious mediation' groups in the country.

*   Department of International Relations, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Email: momotoso@oauife.edu.ng, mashomotosho@yahoo.com

Résumé

Avec une population de plus de 150 millions de personnes, la population du Nigeria est composée de musulmans et de chrétiens qui vivent sur toute l'étendue du pays. La fracture religieuse dans le pays sillonne des territoires occupés par plus de 250 groupes ethniques et crée de profondes divisions politiques qui suivent le sillage de divisions religieuses. Au cours de la dernière décennie, de nombreux « foyer de tension » à travers le pays ont subi de violents conflits religieux, avec un impact dévastateur sur les citoyens et la coexistence pacifique au nigérian. La crise de février 2000 née des soulèvements contre la charia à Kaduna, les émeutes religieuses de 2001 et 2004 dans l'État de Bauchi, le différend au sujet d'un concours de beauté en 2002 jugé insultant pour l'islam, les émeutes contre les caricatures danoises représentant le prophète Mahomet en 2006 et les attentats de Boko Haram au mois d'août 2009 qui ont conduit à installer la chienlit dans la partie Nord du pays étaient tous des signes inquiétants de cette situation. Il n'était donc pas surprenant que le gouvernement fédéral du Nigeria et d'autres organisations non gouvernementales accordent une attention particulière à ce problème en mettant en place des structures innovantes visant à apporter des solutions efficaces au phénomène des conflits religieux violents au Nigeria. Sans nul doute, l'organe de médiation inter-religieux représente un mécanisme dynamique et indispensable pour parvenir à une paix durable entre les différents groupes religieux dans le pays. Les questions qui exigent des réponses incluent donc : Quelles sont les principales exigences d'une politique réussie de médiation inter-religieuse en termes de gestion des conflits religieux, de prévention et de consolidation de la paix ? Quelles sont les moyens alternatifs plus pratiques pour renforcer la capacité du groupe de médiation inter-religieux à résoudre efficacement les conflits religieux dans le pays? En un mot, l'étude examine les différents conflits religieux à la lumière de la stratégie de la paix des groupes « de médiation inter-religieux » qui officient dans le pays.

Introduction

Nigeria today faces greater challenges to peace and stability than ever before. The various regions in the country, the Northern part of the country, the South West, and the Niger Delta, are a volatile mix of insecurity, ethno-religious conflict and political instability. Thousands have been killed in riots between the two major religious groups sparked by various events: aggressive campaigns by foreign evangelists; the implementation in 1999 and 2000 of Sharia, or islamic law, in 12 of Nigeria's 36 states; and the 2002 Miss World pageant saga which resulted into another religious imbroglio when a local christian reporter, Isioma Daniel, outraged muslims by writing in one of Nigeria's national papers, *This Day*, that the Prophet Mohammed would have

chosen a wife from among the contestants. Similarly, in 2006, riots triggered by Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed left more people dead in Nigeria than anywhere else in the world (*This Day* September 2006). The attention to the role of religion in conflicts has been stimulated by positive and negative developments, including the desecularisation of Nigeria's polity and the rise of religious conflicts. In the country today, attention is now on the militant forms of religious fundamentalism as a threat to peace. Also important has been the phenomenon of continuous armed religious conflict which have spread quickly across other states in the country (Mason and Talbot 2000; Polgreen 2008). Religious diversity appears to play a complex role in these conflicts, often entrenching struggles over resources through ethnic violence and social exclusion.

Both the federal government and some Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have set up various institutions to deal with ethno-religious conflicts in the country. Many deal with them on an ad-hoc basis without articulating a standard way to process conflicts. Some of these ad-hoc committees have gone to the extent of designing a Conflict Management System (CMS) to address the issue of religious conflict in Nigeria (Kwaja 2009; Ahmed 2007). Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) and Inter-Religious Mediation Groups are no exception. While many FBOs have well-developed programmes for conciliation, mediation, and scripture-based peacemaking, very few religious communities have taken advantage of the CMS approach to their internal conflicts (Ibrahim 1999).

Using contemporary examples, this paper assesses the feasibility of inter-faith mediation strategies in peace-making. The paper also argues that internationally supported Inter-Religious Mediation and Faith Based Organisations promote peace between and among divergent religious groupings in Nigeria. In some cases, the faith-based organisations and inter-faith mediation group's approaches to peace-making and reconciliation can offer a corrective alternative to the failings of the western peace-making model. This paper is meant as a contribution towards the ongoing search for a lasting peace to various religious crises in the country. The Nigerian government has taken bold steps to reduce tension, but the continuing religious conflicts raise questions about the effectiveness of these mechanisms towards addressing the issue of religious crises in the country.

Religion and the Nigerian State

Nigeria is a state where islam, christianity and traditional African religions are freely practised. Nigeria's two major religions, islam and christianity, are sometimes depicted as monolithic entities that confront each other in pitched battles. Religious beliefs and values are an important feature of the daily lives

of many families and communities in the country (Kukah 1993). It should also be emphasised that traditional beliefs, values and practices have a powerful impact upon our patterns of life and social interaction, as do the beliefs, values and practices of the many religions that have flourished in the country. Nigeria is clearly a prototype state in accommodating divergent religious fault-lines. With a population of over 150 million and over 250 ethno-linguistic groups, it is the only country with a population of approximately half christians and half muslims (Paden 2008; Kwaja 2009). Since the awakening of religion, wars have been fought in the name of different gods and goddesses. Still today most violent conflicts contain religious elements linked up with ethno-national, inter-state, economic, territorial and cultural issues. Conflicts based on religion tend to become dogged, tenacious and brutal. When conflicts are couched in religious terms, they become transformed in value conflicts (Kazah-Toure 2003; Kwaja 2008).

The character of the Nigerian State is responsible for the country's deepening ethno-religious contradictions. This plural nature originates a constant feeling of distrust between the muslim and christian religious groups and they are working towards dominating one another (Kukah 1993; Mason and Talbot 2000). The religious contradictions that Nigeria faces are daunting. The country is essentially a heterogeneous society, with the two monotheistic religions – islam and christianity – enjoying the loyalty of most Nigerians. A sizeable fraction of the population still prides itself as being pure religious traditionalists, meaning adherence to one or the other of the many traditional religions (Olu-Adeyemi 2006; Paden 2008).

Within the Nigerian political setting, everything takes place in a political framework. There are clear intersections of religion and fragility in its politicking, in fact, religion and politics are intertwined. For instance, religious discourse is used in politics, religious sites are part of the struggle, there is an active role of the state in religious institutions and there is internal socio-political and religious division among the various ethnic groupings in the country (Takaya 1992; Williams and Falola 1995). Indeed, the most overlooked aspect of this religious encounter is that competition within the various religious faiths – between the christians (Pentecostals and Orthodox) and the islamic groups that want to engage with or reject the modern world – is just as important as the competition between the faiths. But it is also true that the fastest-growing forms of faith on both sides tend to be the most vibrant and absolute. Nigeria has been identified as a country of occasional violence between muslims and christians, especially in the northern and central parts (the Middle Belt) of the country. Here, the two religions have co-existed and sometimes engaged in fierce confrontation (Ibrahim 1991; Williams and Falola 1995).

Despite the political differences between the various ethnic groupings in Nigeria, religion has also become a source of friction between the muslims and the christians. Violence against christian Igbo immigrants in the muslim north was a key factor during the Nigerian Civil War, and even after the war, the trouble between christians and muslims, especially in the northern part of the country, intensified (Egwu 2001; Babangida 2002). The use of religion as a tool for achieving political ends has contributed immensely to the problem of religious conflict in Nigeria. Some politicians in Nigeria are known to engage in reactionary recourse to religious fervour as a means of either holding on to power, or as an instrument for political ascendancy (Counted 2009). It should be reiterated that religious conflicts are fast becoming a common feature of society, in spite of socioeconomic development coupled with the gains of democracy. Many scholars have attributed the causes of conflicts between and within various religious groups in Nigeria to a number of factors, such as ways of propagating the religions, selfishness, intolerance, mistrust and suspicion between the followers of the various religious groups (Agbaje 1990; Blakely, Walter and Dennis 1994). Conflict prevention and resolution are key objectives on the agenda of Nigerian governments and major inter-faith mediation groups.

Within the Nigerian state, many governments and international organisations are suffering from a legitimacy deficit, and one can expect a growing impact of religious discourses on Nigerian politics. Religion is a major source of soft power (Kukah 1993; Ibrahim 2000). It will, to a greater extent, be used or misused by religions and governmental organisations to pursue their selfish interests. Religious tension in different parts of the country has threatened the survival of the Nigerian state, and the federal government is slow in stemming the religious violence that engulfs the country. When a government fails its people, they turn elsewhere to safeguard themselves and their futures, and in Nigeria at the beginning of the twenty-first century, they have turned first to religion. Here, then, is the truth behind Takaya's assertions with respect to religion and state control. He argues that outbreaks of violence result not simply from a clash between two powerful religious monoliths, but from tensions at the most vulnerable edges where they meet zones of desperation and official neglect, and then faith becomes a rallying cry in the struggle for state control (Takaya 1992).

In spite of this early trend, the issue of religion did not come to the front burner as a critical issue dividing Nigerians until 1999. When military rule ended in 1999, democratic politics provided a perfect platform for corrupt and cynical politicians to play on religious fears to gain votes. The major event that opened the floodgate of religious antagonism was the decision of the Zamfara State government to introduce the *Sharia* penal code in the state

(Yusuf 2008). This move was seen by christians as a ploy to turn Nigeria into an islamic state against the spirit of secularity of the Nigerian state as enshrined in the constitution. The introduction of the Sharia legal system has added another dimension to religious dissension. This singular action of Alhaji Ahmad Sani (Yerima Bakura), the executive governor of Zamfara State, marked the epoch of intractable inter-religious violence in Nigeria. This religious imbroglio continued even in some states where Sharia was not introduced and this was as a result of the inability to categorically distinguish the place of politics and religion. The incessant religious crises erupting across the polity since 1999, when the military handed over power to a democratically elected government, negates Adigun Agbaje's (1990) optimistic thesis that 'Nigeria under a democratic dispensation would likely witness a lessening of tension over religion and politics'. The nascent democracy is witnessing increasing religionisation of politics and politicisation of religion due to the resolve of some northern state governors to adopt the islamic Sharia as the penal and criminal codes in their states. With Zamfara State blazing the trail, eleven other northern states have followed suit. Takaya (1992) also identified centrifugal factors that gave rise to the politicisation of ethnic and religious identities in Nigeria, which include the existence of two or more religious groups with sufficient numerical strength that can significantly affect the outcome and direction of a democratic political process. Then follows the instrumentalisation of ethnicity and religion as a legitimising tool of hegemony when the interests of the political class are under threat. He further reiterates that the society is characterised by political, social or economic hardships which have caused alliances along ethnic and religious fault-lines and these have resulted in the politicisation of religion in Nigeria (Kwaja 2009).

It should be reiterated that before the military handed over power to the civilians in 1999, the country had already witnessed a series of religious crises, and scholars have argued that the long years of military rule increased the gap of distrust as the politicians deliberately employed state power to heighten primordial sentiments, thereby increasing intolerance in Nigeria. The current political and religious sentiments are thus fuelled by some religious fundamentalists and individuals who benefit at the expense of the state (Olu-Adeyemi 2006). In 1990 a muslim-christian crisis broke out in Bauchi and in 1991 another religious riot exploded in Kano after a German fundamentalist christian announced a campaign to bring his Good News Revival campaign to the city (Ibrahim 1991; Egwu 2001). Also in 1992, a violent clash broke out in the northern town of Zangon Kataf, this development brought about a fierce confrontation between the christians and muslims in the community. In that incident, the mostly muslim Hausa and the predominantly christian Kataf ethnic group fought over the relocation of the community's main market

in Zango Kataf, and from there killings spread to other parts of Kaduna State (Yusuf 2008; Polgreen 2008).

Some of the religious conflicts that have captured national and international attention in the last ten years (1999 to 2009) in Nigeria include: The Kaduna anti-Sharia crisis on 21 February 2000; the clashes followed a march by tens of thousands of christians to protest the proposal to introduce muslim Sharia law as the criminal code throughout Kaduna State. Between February-May 2000 over 1,000 people died in rioting over the introduction of Sharia in Kaduna State alone. On 28 February 2000, hundreds of ethnic Hausa were killed in reprisal attacks in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria (Igbokwe 2000). In 2001, over 2,000 people were killed and thousands displaced in religious violence that spread across the Middle-Belt states of Benue, Plateau, Taraba, and Nasarawa (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2012). The outbreak of a religious crisis in the town of Jos, the capital of Plateau State and a city surrounded by beautiful hills, created pandemonium in the Middle Belt geo-political zone. The ironic thing is that Plateau State calls itself 'The Home of Peace and Tourism' in Nigeria. On the other hand, everyone in Nigeria is familiar with the fierce animosities that exist between the various religious groups in Jos (Kwaja 2008; Counted 2009). A week of violent clashes left at least 1,000 people dead and many more displaced in Jos. Soldiers and police kept vigilant watch on vehicles entering town, hoping to curb any potential reprisals. In every household, church and mosque, people blamed followers of the other religion with planning and executing the attacks with a vitriol that does not bode well for the future of the city.

Plateau State has the highest number of displaced people as a result of clashes between christian and muslim communities there. Subsequently a low intensity conflict spread to the surrounding countryside, where the mainly christian farmers clashed repeatedly with the predominantly muslim livestock herders. Over 500 people died in these skirmishes, which forced several thousand people to abandon their homes (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2012). Most of the clashes in Plateau State have been portrayed as being between christian and muslim communities, but have often assumed an ethnic dimension. The predominantly christian Tarok farmers consider the mostly muslim Hausa cattle herders as outsiders, and accuse them of stealing land and trying to usurp political power (Ahmed 2007).

Again in 2004 another sectarian clash between christians and muslims broke out in Jos. Some Fulani herdsmen were believed to have brought weapons into the city and an army search triggered riots which led to the deaths of many innocent citizens. In that crisis, churches and mosques were destroyed and whole communities killed or driven out. This led to the burning down of 72 villages, and in the densely populated residential area of Jos,

dozens of homes laid crumbling, and blood splatter stained floors, walls and
the large peach-coloured boulders between homes (Paden 2008; Kwaja 2009).

In a reprisal attack, about 30 people were killed in Kano, the largest city
in northern Nigeria with a population of about eight million. Religious violence
erupted with a muslim protest demonstration on 10 May 2004, as a protest
against the killing of over six hundred muslims in the small town of Yelwa in
Shendam Local Government area of Plateau State (Olasope 2012; Christian
Solidarity Worldwide 2012). Again over 1,000 people were injured after mobs
of youths armed with clubs, machetes and jerry cans of petrol roamed the
streets in Kano, attacking suspected christians. An estimated 10,000 Kano
residents, mostly christians fleeing from their homes in troubled parts of the
city, took refuge at the main military and police barracks on 11 May 2004
(see *Vanguard* of 16 May 2004). At least 57,000 people fled their homes
following sectarian violence involving christians and muslims in northern
and central Nigeria. More than 30,000 christians were displaced from their
homes in Kano, the largest city in northern Nigeria. Also over 27,000 displaced
people had sought refuge in Bauchi State following a massacre of muslims
by christian gangs in the neighbouring Plateau State earlier in May, 2004
(The Nigeria Inter Religious Council 2009).

Another major protest broke out in connection with the Miss World contest
in 2002 in Kaduna and Abuja. Violence surged when a columnist wrote that
the Holy Prophet Mohammed would likely support the pageant, an event
some muslims felt was indecent. The 'blasphemous' article suggested that
the Prophet Mohammed would have liked to marry a Miss World beauty
queen (*The Straits Times* 2002). Some islamic fundamentalists perceived
this as an insult to islam and it eventually led to further riots in which many
people lost their lives. More than 2,000 people died in the rioting that followed
in Kaduna and Abuja.

In 2006, riots over Danish cartoons depicting Prophet Mohammed led to
the deaths of nearly 200 people in several Nigerian Northern cities, more
than in any other country that experienced violence in the global backlash
against the cartoons (Hill and Asthana 2006).

Then came the sudden insurgency of a violent islamic sect in the Northern
part of the country. Known as Boko Haram, the fundamentalist grouping
aims to overthrow the federal government of Nigeria. The sect's leader,
Mohammed Yusuf, is believed to have formed Boko Haram (meaning western
education is a sin) in 2002 in the restive northeastern city of Maiduguri with
the intention of imposing a strict version of islamic law. He declared total
Jihad in Nigeria, threatening to islamise the entire nation by force. The group
attacked a police station in the northern state of Bauchi on 26 July 2009. The
incident led to a four-day armed struggle between state security forces and

members of the militant group, spreading to three other states (Yobe, Kano and Borno) and leaving over 800 people dead, many of them members of the sect. The militant attacks, which followed the arrest of several of its members, targeted mainly police stations, prisons, government buildings and churches in the four states. Since the completion of a military attack that sought to break up the sect, no more violent outbreaks have occurred. Borno State and its capital city Maiduguri – the stronghold of the sect – were most affected (*Time* 2009).

Religious clashes are relatively common in Nigeria and are likely to persist in the future. However, many of these clashes include a much stronger political dimension than is often suggested, concerning more the uneven distribution of power and wealth, rather than religion per se. While those crises have remained localised in the past and have not had the potential to turn into a full-scale national crisis, the destructive effects on the communities are immense.

The various religious conflicts have brought about economic and political instability, despite the abundant natural resources in the country. The losses in human capital due to the direct and indirect effects of the religious conflicts are of inestimable dimensions. Taking into consideration the level of destruction in the various religious conflicts, and coupled with incessant religious fundamentalist insurgencies, the Nigerian state cannot sustain the economic and human losses. Prevention and resolution of conflicts are, therefore, critical priorities in the nation's socioeconomic development. It is for this reason that peace making has become a key objective on the agenda of the federal government and other relevant non-governmental organisations.

Peace Moves towards Resolving Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

There are significant numbers of international and local faith-based organisations operating in Nigeria, and they are making impressive move towards peace and reconciliation among the divergent religious groupings in the country. Some of the early efforts at reconciliation proved to be ineffective, and in some cases, counterproductive. Nevertheless, many faith-based Non-Governmental Organisations have made a significant contribution to ethno-religious reconciliation in Nigeria. For instance, the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), which consists of both christian and muslim clerics; The Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum (IMC-MCDF) based in Kaduna, Nigeria; and the International Peace League (IPL), a University of Jos student organisation that encourages pluralism and understanding across religious and ethnic boundaries (Ahmed 2007; Berlin Declaration on Inter-religious Dialogue 2007; Olu-Adeyemi 2006). The Heinrich Boll Foundation is also worthy of mention; it is not a faith-based

organisation itself, but it has facilitated many inter-faith dialogues and helped to fund the local Centre for Religious Dialogue in their peace efforts. It developed an approach to organising dialogues that has proved effective over several years in Kaduna, Kano, Bauchi and Jos. Furthermore, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, the Christian Association of Nigeria, Jamaâ'atu Nasril Islam and the Conflict Management Stakeholders Network, have encouraged inter-faith collaboration in planning local, educational, and infrastructural projects aimed to promote dialogue among different religions, spiritual and humanistic traditions in the country (Paden 2008; Yusuf 2008).

Conflict resolution and peace-making and building processes are very complex and time and resource consuming. Success stories are extremely rare. On the road to peace there are often more failures than successes. One reason may be the assumption that leaders make rational choices about the costs of war and the benefits of peace (Ceadel 1987; Kaufman 2006). But then, the inter-religious mediation groups played a leading role in conflict resolution and building on past efforts to mobilise political and religious leaders to increase dialogue across religious divisions. They use their resources to establish peace forces, fostering favourable environments for negotiations and strengthening weak peace processes.

The activities of inter-religious groups in resolving the disagreement and violent clashes among various religious groupings in the country reveal the capacity of religious communities to educate their members on the root causes of religious intolerance and conflict (Princen 1992). The inter-religious dialogue facilitates peaceful coexistence and also serves as effective advocates for the prevention of religious conflict locally and regionally. They play a central role in mediation and negotiation among religious fundamentalists, and lead their communities in the reconciliation and healing required to transform their divergent views and disagreements into a true and lasting peace (Smock 2007). The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), the International Peace League (IPL), and the Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum (IMC-MCDF) in the country played a central role in conflict resolution, through their various activities, i.e., mobilisation and peace network, fostering multi-religious cooperation, building inter-religious councils, and providing religious communities with the tools they need to effectively address religious conflict. They have emerged as key actors for peace.

Religious organisations are rich sources of peace services. They function as a powerful warrant for social tolerance, democratic pluralism, and constructive conflict-management. They are peace-builders and peace-makers. Inter-faith religious organisations contribute to peace-building by empowering the weak, influencing the moral-political climate, developing

cooperation and providing humanitarian aid. They also make efforts to overcome religious intolerance, sectarianism or nationalism, and to develop an ecumenical climate. Hans Kung urges, as a first step, the development of an ecumenical and concrete theology for peace between christians and muslims (Kung 1990). A systematic analysis of their divergences and convergences, and their potential of conflict and cooperation would be a helpful step forward.

The Inter-Religious Mediation Strategy

The process of reconciliation is basically one where there is restoration of good relationships between individuals and groups. It is rooted in individuals but has lasting effects on social harmony in the state. Though there are several dimensions to reconciliation, the main ones include spiritual, social, psychological, and political (Ahmed 2007). The end of communism revived not only the pre-communist models of inter-religious relations, but brought about new patterns of tolerance and cooperation. Zartman and Touval posit that mediation is best thought of as a mode of negotiation in which a third party helps the parties find a solution which they cannot find by themselves. They describe why third parties decide to mediate, why and when conflicting parties accept mediation, and what factors produce effective mediation. Inter-religious dialogue means more than a coexistence of different religious traditions and institutions (Zartman and Touval 1996). The dialogue includes purposeful activities of collaboration between religious institutions in favour of social peace and prosperity. Ahmed (2007) posits that inter-religious dialogue is certainly a bridge-building exercise. It has to do with the way and means of relating with people of different religions. It includes creating harmony in the society, encouraging the development of friendship and spirit of tolerance.

Inter-religious dialogue is a particular way of interacting with others through which all who are involved can be transformed. Dialogue on issues of faith and identity goes beyond negotiations. Open and trustful inter-religious dialogue is furthered by a secure knowledge of one's own religious tradition as well as that of others. This knowledge should be taught in a spirit of peace and respect for the different traditions (Princen 1992; Smock 2007)). Many religions make truth claims that are mutually exclusive. This is no more an impediment to dialogue and the full participation in society than the explicit or implicit truth claims of secular ideologies. Dialogue between religions, cultures and social groups is often dialogue across opposing truth claims and world views (Berlin Declaration on Inter-Religious Dialogue).

As a result of the incessant religious conflict in Nigeria, all the faith based NGOs mentioned earlier were all set out to address the issue of religious crises in the country.

The Interfaith Mediation Centre stands out as the most highly visible and effective NGO which serves as a bridge builder between the warring religious factions in the Northern part of the country. The Coordinator of IMC, Imam Nurein Ashafa, is well known for the reconciliation work he and his former enemy, Pastor James Wuye carried out together to stop christian-muslim violence in Kaduna (IMC-MCDF 2004). The inter-religious dialogue acknowledged all faiths and shared experiences, needs and longings. It should be emphasised that the interfaith bodies recognise various religious groupings in Nigeria. One aim of inter-religious dialogue is to reduce false perceptions of difference and culture gaps. Today the motivations for inter-religious dialogue arise from different grounds. The Nigerian government and concerned citizens in the country has realised that there is the need to convince the religious warring factions to resolve their differences peacefully. They therefore pursue dialogue with the religious leaders and listen to their complaints, while at the same time expressing condemnation of the religious fundamentalists.

This unique gathering of religious leaders can help debunk the dangerous myth that surrounds religion intolerance. First, the inter-religious groups reach out to various religious leaders, particularly those who feel alienated and powerless, and who, having lost faith in the future, are often vulnerable to extremist ideologies. Secondly, the role of religious leaders as peace builders had to be reinforced. Religious leaders have played and continue to play a prominent role in helping to initiate dialogue between warring parties, in providing emotional and spiritual support to communities affected by conflict, and in facilitating the process of reconciliation (Yusuf 2008). The various inter-faith religious groups are using a faith-based approach to promote acceptance of differences (religious, cultural, gender and other social differences) that exist in society and the use of non-violent methods in solving the religious problems. This strategy acknowledges the fact that people are passionate about their religion and that nearly all people in Nigeria belong to one religion or another. It also draws on the immunity, moral authority and influence that religious leaders have on religious communities.

In addressing peace-building challenges, the inter-faith religious groups use scriptural texts that promote peace, and collaborate, partner or network, with other peace practitioners and institutions. Furthermore, they undertake peacemaking initiatives that establish frameworks for achieving peace at both high policy and community levels. They also promote good governance as a vital tool in conflict prevention, using a faith-based approach. For instance, the Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum (IMC-

MCDF) facilitates empowerment activities through training and conflict management, peace building and reconciliation. They also undertake and promote healing and trust building activities in different parts of the Northern region of the country. Also, the International Peace League (IPL) has recently facilitated two high level consultations in February 2004 and May 2004 for christian-muslim relationship in Jos (Kwaja 2009). The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), which consists of clerics from both christian and muslim leaders, also facilitates a cordial christian-muslim relationship in the country. The major inter-faith religious organisations were presented as role models for peace at the co-existence initiative organised by the Conflict Management Stakeholders Network. The Heinrich Boll Foundation also organised workshops in Kaduna after the outbreak of the Sharia crises in that area. They have programmes that encourage partnership across the religious divide by supporting economic empowerment activities of inter-religious women's groups in conflict-torn communities. Apart from their peace initiatives, they have also participated as resource persons in different parts of the Northern region, building a network of religions to achieve peace. They were also facilitators on forgiveness and reconciliation between and among religious groups.

Inter-religious dialogue stresses the need for reciprocal interactions and influences religions, spiritual and humanistic traditions. It also fosters mutual respect. Learning the art of dialogue is both a personal and social process. Developing one's skills and capacity for dialogue implies a willingness to be open while retaining one's critical judgment. For instance, the Jamaâ'atu Nasril Islam and the Christian Association of Nigeria demonstrate that enlightened action by faith-based NGOs can contribute to inter-religious reconciliation in places where religion is a source of conflict. These faith-based organisations can bridge religious divisions, diminish the level of animosity, and focus attention on the shared responsibility to rebuild society (Mason and Talbot 2000; Smock 2007).

The International Peace League (IPL) brought the diverse muslim and christian student population together to view a film produced by the Nigerian-based Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) and open discussion on the value of inter-religious dialogue. Engaging youth has been particularly important to the IMC and IPL, since aspiring politicians often use unemployed and uneducated youth to foment inter-religious strife for political gain. The IPL plans to replicate the student event at three more educational institutions in Nigeria with the aim of reaching over 1000 students. The Heinrich Boll Foundation supports civil society organisations engaged in inter-religious dialogue, mediation, and resolution in Kaduna, Plateau, Bauchi and Adamawa States. The presentation could not have come at a better time as the University of Jos and Plateau State in general have seen an increase in early warning

signs of potential conflict. The cooperation between Heinrich Boll Foundation and the various inter-faith religious organisations is now evolving to support training seminars for the christian and muslim students. They also organise different events for youth to engage in inter-religious dialogue to facilitate a peaceful coexistence. It should be emphasised that inter-religious organisation such as the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and Conflict Management Stakeholders Network have set out all the necessary machinery to perfect the use of an early warning mechanism that alerts the community to trouble signs and to know how to control a contentious situation before it spreads. The mechanism includes improved connections between government security officers, community leaders and others involved in calming a violent situation. They also work to achieve signed peace agreements between prominent religious leaders and state or local government. The effort includes working with violent youths through christian and islamic teachings that emphasise forgiveness and non-violence.

It should also be noted that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) action in the area of inter-religious dialogue seeks to inform and encourage open exchange and interaction between individuals and among groups of different cultural and religious backgrounds, with a view to creating new frameworks for harmonious co-existence and generating new responses to recognised mutual interests and common needs (UNESCO, Final Declaration 2003). Since the outbreak of religious crises in Kafachan, Kaduna state in 1992, there is a growing religious enlightenment and social education that gives recognition to inter-religious dialogue and this has contributed proactively to peace and stability, especially in the Northern part of the country. Religious leaders also played a key role in reinforcing within their communities the precepts of dialogue among cultures and peoples, in particular a broadly agreed body of shared religious and ethical values. Several major encounters have been organised under the aegis of UNESCO such as the 'International Congress of Cultures in West Africa', held in Abuja, Nigeria in December 2003, and 'Religion in Peace and Conflict: Responding to Militancy and Terrorism', in Melbourne, Australia (April 2005). These meetings called upon religious leaders to work together for common goals such as development, inter-religious mediation and reconciliation, social justice and poverty alleviation. They were also invited to advocate these goals in the social and political arena. Alongside high-level meetings, there is also a need to involve the population at the forefront of intra- and inter-religious conflicts. Dialogue becomes a tool for mediation in poor urban areas, together with the training of trainers in inter-religious mediation, the production of educational materials and specific seminars for faith-based women's associations.

To get a better grasp of what inter-faith religions organisations could do, to help promote religious harmony one could start by investigating systematically which positive or negative roles they play now. Consequently, suggestions would be made about how to reduce the negative and strengthen the positive impact. Religious organisations can act as conflicting parties, as bystanders, as peace-makers and peace builders. Religious actors should abstain from any cultural and structural violence within their respective organisations and handle inter-religious or denominational conflict in a non-violent and constructive way. This would imply several practical steps, such as a verifiable agreement not to use or threaten violence to settle religious disputes. Very important is the creation of an environment where a genuine inter-religious negotiation is possible. Extremist rhetoric flourishes best in an environment not conductive to rational deliberation. Needless to say, extremist rhetoric is very difficult to maintain in a discursive environment in which positions taken or accusations made can be challenged directly by the disputing religious organisations. Without a change in the environments of public discourse within and between religious organisations, demagogy and rhetorical intolerance will prevail (Weigel 1991; Williamson 1992; Takaya 1992).

Conclusion

Inter-religious based organisations have a major impact on inter-religious and communal conflicts. The Nigerian state cannot survive without trust and religious tolerance. Religions play a major role, as parties in violent conflicts, as passive bystanders, and as active peace-makers and peace-builders. Religions have a major responsibility in creating a constructive conflict culture. They will have to end conflicts fuelled by religion, stop being passive bystanders, and organise themselves to provide more effective peace services. Religions and religious organisations have an untapped and under-used integrative power potential. To assess this potential and to understand which factors enhance or inhibit joint peace ventures between the muslims and christian religions is an urgent research challenge.

In each development and peace building context, questions can be posed with regard to religion. In secular states such as Nigeria this becomes even more urgent and concrete, since religions, religious institutions and organisations are often relevant players in the political game play at the national, state and local levels, where the government is often failing to resume its responsibilities. Based on their legacy of invoking social trust, religious agents are often the only ones capable of securing some social cohesion. Religion typically affects all of these efforts, whether as a constructive force or as a source of concern.

With respect to the argument in this paper, inter-religious dialogue is important for a peaceful Nigerian state. We also call on inter-faith religious organisations to intensify their inter-religious dialogue based on the principles of enhancing multi-religious networking, trust-building, collaborating and promoting the understanding of religious differences. We call on all religious people in different parts of the country to enter into the most important dialogue at all levels, in the local community, in families and workplaces with confidence and courage. The Nigerian government in conjunction with the major inter-religious faith based organisations should work to prevent conflicts, mediate and promote tolerance and understanding among warring parties, support healing and reconciliation, and work together in a holistic way to address the root causes of religious conflict in the country. They should also create frameworks within which religious tolerance and inter-religious dialogue based on concrete strategies can prevent the resort to terrorism. The government should further strengthen the existing inter-religious dialogue to address the overall objective of promoting religious tolerance, and therefore extend the scope of the dialogue and increase the number of stakeholders in the process. Such initiatives must link local dialogues to the national scene so that signs of trouble are detected early and resolved before violence breaks out. Such dialogue would further create better understanding and accommodation. It must include women and members of civil society so that their concerns are also heard. Efforts to make the Nigerian state safe from religious conflicts should be high on the socio-political agenda of the federal government and various inter-religious mediation groups.

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