

## **The Need for Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Nigeria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The paper, titled “The Need for Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Nigeria,” is motivated by the religious crises that exist between Christians and Muslims, resulting in the loss of lives and property worth billions of naira for decades. Most recently, the northern parts of the country have experienced so many crises between Christians and Muslims. Therefore, there is a call for dialogue between these religions. The method adopted to gather and analyze the data in this research is the quantitative method, which is basically works written by scholars found in books, journals, and internet sources, and the researchers’ experiences. The study, which is anchored on the Christian-Muslim dialogue in Nigeria, discovered the associated challenges to the peaceful co-existence of Christians. The paper discovered that Christian-Muslim dialogue will lead to peaceful co-existence, interreligious and social harmony, interfaith unity, and religious unification, etc. One of the recommendations made in this paper is that Christians and Muslims should not ignore Biblical and Quranic teachings that form the ethics of their religions. Secondly, Christian-Muslim dialogue is the bane of understanding and peaceful co-existence in Nigerian society.*

**Keywords :** Christian, Muslim, dialogue; islamic socio-economic systems.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Christian and Muslim dialogue is becoming a common phenomenon in some parts of the world. The basis for Christian-Muslim dialogue is that Christianity and Islam are geographically the most widespread world religions (Bakari and Yahya, 1995; Arinze, 2017). The number of Christians worldwide is over 2 billion, while Islam has over 1 billion followers (Fitzgerald, 2013; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2013). Though there are no specific statistics on the exact numbers of each religious faith, it matters how each religion interacts with each other. If noticeable religious peace is to be realized, Christians cannot be ignored in the search for global peace. Various religious differences among Christians and Muslims create a need among these adherents of both faiths to learn more about each other’s faith and continue to improve their relationship.

Dialogue is defined as mutual respectful listening and discussing between two equal partners in order to achieve understanding and balance while acknowledging existing differences. The interreligious dialogue between Islam and Christianity is based on related, theologically founded positions. It is specifically connected with the topos of the common Abrahamic roots, i.e., the belief in one God. The dialogue between both religions is to be seen simultaneously in the context of geographic proximity and continuous historic encounters. Representatives from both sides have stood opposed to each other in various constellations during the course of history, from armed conflicts to peaceful coexistence and even alliances.

Inter-faith dialogue is evident in Christian and Muslim theology (Knitter, 2016; Miller and Mwakabana, 2018). Several passages in the Bible affirm that God is the source of all that is. This includes created beings regardless of their religious order

in global society (Psalms 24:1; Acts 14:17; Kibicho, 2016). The Qur'an itself contains references to Christians and indicates the way dialogue should be conducted. Qur'an 2: 136 reads:

Say (O believers), "We have believed in Allah and what has been revealed to us and what has been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the Descendants and what was given to Moses and Jesus and what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we are Muslims (in submission) to him."

Similar references abound as follows: Qur'an 2:253, 285; 3:3, 64-65, 84, 111-115; 61:6. In the last three decades, Christians have made some concerted efforts towards a new understanding in inter-faith dialogue. Concerns are raised on matters of enhancing Christian-Muslim dialogue among Christians and Muslims. It is true that Christians are not enthusiastic about pursuing similar efforts made by churches in interfaith relations. Sometimes scholars are accused of not having an explicit guiding view among Christians on how the Bible informs engagement in inter-faith dialogue (Kahumbi, 2015). Indeed, based on various biblical understandings, the urgency to share the gospel supersedes any form of interfaith dialogue.

Muslims in Nigeria appear to be underlining that Muslims ought to be evangelized. Christian theology is expected to promote God's love for all humanity, portraying unconditional love, justice, and tolerance regardless of one's religious background. Ironically, even some Muslim religious leaders in Nigeria appear to exhibit a strong reservation towards inter-faith dialogue efforts (Mutei, 2016). Subsequently, one wonders how Christians can change their perception and responses towards Muslims and vice versa. Since the dawn of Islam, Christians and Muslims have been involved in inter-faith conflicts. Inter-faith dialogue is a prerequisite to strengthening Christian and Muslim relationships. Earlier studies have focused on inter-faith dialogue from a Christian perspective. This paper is timely because the majority of interfaith forums between Christians and Muslims are promoted by Christians, while Muslims are conspicuously absent. The study contributes to the enhancement of interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims. There is a need to offer insights on varied interpretations of Biblical teachings on inter-faith dialogue by Christians. Theological institutions need to incorporate courses related to inter-faith dialogue into their academic institutions.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE**

We can find a glimpse of religious dialogue during Prophet Muhammed and the Caliphs' tenure. Despite strong opposition from some Muslim adherents, Prophet Muhammed allowed Christians to worship in the same mosque as he did (Papademetriou, 2010). The prophet was criticized by his followers for allowing Christians to worship in the mosque. However, his response that mosques and churches are both houses of God and that anyone can worship in either serves as a seed for future interfaith relations (Ayoub and Omar, 2017; Papademetriou, 2010). Bowen (2020) argues that when Prophet Muhammed migrated to Medina, he adopted the Jewish customs of praying facing Jerusalem. Some parts of the Qur'an revealed during this time show some similarities with Judaism, such as dietary laws. The four rightly guided caliphs (632–661): Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, Umar ibn al-Khattab,

Uthman ibn Affan, and Ali ibn Abi Talib, had strong religio-political undertones. This religio-political aggression has been used by later Muslim leaders to justify physical aggression against non-Muslims. Indeed, it is noted that inter-religious tolerance, which is enshrined in the Qur'an, has been overlooked by many radicalized Muslims. Physical aggression in the spirit of *jihad* has overshadowed the spirit of religious tolerance, leaving little opportunity for interfaith dialogue. Religio-political interests sometimes take precedence over spiritual matters, thus adversely affecting interfaith dialogue.

Scholars argue that Christians and Muslims have a dark history of physical aggression and religious conflicts. For centuries, this has been depicted in ancient jihads – Islam radicalism or extremism – and retaliatory adventures known as medieval crusades (Bartlett, 2010). Nevertheless, the Conciliar Declaration marked the beginning of Christian-Muslim relations from a Roman Catholic perspective. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) legitimized Christian-Muslim relations through the Conciliar Declaration (Michel, 2014). Pope John Paul II and the Council urged Christians and Muslims to forget the past Jihads and medieval crusades and sincerely make efforts to achieve mutual understanding to promote peace, liberty, social justice, and moral values (Fitzgerald, 2013). Christianity and the Islamic faith do share some similarities. As Kenny (2013) and Helleman (2016) note, some of these similarities include monotheism, sanctity of life, and religious piety. Despite these similarities, significant differences in their theology and interpretation do appear. Some Christians and theological institutions are promoting objective knowledge of the two Abrahamic faiths. Ideally, the Catholic-Muslim Liaison Committee and the World Council of Churches support Christian-Muslim dialogue based on the principle of human mutual respect.

Christian denominations are the fastest growing expression of Christianity in Nigeria. Churches are commanding a huge Sunday attendance in major towns, with the majority being in Lagos and Abuja. An essential component of inter-faith dialogue, which ought to be propagated among Christians, is that interfaith dialogue does not intend to reach doctrinal agreement but rather a willingness to re-examine one's faith in the light of others. Basically, this entails active listening and adjusting one's own engagement and interaction with the experiences of the other. Some of the features of the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria rest on uninformed presumptions, stereotypes, distorted perceptions, prejudices and discrimination. Christians' mission is to heed the call of Jesus and to reach out, influence, and receive people into the Christian faith, including Muslims. Muslims promote a false conception of God and the gospel, so they should be won to faith in Christ, a notion widely held among Christians. This includes approaching Muslims with the claims of Christ through prayers, friendships, listening to and proclaiming Christ to them. The basis is that dialogue is not always a mode of evangelism but reaching out through Christ's love, in order to progress beyond negating misconceptions of others' beliefs and praxis.

#### **CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE IN THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY**

Studies related to Christian-Muslim dialogue have come up with some varied theories that try to explain practical strategies for engaging in harmonious inter-faith dialogue. Netland (2011), for example, is inclined to the Inclusivism Theory. This

theory assigns ultimate status to a particular vision while acknowledging that other paths may variously participate in, reflect on, or supplement the truth of this superior way. Inclusivists hold that God has revealed Himself definitely in Jesus Christ, who is central to God's progressive redemptive plan. Within the Christian tradition, inclusivism takes the form of various Christocentrisms (a theology underlining Christ) in matters of logical fulfillment of scriptural prophecies, where the possibility of salvation is granted to non-Christians, but only in and through the extra-ecclesial, redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Though some theories may seem either abstract or complex because most theological perspectives in both Christian and Muslim religions are based on a single point of view. Shared theological concepts and values among Christians and Muslims focus on common areas of religious belief such as orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Socio-religious values include: inter-social relationships, socio-religious grace, peace, compassion and love, trust and reconciliation, and holiness. Christians and Muslims would feel at ease discussing these points of commonality. Other crosscutting issues supporting interfaith dialogue include Biblical prayer (Matthew 6:9–13) and Qur'anic *salat al-Fatiha* (Qur'an 1:2:286); they appear identical in concept and wording. If Christians would take time to study creation mythology, human morality, and eschatology in both the Bible and Qur'an, they would find a glimpse of similarity and build a desire for interfaith dialogue. Some of these verses appear in Romans 1:18–27; Galatians 5:17–19; Qur'an 5:90–91; 17:32; and 42:37. In both faiths, sexual sins such as adultery, fornication, homosexuality, lesbianism, and same-sex marriages are forbidden (Matthew 25:46; Romans 1:18-27; Qur'an 5:90-91; 13:35).

Both the Bible and the Qur'an teach socio-political and economic dialogue. These deal with common commitments to good works, governance and leadership, justice, human liberation, development programs, trade and commerce, and tolerance amidst diverse doctrines in the Christian and Islamic traditions. The Bible as well as the Qur'an teach the need to uplift the wellbeing of others. Through the principles of courtesy, morality, uprightness, justice, fair-play, honesty, and dignity, socio-religious love and compassion are expressed to those who are oppressed, wronged, and less fortunate (Galatians 5: 16–23; Qur'an 2:143; 2:177; 2:188; 4:135; 3:103; 21:92). Islamic socio-economic systems, socio-economic trade and socio-economic principles envisaged in the Qur'an (3:159; 5:8; 62:9-10) revolve around economic, trade and commercial activities that revere God. This precept of good governance, embraced in the Qur'an (3:159; 42:38), is *shura* (consultation in decision-making) among Muslims and non-Muslims in affairs that affect the community.

Divergent theological matters in both the Bible and Qur'an dictate how interfaith dialogue should be embraced theologically or practiced. Interpretation of some theological doctrinal values, scriptures, and religious practices within Christians and Muslims causes disparity between them. Other aspects associated with divergent issues include the understanding of God and worship styles. Even though Christians and Muslims have different theological beliefs, there is still a lot they can learn from each other and look into together when it comes to the most important and important parts of their beliefs and practices. Inclusion was an important part of Jesus' ministry. During His earthly ministry, Jesus encountered non-Jews and responded to their perceived needs, such as the Roman Army commander (Matthew 8:5; John 4:45–544)

and the Canaanite woman (15:21–28). Multicultural and multi-religious contemporary societies can only excel through the Inclusivism Conceptual Model of religion.

### **CHALLENGES OF CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA**

Contemporary era is counted as the era of globalization and most developed shape of thoughts, civilizations and faiths. Every faith and community wants to become supreme and superpower on the surface of the earth. Especially the global powers want to run and implement their laws, rules and regulations as world order. They want to rule the world dominantly by hook or by crook. Their socio-economic, socio-political and geo-strategic interests made the world's politics a pile of ammunition where a minute mistake can destroy it. Thus, in this hard situation, doubtlessly, interfaith and inter civilization dialogue would become key solutions of these huge national and international issues and problems with common sense wisdom and spirit. For that purpose there is need to analyze the contemporary challenges and obstacles in terms of mutual understanding, peaceful coexistence, interfaith dialogue and harmony among Christians and Muslims in Nigeria.

The basic goal of interfaith dialogue is to establish an ideal society where people have commission for the suffering of others, care for each other, where they do not hurt each other, where the system of production and distribution are humane, rational and ethical. This kind of understanding and objectives of dialogue would help solve the serious issues and controversies of the modern world. This calls for discussing the obstacles and challenges to solve them in accordance with common wisdom. In the following points the writers throw light upon some most important contemporary obstacles and challenges of interfaith dialogue.

#### **Historical Conflicts and Clashes**

A very important obstacle and challenge for the betterment of interfaith dialogue, especially, in case of Christian-Muslim dialogue is historical clashes and conflicts. These clashes have been part of the Christian-Muslim history throughout the history and foundations of Islam. They can keenly be observed as the battles of Islamic and Roman empires since the advent of Islam in the global era of Prophet Muhammed and later on in the era of caliphate Hazrat Abu Bakar and Hazrat Umar Faruq. First of all the Roman governor killed the ambassador of the Prophet, Sikh; and after it the caliphs of Islam Hazrat Abu Bakar and especially Hazrat Umar Faruq conquered the majority areas of the Roman Empire. With the passage of time the Ottoman Empire conquered the capital of Byzantine Constantine in 1452 AD. That was when tension and conflicts between Islam and Christianity was on its peak. According to Kshama Pandey (2016), it would be understood that the future of interfaith dialogue does not entirely depend on the history of Christianity and Islam. He says:

The Christian and Muslim civilizations are geographical neighbors, and there is long diversified history of frequent tension, acute rivalry, armed conflict, military alliance across religious lines, (as well as) peaceful cultural exchange, economic traffic and occasional cooperation. Some would have us believe that the past of these two civilizations necessarily fixes their future.

Later in that history the war of crusades presented the worst shape of clashes and conflicts between Islam and Christianity. This was the era of bloodshed and huge loss of human lives in the name of religion. This is recorded fact of history and cannot be excluded from the Muslim-Christian history. After that, the era of colonialism started from the West after renaissance in modern Western history. In this crucial period of history the West has allegedly exploited the ideology and resources of the Muslim world, especially after the Islamists terrorists' attacks on the US on September 11 (9/11). This so called exploitation is perpetrated in the name of war against terrorism. These historical conflicts and clashes have destroyed the self-confidence of both Muslim and Christian communities on a large scale. Kenny has this to say about relations of Islam and the West:

A major problem in the relations between Islamic and "Western-type" cultures is a deficiency of mutual understanding. An especially negative specific effect of this incommensurability is the frightening image of Islam. Islam is perceived in many cases as intolerant, and culturally inflexible; that is, it is unready to make compromises for the sake of peaceful coexistence with Western types of social behavior.

In this constant and seemingly unending state of tension and conflict situation between both communities of Christians and Muslims, Islamic and the Western world, it is challenging that we have to initiate some flexible, positive and successful steps for a meaningful interfaith dialogue.

### **Challenge of the Religious and Cultural Identity**

The second most relevant challenge to Christian-Muslim dialogue is sensitivity of the identity on theological grounds, especially in majority populated areas of both Christians and Muslims. Doubtlessly, Christians and Muslims are the largest community of the world population since the advent of Islam, especially in contemporary era when the Muslims comprise about 25% and the Christians are 31% of the world's population. It means that both religious communities are more than half of the existing population of the contemporary World. In this regard both communities are proud of this and sensitive to their religious identities. Bakari and Yahya (1995) in their *Islam in Kenya* posit that:

Christian-Muslim relations have been an issue since the historical rise of Islam, more than fourteen centuries ago, from the beginning there have been two dimensions to the question. The first is related to the practical living together of individuals and communities of the two faiths, and the second to theological challenges. These include questions of Christian self-identity and self-expression in relation to Islam as well as those of understanding its significance. These issues have engaged Christians through the centuries.

This aggressive identity issues have arisen some questions on religious understanding and peaceful coexistence on the majority of community. For example, this complaint is common in Muslim countries from non-Muslim minorities as well as from Muslim minority in Christian Europe and Hindu India – that their identity is being vanished from mainstream of socio-economic and socio-political spheres. They do not have trust on the majority group. According to an interesting and informative study on minority behavior:

Our experimental results show that it is status based on religion rather than religion in itself that dictates behavior of the minority, on average, irrespective of religion, behaves differently than the majority. Individuals from the minority religion trust their own religious group more than they trust the other religious group. However, they do not show such behavior when they constitute majority.

The situation would be continuous as far as the relationship between Islam and the West; Christians and Muslims are not so good but worst and tensed even in the civilized, modern and so called plural Europe and America. According to the study of W. Shahid and P.S. Van Koningsveld (2012):

Daily events in which both the relationships between the Western and Muslim world and between Muslims and non-Muslims of Europe and North America is the central issue when combined with the various publications on this topic show that the relationship with the groups concerned is a tense one. Mutual contacts mainly based on stereotype and prejudices, which are clearly observable in various reports in which the Muslims are described as fanatics, irrational, primitive, belligerent and dangerous.

These are only some very few examples of the ugly picture of what the relationship between Islam and the rest of the world is all about; the rest of the complete picture is the ugly depictions of Christian-Muslim interfaith relations (a major challenge to interfaith dialogue) throughout the centuries of history. Thus, the identity and image of both communities is not good. In this tense and difficult situation dialogue is really a difficult task, but obviously it is not impossible to attain.

### **Lack of Consensus on Objectives, Issues, Approaches and Direction**

Another most important obstacle and challenge of interfaith dialogue is lack of consensus on common religious and social issues, objectives, approaches and direction of interfaith dialogue. Moreover, the definition and common understanding of interfaith dialogue is different from person to person and group to group as well. Even though the definition and objectives of dialogue in the East and the West are entirely different from each other, the basic reason for this difference is that the Islamic and Christian objectives to participate in interfaith dialogue are entirely different from each other. A research of Farjan (2010) elaborates alike:

Whether calling dialogue conversation, debate or polemics, it requires elaborate reasoning to prove and establish it. Otherwise, it could be fatal to the very objectives of dialogue among religions. This study considers, first of all, the analysis of different concepts and meaning known throughout history and what the researcher understands by dialogue to work out a comprehensive understanding that could help understand how dialogue is perceived in Nigeria.

Definitely if the definition and objectives of dialogue are so far from each other, then how can we get unanimous results of this dialogue? Furthermore, the issues, approaches and direction of interfaith dialogue also differ from community to community in every country and society, especially in Muslim and Christian perspectives.

Christian and Muslim scholars also do not agree on the approaches and direction of the contemporary interfaith dialogue. Muslims' concern is theological and preaching-based, while the Christians' involvement is due to sociopolitical harmony and missionary purpose. This kind of difference creates a kind of obstacle and challenge to start a successful and meaningful dialogue among different communities. Here, to some extent, this study agrees with the suggestion of a comparative religious scholar Dr. Moddassir Ali (2016). He articulates, "If we want to establish a fruitful dialogue between Muslim and Christian Communities of Nigeria, we should completely revise the present direction and strategy and approach of the dialogue because it does not match with the temperament and interests of Nigerian Muslim society."

### **Misunderstanding, Misconception and lack of Awareness**

Another significant obstacle and challenge for interfaith dialogue in Nigeria is lack of awareness, knowledge, and misconception about interfaith dialogue. There are many misconceptions and misunderstandings about interfaith dialogue found in Christian-Muslim spheres of Nigeria. Due to these challenges and issues, the Muslim community is not ready to actively participate in interfaith dialogue activities in Nigeria. There is need of clarification of these issues and obstacles with the consultation of Christian-Muslim scholars. Many academic studies have exposed them but actually the result is not fruitful. To this Kshama Pandey (2016) points out thus:

It is a fact that Nigerian Muslim scholars hardly play a role in interfaith dialogue whenever and wherever organized. There are some misunderstandings regarding dialogue in Nigeria. There is a huge gap between followers of Islam and others. No proper interaction is founded among the people. The followers of every religion have their own ideologies which obstruct them from mixing with others.

A most considerable confusion from the Christian community is that Muslim scholars (especially traditional *Ulama*) are not interested in taking part in dialogue actively. This study is of the view that it is nothing but a wrong perception. Practically, by visiting many Muslim scholars, academicians, as well as traditional *Ulama*, it was discovered that they did not disagree with interfaith dialogue but they have some reservations about methodology of dialogue. Here, we share a research which was conducted on this respective issue by Habfb Shahid (2017), a traditional Muslim scholar of a religious school of thought. According to him, "Interfaith dialogue in itself is a good activity but the modern movement of dialogue has negative impact on Nigerian Muslim society and one of the most important negative impacts of this dialogue is to spread liberalism and secularism in Nigerian Muslim society."

Now, why these kinds of misconceptions and misunderstandings being created? It is here opined that sometimes use of less careful language creates such situation. For example, when Christian community talks about interfaith dialogue and missionary activities being equal to each other, a sense of reservation is created from Muslim side especially in Nigerian context. Another Nigeria Christian scholar Michal Nazir Ali (2016) proffers a solution when he writes bravely in a research paper about the objectives of dialogue, "Encounter with other religions has been an important element in the history of Christianity in every age. The study of these encounters may



contribute to our understanding of current encounters in the form of inter-religious dialogue.”

If we want to initiate and carry out interfaith dialogue in a legally announced Islamic country then there is no need of the usage of this kind of demonstration in an academic or public forum. It is also noted, some serious efforts need to be done in order to remove this misconception from the minds of Muslim scholars.

### **Lack of Participation**

One of the most challenging to interfaith dialogue, especially in Nigeria is lack of comprehensive participation spirit, skills and eligibility of participants and administration of interfaith dialogue. Much national and international dialogue experts show their concerns towards this issue. According to Habib Shahid (2017), as a dialogue expert observes that:

One of the biggest challenges posed to the interfaith struggle in Nigeria is the inadequate understanding of interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution, and what they really mean. (Really), the involvement of religious leaders in an interfaith seminar is indispensable, but if the goal is to strengthen the interfaith movement in Nigeria and create a real impact for different faith communities, the involvement of young people in this struggle holds a crucial position. (So), they need to be trained and educated in interfaith dialogue, and should be well equipped with the ideas, knowledge, and techniques to promote interfaith harmony in Nigeria society.

It is really a challenge in interfaith dialogue process that sometimes inexperienced and untrained persons create serious problems and conflict in the process of peace and harmony. The foundational success of dialogue depends upon the common sense, intellectual capacity and spirit, based on interest in interfaith dialogue activities. Unfortunately these qualities are lacking many a times. Michal Nazir Ali (2016) states once again:

The ground reality is that the common people do not know anything about the spirit and nature of this interfaith dialogue. They are rather confused about it (or do not take part actively). Some people consider it mixing of different religious faiths. Some people consider their first and foremost duty to oppose this dialogue and declare statements against it.

It is noted that due to nonsense and non-academic issues, the interfaith dialogue and social harmony have been interrupted and the national peace and development process in Nigerian society have failed to achieve their goal and height. For that purpose there is need of time to arrange special workshops and training programs from public and private sector higher education institutions of Nigeria to promote meaningful dialogue processes.

### **Lack of a Pluralistic Approach**

Every religion specially revealed religious claims that promote peace, harmony, love and welfare. But in contrast the actual situation is different in most religions all

over the world. It is a great dilemma for religions that their teachings promote peace and love but their conduct is the witness of chaos, terror and instability. The actual issue is that the followers of different religions do not act up on the real teachings of their religions. Moreover, there is lack of mutual confidence, tolerance, equality and respect. This deficiency influenced the mutual relations, interfaith peaceful coexistence and interfaith dialogue badly. According to the majority of dialogue scholars and experts the lack of mutual confidence, tolerance, equality and respect has proved to be a big challenge and obstacle in the way of the promotion of constructive interfaith dialogue movement.

Knitter (2016) elaborates further on this. According to him religious pluralism must be clearly differentiated from religious diversity, which is the reality of a variety of types and forms of religious expressions. The essence of religious pluralism has nothing to do with regalia, but relationships. Here basic questions must be asked including the following: What is the relation of the content of the various faiths in a community? What is their common history? What are their status and power relations? How do they relate to each other? What are some common humanity efforts to be planned and worked on jointly? In most of the societies, whether in the East or the West, the religious minorities face disrespect, intolerance and inequality. These things are very dangerous and create obstacles in the way of constructive dialogue among different religions and communities. The study of original sources of religion is necessary for that purpose but unfortunately religious scholars of both faiths are not paying proper attention to this most pivotal problem of the society. Adherents of religious groups ought to be properly informed about theirs and others' religious beliefs and practices.

The undue misconceptions, lack of mutual conference and active interfaith relations, absence of reasonable tolerance and mutual cooperation are the biggest challenges in the way of promotion and conduct of fruitful interfaith dialogue in all over the globe and especially in Christian-Muslim opponents of the East and the West.

## **THE NEED FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY**

In order to encourage dialogue between Christian and Muslim communities to foster mutual understanding, peaceful co-existence and promote cooperation in various spheres of nation-building, the paper captures the following reasons necessary for interreligious dialogue among Christians and Muslims in Nigeria.

### **Peace and Peaceful Coexistence**

The main objective of the Christian-Muslim dialogue is to promote socio-religious peace, peaceful relations and existence at every level among local religious and social communities of Nigeria. The Christian community gives special attention to interfaith peace because the war is completely forbidden in their theology. The Bible declares: "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him. "For all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matt 26:52). A renowned Christian figure, Cecil Choudari once said: "The message of love, reconciliation and peace is found in the Holy Bible from the beginning (The Book of Genesis) to the end (The Book of Revelation)". Hamid Henry speaks of peace as being the great ideal of the people. Where research is carried on different topics of peace, the Christian faithful are

committed to the mission that peace is not itself a goal but this is a continuous journey. The Christian faithful also promotes social justice for peace and peaceful co-existence for its special objectives. Therefore, we may say that Christianity is working on the peace process, peaceful relations among minorities as a task and mission according to its own strategy and style in the Nigerian perspective.

### **Interreligious and Social Harmony**

Another important objective of the Christian-Muslim dialogue is interfaith and social harmony. The main focus of the study after peace is on religious and social harmony. For that purpose, Christian-Muslim dialogue launches special social harmony projects. Interfaith harmony is a project which is running under the supervision of the Christians and this project is adopted for social and religious harmony among different communities of Nigeria. Accordingly, the purpose of interfaith dialogue is not to bring the faiths into harmony, rather it is to bring the followers of the faith into harmony. The Christian faithful has been involved in this activity for the past 50 years. The socio-religious harmony is much significant to them that they have published special training manual for that objective. This paper analyses the social, political, educational, religious, cultural and economic events of the past 70 years which were basic cause in Nigeria for disunity, sectarianism, intolerance, abhorrence and dispersion.

### **Interfaith Unity and Religious Unification**

This aspect tries to generate humanistic and religious harmony and sometimes interfaith unity and unification among different communities of Nigerian society. Apparently we believe in a different philosophy of life and understand that salvation is in several religions; because of this we belong to one generation, we have one root, we are created by One Creator and we all are the children of Adam. To promote unification of religion among different faiths and religions of Nigerian society is another important but controversial purpose of the dialogue. According to Muslim scholarly point of view it seems a controversial activity in a Muslim society of Nigeria. Even the basic texts of Qur'an also oppose it strictly, "The Religion before Allah is Islam (submission to His Will)" (Qur'an 3:19). And another place it says, "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him" (Qur'an 3:85).

Muslim Scholars have shown their extreme concerns on this controversial activity and objectives. It does not meet to Muslims' objectives of interfaith dialogue; therefore, it cannot be allowed in a Muslim majority based society.

### **Religious Diversity**

Religious diversity is another imperative objective of dialogue. How can we promote the diversity in ideas in a society so that the people may accept each other and accept that diversity is not a bad thing; and also learn that in diversity we can be united? It is said that the beauty and charm of the world is in diversity not in uniformity, it means the base of peace is in 'Unity in Diversity'. The formation of a most pluralistic society in Nigerian perspective is a vital purpose of the paper because according to the administration of dialogue, a pluralistic thought is most necessary for a nonviolent society.

In order to further this cause, some groups are working against some Islamic laws especially to eliminate the blasphemy laws by running a huge campaign against it in Nigeria. For that purpose there is a big alliance of international NGOs and local secular and atheist lobby. They also oppose and protest against any kind of Islamization and Islamic indemnity of Nigeria. We appreciate their struggle for dialogue and efforts to change the Islamic identity of Nigeria.

### **THE WAY FORWARD**

The Bible and the Qur'an address matters relating to interfaith dialogue in various ways. We have evidence from the Biblical and Qur'anic teachings on the possibility of interfaith dialogue. Such scriptural teachings point to socio-religious, socio-economic, as well as leadership and governance values pertinent to Christian-Muslim dialogue. The Qur'an regards previous divine revelations, including the Bible, as authentic documents for spirituality. Such acknowledgement forms the basis for respecting religious plurality as a means of developing a social community. In addition, Biblical and Qur'anic teachings on inter-faith dialogue recognize matters of doctrinal divergence. Christians and Muslims need to approach interfaith dialogue and theological interaction more openly in order to overcome undue religious misunderstandings.

There is strong evidence that Christianity formed the spiritual and moral values mostly found in Islamic teachings. From its inception, Islam grew in a milieu that permitted interfaith dialogue. This is evidenced by Prophet Muhammed's positive attitude towards interfaith initiatives between Christians and Muslims. He gave privileges and protection to Christians under his jurisdiction. He admired Christian piety, love, humility, and faith. Upon his death, his successors, the four Caliphs, favored interfaith dialogue even as they exercised religio-political leadership. Christians and Muslims in Nigeria should benefit from interfaith relations that transcend accusations and counter-accusations to a unity of basic principles found in religious teachings. This will lead to a more meaningful and open discussion in the spirit of love and respect. The number of Christians and Muslims in Nigeria is numerically increasing. This is mostly attributed to evangelism and *da'wa*. Numerical religious growth sometimes comes with challenges, especially religious conflicts. It is, therefore, important for religious leaders, organizations, and political leaders to spearhead the spread and acceptance of interfaith dialogue in Nigeria. Christians and Muslims should prioritize the agenda of enhancing interfaith dialogue. Acceptance of each other reduces religious exclusivism. Reading about other religious systems in light of one's own theological or reader presuppositions is insufficient. There is a need to move interfaith dialogue from the corridors of academia to the contextual realities of the masses through the plain medium of communication.

The Christian-Muslim dialogue in Nigeria can best be enhanced by appropriate strategies. There is a need to stress the fact that religious leaders, political leaders, and organizations are critical organs in developing an effective Christian-Muslim dialogue. First, resolving outstanding perceived religious conflicts can enable Christian-Muslim dialogue to be promoted. This would assist Christians and Muslims to develop conflict resolution mechanisms and minimize intolerance. Through interfaith forums, shared and divergent theological issues and aspects should be objectively discussed to realize constructive dialogue. There is a need to embrace

interfaith dialogue not as a compromise of major doctrines, but as a means to being inclusive. Youthful Christians and Muslims should be theologically trained to propagate interfaith dialogue. Religious leaders should address social evils in the community because those evils adversely impact interfaith dialogue. For example, Christian and Muslim religious leaders have incredible influence, and this should be exerted positively on their members for dialogue. Equal partnership in the status of interfaith dialogue should be embraced by Muslims and Christians. Religious equality in interfaith relations is vital in enhancing Christian-Muslim dialogue. Working as equal partners in dialogue should lead participants to be open, honest, and committed to developing personal relationships.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

We have previously stated that, despite the vigorous efforts made across divides to promote dialogue between Muslims and Christians, it does not appear to bring the desired peace, understanding, and harmony. On the whole, interfaith dialogue, which is also an inter-cultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims, is so important that it cannot be undermined. It is, in fact, a vital necessity upon which, in large measure, our future depends. The future of the world depends on peace between Christians and Muslims. We appreciate that the global concern and desire for dialogue between Christians and Muslims is being stressed now more than ever before. The fact that Christians and Muslims make up over 50% of the world's population makes dialogue and cooperation even more imperative. Therefore, there is a sense of urgency, a need to build upon the good relations that we have and to provide an example of understanding, trust, and cooperation that can be followed by Christians and Muslims in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Dialogue is of great importance as it helps to create an integrated and cohesive community at ease with diversity and secures a sense of common purpose. But are we succeeding? To the writers, it has been a dialogue without communication, where people pretend to bury their differences for progress to be achieved.

It appears interesting to note that in Nigeria at the time, the then two leaders, Sir Ahmadu Bello and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who struggled for the country's independence, both headed regional governments in the North and South, respectively, and had to form a coalition in the central government. They became concerned over the growing tensions between the coalition partners, the Northern People's Congress, led by Ahmadu Bello, and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens, led by Nnamdi Azikiwe. The tension brought out the open divergences between the majority Muslim north and the majority Christian south, almost degenerating into ethno-religious antagonism. In an organized dialogue session to restore some understanding, the republican Dr. Azikiwe was said to have said to Ahmadu Bello, "Let us forget our differences and forge ahead." But the pragmatic and frank Ahmadu Bello replied, "No, let us understand our differences; it is by understanding our differences that we can build unity in Nigeria."

It was noted that the root of all conflicts, it was noted, is the problem of effective communication. This means we need to explore more creative and more robust means of communication across religions and cultures (Ebong et al., 2013; Ayeni & Ebong 2013; Ebong & Ayeni, 2013). The question, however, is how much communication takes place in such interfaith dialogues in such nice but

often closed environments, where, like a meeting of in-laws, everybody is eager to be nice to the other? Apart from that, the calibre of people that attend such meetings in Nigeria and elsewhere is the least of the problems. People engaged in interfaith dialogue must take into account the religious, cultural, and ideological differences of those with whom they are communicating; otherwise, you may be surprised by what is received on the other end. Communication that is open and consistent breaks down barriers, challenges, and stereotypes while also giving people more confidence in the rest of the world. Dialogues must go beyond the mere demonstration of half-hearted handshakes and exchanges among elite groups anchored in conferences and round tables, towards the true and frank teachings of Christianity and Islam, where the real world of love, peace, understanding, and cooperation with one another should be the basis. People should endeavour to make religion a relationship between the creatures and the Creator and among the creatures, not merely ritual acts of spiritual devotion. Nigerian Christians and Muslims can run fast when they are alone, but they cannot walk far when they are separated. Walking together in peace is what we need in Nigeria between Christians and Muslims.

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