

AFRREV IJAH  
An International Journal of Arts and Humanities  
Bahir Dar, Ethiopia  
Vol. 1 (4), November, 2012:167-175  
ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

---

## Religious Dialogue in Nigeria: The Way Forward

**Ejikemeuwa, J. O. Ndubisi**

Lecturer, Department of Philosophy and Religion,  
Tansian University, Umunya, (Oba Campus), P. O. Box 375, Oba,  
Anambra State, Nigeria.

**Phone No.:** +2348062912017, +2348028011298

**E-mail:** [ejikon4u@yahoo.com](mailto:ejikon4u@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

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

**Key Words:** Dialogue, Prejudice, Religion, Religious Dialogue.

## **Introduction**

The nature of the human person is one and the same. Existentially, the human person is a being-with-others. This means that the life of every human person becomes more meaningful in relationship with other human beings. So we cannot but interact with each other. This is the more reason for the assertion of Aristotle that the human person is a social being. As human beings seek meaning in life by living together, worshipping together, marrying each other, etc. there abound to be some misunderstanding. This is based on the fact of our individual differences. But that does not mean that we cannot understand each other and live peacefully, notwithstanding our individual and religious differences.

The fact that religion constitutes the second nature of the African people cannot be overemphasized. Religion affects everything we do. Mbiti (1985) rightly observed:

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that is not easy or possible always to isolate it ... Religion is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned (p.1).

In fact, another name for an African person is a religious person. But the role of religion in the face of the incessant religious crises in some parts of Africa has left many right minds to ponder on its usefulness. Religion in Africa, as stated by Uche (2008:388) has supported mutual intolerance, inquisition, Jihad, Christian crusade, fanaticism, priest-craft, and harmful cultural practices. A religious crisis in Africa especially in Nigeria is a cog in the wheel of democratic governance and development. So for a better grasp of the topic, this work has decided to focus its inquiries on Nigeria. The idea therein can be extended to the rest of African countries.

Most religions generally agree that there is one God. This is the position of Islam and Christianity. Nigerians, like other Africans, find meaning in life through religion. Each of us tries to approach the divine through various means; hence, we have Christianity and Islam as the two major religions in Nigeria. No doubt, Moslems and Christians have had disagreements in the past that escalated to violence, loss of lives and destruction of properties.

This paper, therefore, is geared towards better understanding and appreciation of religious dialogue as a panacea to the incessant religious crises in the country. The paper concludes with some recommendations.

### **Religious Dialogue X-Rayed**

Dialogue is a form of communication between two or more persons. It involves sharing of ideas among a group of people. The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary defined dialogue as a “discussion between representatives of parties to a conflict that is aimed at resolution.” This definition presupposes the aim of dialogue – resolution of conflicts. It means that dialogue is a means of resolving conflicts among human beings. Contextually, dialogue is a sure means of resolving religious differences.

The idea of religious dialogue presupposes that there is conflict. That conflict exists is one thing, and proffering solution to the conflict is another thing. Religious dialogue has to do with discussions concerning the views of different religious parties for the sole purpose of understanding each other better ((Borrmans, 1990:10). As a Christian, there is no way I will understand a Moslem very well without knowing his faith background. This can be perfectly carried out through dialogue. The fact of dialogue is also concerned with the exchange of ideas and opinions being an encounter that takes place on equal grounds with mutual confidence, frankness and without ulterior motives (Tanko, 1991:9).

Religious dialogue is an activity that is carried out in an atmosphere of openness, thirst for truth and mutual respect. It has to do with “give and take”. Ogara (2009:12) opined that religious dialogue presupposes the existence and relevance of other points of view and a readiness to accept the truth wherever it may be found. In religious dialogue, no party should claim superiority over the other as this will hinder the objective of dialogue. It must be observed that the objectives of religious dialogue include deeper understanding of other religions and also fostering better human relationship. Religious dialogue is not a period of confrontation. It is not a period of counting religious differences. Dialogue among religions lies on the fact of respect of religious differences. It is on this note that Walgrave (1969:124) states that tolerance maintains solidarity, even where profound differences in convincing opinions separate human beings from one another. Religious dialogue involves sharing of religious values among different religious groups. It is a time to count on what unites us rather than what divides us.

### **The Basis for Religious Dialogue in Nigeria**

Religious dialogue has to be appreciated by all Nigerians – young and old, literate and illiterate, the poor and the rich, Christians and Moslems. It should be a daily activity based on our commonalities and respect for our differences. The talk about religious dialogue, especially between Christianity and Islam in Nigeria is very crucial because both religions have some things in common. The teachings and practices of Christianity and Islam are similar in many respects. Therefore, the basis for the dialogue between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria include:

1. **We are human beings:** Both Christians and Moslems in Nigeria are human beings. All of us are rational beings. As rational beings, we are expected to be rational in our thoughts and actions. It is rational and human to preserve life than to take away life. All the religions of the world, both Islam and Christianity, value life so dearly. Every rational human person values life. Religious dialogue, therefore, becomes a means of expressing our humanness by respecting the stronger points of view as we engage in religious discussions.
2. **We believe in One God:** The belief in one God is common to both Islam and Christianity. Islamic theology states that there is only but one God – Allah (Omogbe 1993:147 – 148). The concept of God in Islam is very similar with that of Christianity. Omogbe (1993:41) observed that the Allah of Islam is identical with the Yahweh of Israel. So Christians and Moslems are believers in one God. This can be a good starting point for religious dialogue.
3. **We are Nigerians:** The fact is that we are Nigerians. It does not necessarily matter how we came to exist as one entity. As Nigerians who share the same geographical location, we are bound to work towards the peaceful coexistence of the nation. This can be achieved, not through religious intolerance, but through mature and healthy discussions. Since religious dialogue aims at fostering human relationship, we have to give it a chance. Giving religious dialogue a chance in Nigeria will certainly affect positively the economy of the country. If economy becomes better, all of us – Moslems and Christians – shall be the beneficiaries.

4. **The Day of Judgment:** It is evident that both Moslems and Christians believe that there is a day for judgment. In the holy Quran, Sura 2:62, we read: “Believers, Jews, Christians and Sabaeans – whoever believe in Allah and the Last Day and does what is right shall be rewarded by their Lord; they have nothing to fear or to regret.” Christian theology talks about the Last judgment. Moslems and Christians believe that God will reward good deeds and also punish evil deeds. This presupposes that the adherents of the two religions should be lovers of good deeds – a good point for religious discussions in Nigeria!

### **The Evils of Religious Prejudice**

That is evil which brings sorrow, distress or calamity. Religious prejudice as experienced in Nigerian is evil; it is wicked and inhuman. It is a form of biased opinions about other religions occasioned by insufficient knowledge. This is often caused by lack of knowledge on truth or reality of other religion. The religious conflicts are mostly based on prejudice. Religious prejudice, as we observe among Moslems and Christians in Nigeria today, is the root cause of most of the violent religious crises in the country. Many lives have been lost in the name of religious crises that were caused by this cankerworm – religious prejudice. Properties worth billions of naira have been destroyed on account of this hydra-headed monster. In Sudan, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Eritrea, Nigeria and some other African countries, we have experienced religious wars with resultant destruction of life and property (Uche 2008).

The evil of religious prejudice and intolerance is seen where friends become enemies overnight on account of religion. Religious prejudice is a serious threat to the corporate existence of Nigeria as a nation. The evil of this division is manifested in public offices. People are discriminated on account of religion. In some parts of the country, jobs are not offered based on merit but purely based on religion. This practice predicts doom for the country.

Religious crisis has made some states in the country to be ungovernable. It has really spelt doom to democratic governance. The energy and time that should have been used for nation building will now be used for curbing violent activities. In places where religious prejudice rears its ugly head, there abound to be backwardness and gross underdevelopment. Therefore, in order to create a good atmosphere for democratic governance and national development, religious dialogue is the answer. There is urgent need for dialogue among various religions.

### Recommendations

The Nigerian Inter-religious Council (NIREC) formed by the representatives of Christianity and Islam is a very welcome phenomenon. It must be noted that the council has made effort to keep a balance between the tension we often observe among Christians and Moslems. While this paper appreciates the efforts of the council, it calls for the acceptance and appreciation of dialogue as a way of life in Nigerian society.

Religious dialogue should not only be seen as what the representatives of Islam and Christianity do either in Abuja or in the cities. It has to take another dimension that will have a holistic effect. As a way of fostering human relationship and a deeper understanding of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, this paper recommends:

1. **Introduction of Comparative Religious Studies:** One of the major causes of religious intolerance is ignorance. It is against this background that this paper strongly suggests for the introduction of Comparative Religious Studies in primary and secondary schools. This subject, when introduced, will help to reduce the tension usually experienced between Christians and Moslems. The curriculum of the subject will deal with the objective views of both religions. It will ensure mutual relationship. If this subject is introduced, it will take care of the problem of fanaticism and the likes. Pupils will be taught from the early childhood the importance of religious tolerance. This will positively change the thinking patterns of our people which will ensure national development.
2. **Inter-religious Conferences/Workshops:** Knowledge is so powerful in that it removes scales from the eyes of people. There is nothing like updating one's knowledge about a particular thing. So, having introduced Comparative Religious Studies in the primary and secondary levels, the next thing is how to sustain the trend. There is need for public inter-religious conferences, workshops and seminars. This will be a forum for deepening our oneness and belief in one God. It will also be an opportunity to clear some misconceptions concerning one's faith. It has to be done with mutual respect and a view to understand the other better.
3. **Introduction of Conflict Management in Tertiary Institutions:** Conflict Management should be made a general course in all tertiary

institutions. It is a fact that where two or more people are gathered, there is a probability of having misunderstanding. But the manner a particular conflict is managed matters a lot. There are better ways of managing conflict apart from resorting to violence. This paper strongly believes that the inclusion of Conflict Management as a general course in our higher institutions will go a long way to develop the mentality of our people.

4. **Impact of Religious Leaders:** Both Islam and Christianity are religions that are based on the consciousness of God which should be reflected in human relationship. The religious leaders of the two religions should stand out as the messengers of truth. They should not allow themselves to be used by those who do not have the good of the country at heart. No doubt, religion is a powerful force. The force of religion should be channeled for the good of the country. It is pertinent to note that both Islam and Christianity teach love of one's neighbor and hatred for evil. None of them (Islam and Christianity) teaches violence, hatred, killing one's fellow men, as the right way to serve God (Omoregbe 1999:62). Since the religious leaders are the mouthpiece of God, they should always condemn any act of violence, killing of human beings, discrimination, as these acts are against the will of God. Peace and unity of the country should constitute the central message of our religious leaders especially at this period of upheavals. The position of our religious leaders cannot be undermined in maintaining a healthy relationship among Moslems and Christians in Nigeria. They have to tell their followers the truth always.

### **Conclusion**

From our discussions so far, it is evident that both Islam and Christianity have some things in common. They are not totally two different religions. And as such, the urgent need for a healthy and sound dialogue that will enhance human relationship and national development. It is true that there are some few areas of divergence, but we have to concentrate more on the areas of convergence. We should bear in mind that a peaceful environment ensures progress of the nation. Peace is what every human person desires. Mahatma Gandhi in Holmes (1990:54) observed that man is by nature nonviolent. Let us now more than ever say no to violence, religious intolerance and any form

of behavior that can disintegrate this one nation – Nigeria. We should heed to the admonition of Muste (1990),

What we know surely, and the only thing we can know, is that evil cannot produce good, violence can produce only violence, love is forever the only power that can conquer evil and establish good on earth (122).

Both Islam and Christianity should work towards peaceful co-existence, as this is the only way we can show that we are worshippers of a God who is full of love, a God who does not encourage killing of one's neighbor. If the recommendations of this paper are heeded to, the current religious crises will be a thing of the past. The three tiers of government should not lose sight of the fact that proper education is the best means of creating friendly relationship. Those in the corridors of power should not relent in restoring peace back to Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Hans Küng in Musser and Sunderland (2005:1) observed that "there will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions." It is high time we embraced true dialogue. Religion should be a uniting factor in Nigeria and not a means of division. We must bear in mind that for there to be any meaning development in the country, there has to be peace and harmony among different religions in the country.

### References

- Gandhi, M. K. (1990). "From Passive Resistance to Direct Action". In R. L. Holmes, (ed), *Nonviolence in Theory and Practice*, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1985). *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann.
- Musser, D & Sunderland, D. (2005). *War or Words: Interreligious Dialogue as an Instrument of Peace*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press.
- Muste, A. J. (1990). "War is the Enemy". In R. L. Holmes, (ed), *Nonviolence in Theory and Practice*, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Ogara, P. I. (2009). *United We Stand*, Enugu: Ndubest Productions.
- Omoregbe, J. I. (1993). *A Philosophical Look at Religion*. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd.



- Omeregbe, J. I. (1999). *Comparative Religion*. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd.
- Tanko, P. B. (1991). *The Christian Association of Nigeria and the Challenge of the Ecumenical Imperative*. Rome: Domenici-Pecheux.
- Uche, O. C. O. (2008). "Religion and Violent Conflicts in Africa". In *Nigerian Democracy and Global Democracy*, Ike Odimegwu (ed), Awka: Fab Educational Book.
- Walgrave, J. H. (1969). *Socio-Ethical Principles*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne U.
- Borrmans, M. (1990). *Inter-Religious Documents: Guideline for Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims*. New York: Paulist Press.