

**INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: AN OBLIGATION FOR THE CHURCH AS
A FAMILY OF GOD IN A PLURALISTIC NIGERIA**

Ibe, Julian Chukwuemeka PhD

Department of Systematic Theology
Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

frjulianibe@gmail.com

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Abstract

Religion is a major issue in Nigeria, Africa and the world as a whole. In Nigeria, religion has proven to be a major cause of social unrest over the years. This is largely, if not totally, between the two dominant religions: Christianity and Islam. Most crises in Nigeria, especially in Northern Nigeria, often had religious undertones. Religion is also a major determinant in political matters in Nigeria, sometimes to the extreme. Over the years, efforts have been made by government, religious bodies and other NGOs to engender long-lasting peace between these two major religions in Nigeria. While these efforts are yielding fruits, there is still a long way to go. In this work, we set out to discuss inter-religious dialogue as an obligation for the Church as a family of God. We shall trace the origins of religious conflicts in Nigeria. We shall examine some major causes of religious conflicts in Nigeria. Then we shall discuss the Church as a family of God. We shall x-ray some Church documents on Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. Then we shall make recommendations towards harmonious Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. It is hoped that this work will aid towards the reduction of unnecessary tension between adherents of bot religions.

Keywords: Church, Christianity, Islam, Conflict, Dialogue, Nigeria.

Introduction

On Thursday 13th May, 2022, Nigerians were met with the shocking news of the gruesome murder of Deborah Samuel, a 200 level Economics student of the Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto by Islamic fundamentalists on allegations of blasphemy. She was allegedly stoned to death and her body set ablaze by the irate mob. The most heart-rending part of this unfortunate incident was that her killers proudly bragged about their exploits in full view of the cameras (The Tribune, 14.05.2022). This is only one example of the nature of relationship between adherents of both religions. As both Christians and Muslims seek to make converts and exercise their religious freedom, great caution is needed to avoid a collision course between Islam's *Da'Wah* and Christianity's Evangelizing Nature. Most of the problems of civil unrest in

Nigeria today are given a religious undertone. These problems are often traced to colonial rule and the seed of discord sown by the colonial masters in a bid to achieve their objectives by the divide and rule tactics. This clearly expresses the situation in Nigeria today, where religion forms the basis of the average Nigerian's judgment. The situation may be less tolerable in the southern part of the country, but in the north, it is a different kettle of fish. While we can easily and justifiably attribute the origins of this religious bitterness to the colonial masters, we must not forget that Nigeria gained independence over fifty years ago, giving her ample time to have rebuilt this unfortunate foundation.

During elections in Nigeria, it was obvious that it is a plainly religious affair. The general expectations were that those from the north will vote for a Muslim president, while those from the South will vote for a Christian president. Little wonder there was fracas on 18th April, 2011 just before the announcement of the Presidential Election results that resulted in the loss of lives and destruction of property, especially places of worship. On the 18th of April, *The Nation*, a national daily, reported violence in Bauchi state on the 17th of April that resulted in the death of ten people and wanton destruction of property worth millions of naira. Similar occurrences took place in Borno, Gombe, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina and Sokoto states. In its April 29, 2011 edition, the same daily cited Professor Wole Soyinka, the renowned Nobel laureate, who insinuated that the killings in the north were premeditated and planned. The elections of 2015 and 2019 bore no less religious undertones. The common sentiments were "vote for him because he is a Christian/Muslim".

The deep-rooted resentment between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria appears to reject all attempts at reconciliation as people now build settlements and rent accommodation based on religious boundaries. Thus, the common expression is "*Ai, unguwar musulmi ne: It is a Muslim area*". The role religion plays in the allocation of public offices is very sad. This is very disappointing, as people who are best qualified for certain jobs or offices are denied the position for purely religious reasons, even in educational institutions that should be models for the society.

The irony in all this is that peace is a recurring decimal in the teachings of both Christianity and Islam. How these two religions can preach peace so frequently and yet keep peace so far away from their everyday lives is a great contradiction. It is with a view to finding a plausible solution to this constant religious friction between adherents of Christianity and Islam, two religions that openly preach

peace and yet obviously find it very difficult to practice, that we are undertaking this study. This we shall do in the light of the Church as a family of God.

Background to Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria

It is common knowledge that when people have a common enemy, they tend to work together. This was evident in the colonial era of Nigerian history, when in their struggle for independence, Nigerians worked together with little consideration for religious or ethnic differences. The post-colonial era brought clashes of regional and ethnic kinds which were as a result of the clamour for federal establishments like companies and institutions of learning. The Nigerian Civil War of 1966 to 1970 was a direct result of this. However, Nigeria as a nation was not plagued with religious conflicts, at least, not at first. The rise of religious conflicts in Nigeria can be traced to states in the northern part of the country such as Kaduna, Kano, Plateau, Borno and Katsina. Here the constant friction between Christian and Muslim indigenes has been so volcanic. This is because, there never seems to be a permanent solution to the problem. At times, there appears to be peace and then at the slightest provocation, there is an eruption.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the *Jihad* of Uthman Dan Fodio swept across the Northern Nigeria resulting in the conquest and Islamization of the Hausa-speaking states and the establishment of Emirates in different parts of Northern Nigeria, with Hausa as its medium of communication. This development led to the identification of anybody that spoke Hausa as a Muslim, ignoring the fact that so many Hausa indigenes are either Traditionalists or Christians (Tanko in Bisong 109). Since then, a life-long feud has prevailed between the Muslims and Christians till this day. This was fueled by the efforts of the Hausa-Fulani to establish Emirate rule, the slave trade and their undeterred efforts to proselytize the non-Muslims. The problem escalated with the declaration of the Northern Nigerian Protectorate at Lokoja on January 1, 1900. This was because with this, the British placed the emirs at the head of native authorities. A good example is the case of Kaduna State.

The power given to the Hausa-Fulani Emirates gave rise to a lot of discriminations against the non-Muslim Southern Kaduna people. This was in the form of forced labour, taxation, and the performance of menial jobs. The courts saw justice as the prerogative of Muslims and so a non-Muslim always lost a suit against a Muslim. Even in educational opportunities, the Muslim children were given better consideration. Thus, with the establishment of elementary schools in Jemaa Mallam in 1930 for Muslim boys, and in Zangon

Kataf in 1934 for non-Muslims, it was an all-win situation for Muslim children. In the end, only the advent of Christianity brought education to the doorstep of the non-Muslim Southern Kaduna people through the activities of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) and the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) from 1937 to 1940. The conversion to Christianity and education of the Southern Kaduna people brought the enlightenment they needed to make them seek emancipation and this led to the influx of religious intonations to a crisis that was hitherto ethnic. Their agitations paid off when in 1966 the military government appointed District heads chosen by the people and thus reduced the powers of the emirates. By 1970 the Southern Kaduna people had more access to education opportunities and employment even in public sectors (Toure 3).

After the Nigerian civil war, the crises in Northern Nigeria became clearly religious with growing antagonisms and clashes between Christians and Muslims. Examples of these are the 1987 religious crisis that began in Kafanchan as a students' riot before spreading to other parts of the State. In 2000, the Sharia crises in Kaduna State which, with the amount of damage done in form of loss of lives and property, has both psychologically and physically divide the city of Kaduna into two. The 2002 Students' Union Government elections in Federal College of Education, Zaria that turned into a bloodbath between Christians and Muslims. In 2002, an alleged defilement of a holy book almost escalated into violence in Queen Amina College, Kaduna. Similar occurrences took place in Kufena College, Wusasa-Zaria in 2005 and Technical College, Malali, Kaduna in 2006, which led to the closing of the schools. More recently, the post-election violence of 18th April, 2011, was converted from political to religious and swept across Northern Nigeria leaving many corpses as well as so many churches and mosques burnt.

It is important to present this long background in order to understand how difficult it would be to talk about inter-religious dialogue in the world as a whole and in Nigeria in particular.

History of Religious Conflicts

Ibrahim and Toure (3), trace the origin of religious conflicts in Nigeria to regional hegemonies. According to them, a lot of the literature analyzing the failure of the Nigerian project has traced the crisis of democracy and the causes of ethno-religious conflicts to misrule by the three regionally based elites – Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo, (WAZOBIA in Nigerian language parlance). The argument is that these elite have devised effective methods for subjugating the minorities to

their hegemonic hold. Some of the most vociferous critics of these oligarchies are the intellectuals from the Middle Belt who complain about the hegemonic stranglehold of the Hausa-Fulani elite over them. The usual arguments are that the political problem of Northern Nigeria is that the majority Hausa-Fulani ruling class has maintained its hegemonic hold over the ethnic minorities of the Middle Belt. In so doing, it has used effective administrative structures to maintain this hegemony. The effect of this history of domination is that the people of the Middle Belt have been deprived of access to political power and they have been constantly threatened with the violation of their religious rights by attempts to impose Islam and the Sharia law on them.

Bekeh (3) traces the history of inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria to colonization and the creation of geo-religious identities. After the slave trade ended, a group of Western nations gathered in a conference in Berlin in 1885 where they divided Africa among themselves as a mother sharing a loaf of bread among her children. This is what came to be known as colonization. The colonial masters created an identity that was geographical and at the same time religious. What became common place is that once you are from the North, there is an assumption that you are a Muslim and once you are from the South, there is the general assumption that you must be Christian. This assumption is fallacious and has led to a lot of problems in recent times. However, history shows that there were Christian missionaries who evangelized the North leading to a significant number of Christians in Southern Kaduna and in Plateau State. At the same time, there is a significant number of Muslims in the South-West of the country and in the Middle Belt. The problem with this assumption is that some Northern states such as Zamfara concluded that their state is a Muslim state and passed the Sharia law as the law governing everyone in the State and some of the Christian states in the South like Cross River State threatened to declare the state a Christian state and subject everyone in the State including the Muslims to the Canon Law.

Emeagwali (3) simply defines colonialism as

...a system of administration; a process of exploitation, and a production system often geared towards the creation of capitalist relations and the economic and socio-cultural aggrandizement of the colonizer. This may be done by covert or overt, psychological, legal and military mechanism.

Nigeria like other African countries was subjected to this system of domination and a corporate existence was forged between different ethnic groups that had

no common relationship. The colonial masters created these corporate countries without recourse to the history of these geographical areas, how the cultures differ, the relationship of the tribes and the political systems governing the groups.

Obadina (4) writes that “...by redrawing the map of Africa, throwing diverse people together without consideration for established borders, ethnic conflicts were created that are now destabilizing the continent.” As the history of Nigeria as well as that of Islam and Christianity above shows, Nigeria existed as separate kingdoms, tribes and ethnic groups until the British forged the groups together creating a country called Nigeria. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914 by Sir Lord Lugard, the British Governor to Nigeria is a significant moment in the history of Nigeria, not only because it created a corporate region called Nigeria, a name suggested by his mistress, but it is also the genesis of the geo-religious problems Nigeria will later face. He thus argues that the people of Northern Nigeria, who are chiefly Muslims, had no cultural, geographical, or religious relationship with the people of Southern Nigeria, mainly Christian.

Causes of Christian-Muslim Conflicts in Nigeria

a. Sharia Law:

Shariah law has been a contentious issue in Nigeria in recent years and has led to religious strife and violence between Christians and Muslims. At the beginning of the new democratic dispensation in 1999 in Nigeria, many of the Muslims started clamoring for Sharia law. Ahmed Sani Yerima, the governor of Zamfara state surprised the nation when he introduced the Sharia law. He introduced the full provisions of Islamic law in the penal code of the State. According to Sanusi (1), his decision had a bandwagon effect on other predominantly Muslim states in the North with other governors taking Yerima’s footsteps with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

The problem of Shariacracy in Nigeria has been summarily stated by Van Doorn-Harder (4) thus,

Nigeria’s Muslims insist that because Shari’a is the pure law revealed by God, humans cannot tamper with it. They are frustrated because the Nigerian government allows only partial implementation of this law, which the northern Hausa and Fulani tribes have followed on and off since the 11th century. Christians fear that if the Muslims gain political power throughout Nigeria, Christians will be reduced to second-class citizens.

They point to countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran, where freedom of religion is severely restricted.

There are two issues involved here, the Muslims believe that Sharia law should govern their everyday life and the Christians fear that their rights would be restricted if the Sharia law is introduced. It is this lack of agreement that has led to most of the tensions resulting from Sharia law. Although Muslims have continued to argue that the Sharia law does not affect the Christians, but most Christians do not believe them. They see the Sharia law as a systematic plan to make Nigeria an Islamic state, with Christians in a second-class position.

The current practice of the Sharia law in states where it is implemented is very restrictive of the Christian's rights. The Christians cannot reconcile the Muslim's insistence that the Sharia law is for Muslims only when it affects the day to day lives of Christians. Some of the social provisions associated with the Sharia law that affects Christians is the separation of the sexes in public schools, in health and transportation services and the criminalization of alcohol consumption. In Kano state for instance, non-Muslims are fined approximately \$380 or up to a year in prison for drinking or selling alcohol in certain public places. The only place alcohol can be sold or drunk is in federal government installations.

Bekeh (3) states that many persons including Muslims are very uncomfortable with the Sharia law most especially as it relates to some high profile cases in the last few years. Many Nigerian feminists are uncomfortable with stoning women to death for adultery while letting the men that committed the act go away free for lack of evidence. Many are uncomfortable with chopping off people's hands for minor crimes such as stealing a goat or a bag of rice when most of the rich Muslims in the country are living comfortable on ill-gotten wealth. In the final analysis, the introduction of Sharia law as well as other forms of religious laws in Nigeria as the civil penal code is trying to politicize religion.

b. The Politicization of Religion:

Both the Muslims and the Christians have used religion as a tool to serve their political interests. Kenny (6) puts it thus, "Religion in the politics of 1970 onwards was basically a tool which the politicians used for secular interests." What is common between the two religious groups is that their insistence on the religious way of life is not necessarily because they are convinced that is the right thing for the country, but because they seek to satisfy their overzealous constituencies.

The North share one thing in common: Islam. According to Kenny, Islam has long been a social definition in Nigeria. They bound together to advance one common political value which is not that of their religious rights and privileges but to get their own share of the national cake. On the other hand, Christian never had this common political value, it however became a rallying point in reaction to Islamic politics. The result of this is that the fight between the two religious groups is primarily political. It matters to each of the religious groups who the president of the country or the governor of a State is. In a South-Eastern state for instance, Christians would not live to see a Muslim become a governor even if they are absolutely sure their Christian rights would be protected, in like manner, the North would not want to have a Christian as the governor even if they were guaranteed of their religious freedom as Muslims. As the country begins a new transitional program, the question again is who becomes the next president? Would it be a Northerner or a Southerner? While it seems that the question is whether it is a Northerner or a Southerner, the real question is whether it is a Christian or a Muslim?

There is political Islam and political Christianity. It is not uncommon to see a person who was never religious begin to identify himself or herself with a religious group during politics and when the person eventually wins, depending on his or her religious platform begin to use government money to pay for pilgrimages either to Mecca or to Israel/Rome. What is usually the case is that these pilgrimages are not sponsored holistically. A Muslim governor is more likely to sponsor more Muslim pilgrims to go on pilgrimage and the Christian governor is likely to sponsor more Christian pilgrims. If a governor is interested in the religious welfare of all the citizens of his state, it would be more appropriate that this is done uniformly across the two religions. What we see here is, playing politics with religion.

c. Hunger and Poverty:

According to the World Bank Report of 2005, Nigeria is afflicted by widespread poverty. Two reasons for the poverty of the country are unemployment and corruption. Between 1987 and 2006, the population of the unemployed has tripled. In 1987, there was 7.0% of national unemployment. Today it is almost 21%. The increase is due to the three fold growth in the population, the rising enrollments in higher institutions of learning without corresponding growth in the economy. Data shows that while only 125,000 students were enrolled in higher institutions of learning in 1985, by 1990, there was an estimated enrollment of about 125,000 to 200,000 students, representing an increase of

75,000 students within five years. The second reason for poverty in Nigeria is corruption. The Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria summarily captures it thus,

Corruption is responsible in large measure for the broken promises, the dashed hopes and the shallow dreams that have characterized the existence of the multitude of Nigerians in the last few decades. The choice before us is clear: We either go to war against corruption in all its ramifications or we shall soon be totally consumed by this hydra-headed dragon.

World hunger is a terrible symptom of world poverty. In 2018, Nigeria overtook India as the poverty capital of the world, with over 87 million people living in extreme poverty (The Vanguard, 10.04.2022). While in 2022 India reclaimed its position as the poverty capital of the world, Nigeria still maintains second place with over 70 million people living in abject poverty (The Cable, 09.04.2022). Given that hunger and poverty are two faces of the same coin, one can imagine the number of people living in extreme hunger in Nigeria. Hunger cannot be solved without the alleviation of poverty. Unfortunately, the poor are usually the ones been used to cause social unrest. Many Muslim children are brainwashed to believe that if they kill in the name of Allah, they will get 72 virgins in heaven. On the part of the Christian, most believe that all Muslims will go to hell unless they accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.

d. Illiteracy:

Enang in Omojola (10) identified illiteracy as one of the causes of religious conflicts. In the area of illiteracy, the story is as bleak as that of poverty. In some Southern parts of the country, the children drop out of school to hawk goods in major streets. In the North, most of the children grow up as farmers or street beggars. The government implementation of nomadic education has not helped to bring about literacy in the North. The percentage of the uneducated is still significantly high. An estimated 32% of Nigerians age 15 and above cannot read and write. This problem has contributed to most of the riots in Northern Nigeria. Those who are usually used as tools on both sides to cause trouble are the illiterate and jobless young men and women in the streets. Illiteracy is also on the rise. The latest global data from UNESCO on out-of-school children says Nigeria has 20 million children and youths who are out of school (The Africa Report 02.09.2022). This is even more saddening given that Nigerian universities have been on strike since 14th February, 2022, meaning that, as at now, university students have been out of school for about 8 months.

e. The Rise of Islamic and Christian Militancy:

According to Bekeh (6), in recent years, there has been a rise in Islamic and Christian militancy. Islamic militancy in Nigeria is always linked to radical Islam. The history is traced to Usman Dan Fodio. His militant attack was directed at purifying and reforming Muslim society. This conservative version of Islam promoted by Usman Dan Fodio later encountered a split between the traditional conservative establishment, as represented by most of the emirs and their councils, and the newer and more fanatical groups who do not eschew violence as a means of achieving the desired Islamic State. This later group constituted itself into an organization known as the Maitatsine (Hickey in Bekeh 7). The Maitatsine movement represents the uneducated casual laborers during the oil boom of the 1970s. Despite the prosperity in the country, they were poor and marginalized. According to them, both the traditional authorities and the new politicians had betrayed Islam and deserve death. This movement carried out violent actions in Kano in 1980, Bauchi in 1982 and Yola in 1984. It took the Nigerian military to crush them and send them underground.

According to Doorn-Harder in Bekeh (7), in reaction to increased Muslim activism, Christian militancy has also grown. Since after these uprisings, they have been many riots between the Christians and Muslims. While there is no Christian group that constituted itself in a military faction as the Maitatsine movement, Christians have always come out in mass to defend their faith whenever these uprisings occur. Many Nigerian Christians have forgotten the biblical principle of turning the right cheek when slapped on the left. They have rediscovered the Old Testament code, *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. This Islamic and Christian militancy is becoming more and more popular leading to more religious riots in recent times. Global Security, a watchdog organization has recently chronicled all these riots beginning from 1999. According to their report, in May 1999, more than 100 people died in Kaduna State over the succession of an Emir. As the State was recovering from this religious riot, between February and May 2000, about 1000 people died as a result of a riot in Kaduna over the introduction of the Sharia law in the State. There were reprisal attacks in the South of Nigeria, killing many Hausa Muslims. In September of 2001, over 2000 people were killed in inter-religious rioting in Jos, Nigeria. Between 2002 and the end of 2003, more than 72 villages were burnt due to religious violence in Plateau State. Religious violence erupted in Kano in May 2004 because of the several Muslims that were killed in Plateau state in the beginning of May 2004. An

estimated 10000 Christians abandoned their homes and sought refuge in military installations for fear of the Muslims killing them.

According to Back (214), one of the Characteristics between these violent acts is that no matter whatever the root cause of it, they end up becoming religious. For example, in 2002, a reporter for a popular Nigerian newspaper, *This Day* wrote an article suggesting that the Muslims should stop protesting against Nigeria hosting Miss World contest in Kaduna because if the Prophet Mohammed was still alive he would probably have chosen a wife from among the contestants. This statement which was a comment from a reporter not representing the Christian faith and from a newspaper that is neither Christian nor represents Christian theology, ignited a wave of violence between Christians and Muslims, leading to a loss of over 200 lives.

f. The Special Case of Boko Haram

According to Ukavwe (1), *Boko Haram* whose name means “Western education is forbidden”, ordinarily signifies a revolt to Western education, but in practice, it goes differently. Its official name is “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad,” which is the English translation of *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad*. The residents of Maiduguri, where the group was formed, dubbed it *Boko Haram*, the term which comes from the Hausa word “*Boko*” meaning “western education” and the Arabic word “*Haram*” figuratively meaning “sin” but literally meaning “forbidden.” Thus, *Boko Haram* translates into “western education is forbidden”. The name is due to its strong opposition to anything Western, which it sees as corrupting Muslims (Chothia in Ukavwe 1). Little wonder the sect has carried out a number of attacks on schools in some parts of the Northeast, killing and even kidnapping students. The most popular case being the April 15, 2014 mass kidnapping of 276 female students from Government Girls College, Chibok, in Borno State., an attack that provoked reactions from across the globe and led to the formation of the popular worldwide movement “Bring Back Our Girls” (BBOG).

Ukawve (1) traces the founding of *Boko Haram* to Mohammed Yusuf in 2002 in the city of Maiduguri with the aim of establishing a Shari'a government in Borno State under former Governor Ali Modu Sheriff. The group includes members who come from neighbouring Chad and Niger and speak only Arabic (BBC, 2009-07-29). It was reported that Yusuf successfully attracted followers from unemployed youth “by speaking out against the Police and political corruption” (Wikipedia, 2012). Since its inception, Boko Haram has willfully attacked

hundreds of buildings and killed many innocent Nigerians and has claimed responsibility for most of the recent bombings in Nigeria. It is based in the northeastern part of Nigeria. Violence blamed on the sect has steadily worsened in the last few years, with bomb blasts becoming more frequent and increasingly sophisticated and death tolls climbing. These attacks continued despite well publicized raids on so-called bomb factories and arrests of a number of alleged *Boko Haram* members by authorities. Also, there has been intense speculations over the swearing of allegiance by *Boko Haram* to other more deadly extremist movements including Al-Qaeda and very recently, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which is arguably the most dreaded religious movement in the world today, known to be responsible for many attacks across the Arab world and even Europe and America.

Only recent efforts by the combined forces of the Nigerian Army, Navy and Air Force, and the collaboration of neighbouring countries, have given respite to the gloomy situation into which *Boko Haram* threw the Northeast and enabled normal activities to resume in that part of the country.

The Church as a Family of God

It is the Father's wish that all men should be members of His one family. God calls every human person to become his son or daughter, to come into his true family in Christ. The Church is the assembly of all who respond to that divine call. The image of the Church as the Family of God is found throughout Christ's teaching. In the Gospels he makes frequent use of family imagery to define his mission, his Person, his commands, his relationship both with God and with his disciples, and the Church's own relationship with God. In Matthew 12:49-50, stretching out his hand toward his disciples, Jesus said, "Here are my mother and my brethren! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother." Thus, becoming a disciple of Jesus, means accepting the invitation to belong to God's family and to live in conformity with His way of life (CCC 2233). Although Christ also uses other images when speaking of his Church, the image of family remains principal. Christ is the eternal Son of the Father, who gathers to himself those whom the Father has called to be his beloved sons and daughters: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all men to myself" (Jn. 12:32).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that "the Church is nothing other than 'the family of God'" (CCC 1655). By the Sacrament of Baptism Christians

become the adopted sons and daughters of God. It is by virtue of this that we first receive the sanctifying grace that incorporates us into God's family. God's acceptance of every one of us as his son or daughter is called "divine filiation". The Sacrament of Confirmation strengthens this divine filiation that was begun in Baptism. (Cf. CCC 1213, 1303, 2026, 2798).

In his weekly General Audience of May 29, 2013, the Holy Father, Pope Francis focused on the subject of the Church as Family of God. He points out that the parable of the Prodigal Son reveals God's plan for humanity.

What is this plan? It's to make of all of us the one family of his children, in which each will feel close and feel loved by Him, as in the Gospel parable, that each may feel the warmth of being the family of God. In this great design, the Church finds its roots; the Church is not an organization born out of an agreement made by some people, but – as Pope Benedict XVI has reminded us many times – it's God's work, it is born from this plan of love that takes place progressively in history. The Church was born from the desire of God to call all people to communion with Him, to His friendship, and indeed to participate as his sons of his own divine life.

Inter-religious Dialogue: An Obligation for the Church as Family of God

As the family of God, all members of Christ's faithful are obliged to reach out to others with an attitude of love and understanding. Inter-religious dialogue is a fundamental duty of every member of God's household. Let us examine the position of the Church on inter-religious dialogue as contained in some Church documents.

Evangelii Gaudium: This is the first Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, published on November 24, 2013, at the conclusion of the Year of Faith. Pope Francis addressed the plenary assembly of the council and stated that "New Evangelization means to reawaken the life of faith in the heart and mind of our contemporaries." He then set down three aspects of the New Evangelization for today as follows:

1. Every baptized person is a bearer of the light of Christ.
2. Every Catholic Christian is to go out and encounter others and preach the Gospel.
3. The ministry of the New Evangelization is to be focused on Jesus Christ.

Numbers 250-254 of *Evangelii Gaudium* are subtitled “Inter-religious Dialogue”. Here the Holy Father advocates an attitude of openness in truth and love when dialoguing with non-Christian religions. This must be the case in spite of the obstacles and difficulties, especially fundamentalism on both sides. He points out the necessity of inter-religious dialogue for peace in the world, thereby making it a duty for everyone. This dialogue must be first of all a dialogue of human existence, in which we accept one another’s ways of life. We must collaborate to ensure the existence of justice and peace in our human society as a means to mutual purification and enrichment. In the process, the bond between dialogue and proclamation must be highlighted. By this the Holy Father pointed out the connectedness between evangelization and peace-building. For to be truly Christian is to be truly a peace maker, for “blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called sons of God (Matt. 5:9). However, this peace-building does not imply accepting whatever is thrown our way as a means of avoiding problems, but a mutual sharing of ideas in order to enrich and be enriched in the process.

He highlighted similarities between Christianity and Islam: Muslims too “profess and hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge humanity on the last day,” thus their sacred writings retain some Christian teachings. Also, the special veneration of Jesus and Mary in Islam is not to be forgotten. He proposed the following:

1. Those who are involved in dialogue with Muslims should be given suitable training in order to be both grounded in their own identity and knowledgeable in the teachings and values of others.
2. Christians should accept and welcome immigrants from Islamic countries with love and affection.
3. Christians living in Islamic countries should be granted freedom of worship in the same way Muslims enjoy same in Christian countries.

Finally, the power of God to reach out to justify all through the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ and made available through the grace of God was the icing on the cake. While others may not enjoy the direct merits of the sanctifying power of the sacraments instituted by Christ, their own religious expressions and faithfulness to their consciences can be channels through which the Holy Spirit enables them journey towards God. By this we know that even in non-Christian religions, Christians have rich treasures through which we can further appreciate the rich deposit of our faith.

Nostra Aetate; This is the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, released on October 28, 1965, as a one of the outcomes of the Second Vatican Council. According to it, the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these (non-Christian) religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings, which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. The Church, therefore, urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussions and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture (NA 2).

Dominus Iesus: This document was released by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith on August 6, 2000. According to it, certainly, it must be recognized that there are some elements in the texts of these religions which may be *de facto* instruments by which countless people throughout the centuries have been and are still able to nourish and maintain their life-relationship with God (DI 8).

Laudato Si: This is the first social encyclical of Pope Francis, published on May 24, 2015, and focused on the care for our common home (earth). It says the majority of people living on the planet profess to be believers. This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity (LS 201).

Types of Dialogue

Anybody can participate in inter-religious dialogue. The key is to identify the best form of dialogue applicable to the particular context. When the proper form of dialogue is harnessed, it yields better and longer lasting results. Below are some types of dialogue.

a. Dialogue of Life

One popular form of dialogue is often called "dialogue of life", including personal exchanges on the problems, joys and sorrows of life, and a wide range of cooperation for the common good. Very often this is as far as both partners are prepared to go together, and probably 99% of inter-religious dialogue takes place at this level. According to Arinze (163), this form of dialogue occurs everywhere and every time.

b. Dialogue of Theological Discourse

A further more difficult step is for both parties to examine their faith to see what they share in common. Uzoukwu in Achi (11) is of the opinion that this form of dialogue involves an encounter by religious specialists with their counterparts from other religions to explore areas of convergence for mutual enrichment and understanding. This kind of dialogue can help clear away misunderstandings and distorted presentations of the other's faith, so as to expand this area of recognized common beliefs. Such dialogue, mostly confined to the area of the rational foundations of religion, is not threatening. Although it is a task that only experts can carry out, their work can reach a wide audience in the form of popular presentations.

c. Dialogue of Social Engagement

Arinze (163) describes this form of dialogue as an engagement for human promotion and integral liberation of humankind. Thus various believers can cooperate in the execution of development projects to help populations suffering from drought, famine or stark poverty, in looking after refugees and especially in the promotion of justice and peace. This can be the beginning of deeper communication.

d. Dialogue of Non-violent Resistance

The dialogue of non-violent resistance was greatly supported by Odey in Achi (11), who cited the case of Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, who having suppressed all opposition to his presidency, was overthrown through the non-violent resistance of the people led by Cardinal Sin, Archbishop of Manila. The armoured tanks deployed by Marcos to disperse the crowds were powerless when confronted by the unarmed people. This led to the swearing in of Mrs Corrazon Aquino, who had been legitimately elected by the people, in 1986.

e. Dialogue of Ecology

It is no longer news that the world is facing grave ecological challenges. These are a result of humankind's misuse or abuse of the earth's resources. Some of these challenges manifest in global warming, floods, earthquakes, wildfires, erosions and drought. These ecological concerns affect, in one way or the other, every human being. Therefore, ecology should be another major point of dialogue, bringing people of different faiths together to solve the challenges to our common home.

f. Rapprochement

Rapprochement is a word that simply means reconciliation, increased understanding, restoration of harmony, agreement, cooperation, harmonization and softening. According to Achi (35), rapprochement is the Christian method of peace building that brings reconciliation through dialogue between belligerent parties. It was employed by Jesus in his relationship with people of other faiths during his public ministry on earth. He proposes rapprochement to Northern Christians as a means of winning back their Islamic brothers and eliminating violence, hatred and mutual suspicion that have characterized their relationship. It will also create structures for addressing religious matters in the nation (Achi 35).

Conclusion

From our study so far, we have been able to trace the history of Christian-Muslim relations and origins of inter-religious crises in Nigeria. Though Nigeria is made up of other religions apart from Christianity and Islam, inter-religious skirmishes in the country have been mainly between Christians and Muslims and that is why our focus is on Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. We have reviewed literature on the topic at hand and made a social analysis of the situation in Nigeria. We then took a theological glance at some *Evangelii Gaudium*, highlighting their implications for Christian-Muslim relations, as well as a few contributions from other church documents. We hereby conclude that despite the unfortunately sad history that has preceded Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria, recognizing the role of the Church-family of God, we cannot give up, but must strive even harder to foster an atmosphere conducive to peaceful and harmonious co-existence between people of all religious beliefs.

Recommendations

In the light of the above, we make the following recommendations:

1. First of all we need a re-orientation of attitude, from one of utter disdain and disrespect for others' religious beliefs, to one of respect and appreciation, remembering that we are all children of one eternal Father and have something to learn from their religious heritage of others.
2. Every Christian must see inter-religious dialogue as a personal enterprise. While the Church makes effort to achieve this on an institutional scale, we must each make effort to do so at the individual level. This is going to be simply by relating with Muslims and other religious adherents as people with rights, feelings and dignity.
3. Inter-religious dialogue cannot be achieved without forgiveness. This is more so for those who have lost loved ones in religious clashes. All forms

of bitterness and antagonisms towards others must be resolved for healing personal and societal healing to be complete.

4. Government must make effort to always investigate religious crises and bring to book all those responsible. To ignore them and presume them forgotten will not get us anywhere.
5. Religious leaders should make it a point of duty to pay courtesy calls on each other on special occasions and on reporting to a new place of apostolate. This will foster understanding between religious leaders and their followers by extension.
6. The Role of the Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA): In line with the recommendations of Francis Cardinal Arinze, CIWA can contribute greatly to the fostering of inter-religious dialogue. This is by continued research into other religions (Arinze 143). While a number of graduates from the institute have undertaken research in this field, their findings should be put to practical use.
7. In the end, what should be at the back of our minds is that all men and women are created in the image and likeness of God, irrespective of race, gender or creed. We all are members of God's household, called to love each other despite our differences. This should be for every person, the fundamental principle of human relationships.

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