

**TOWARDS RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENTS: EXPLORING THE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN PLURALISTIC NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*Nigeria's north-south divide has been plagued by recurrent religious conflicts, resulting in devastating consequences, including loss of lives, injuries, property destruction, insecurity, and humanitarian crises. These conflicts, fueled by religious cosmological exclusivism and unhealthy competition, have pitted Christians and Muslims against each other in a struggle for power, dominance, and spheres of influence. As a form of religious engagement, interfaith dialogue has been widely recommended as a vital tool for managing these conflicts, but the ethical principles underpinning its effectiveness in Nigeria's pluralistic context remain understudied. Hence, this library-based research aims to address this knowledge gap by exploring the ethical principles relevant to interfaith dialogue in Nigeria, using the Contact theory and the Dialogical Model of Intergroup Relations (DMIR) as theoretical frameworks. These frameworks suggest that intergroup contact and dialogue can reduce prejudice and improve relationships between groups, but only if certain conditions are met, such as equal status, common goals, and institutional support. Through a critical and thematic analysis of secondary data from journals, books, newspapers, and reports, this study's findings will contribute to the development of a comprehensive framework for interfaith dialogue in Nigeria, enhancing conflict resolution mechanisms and promoting peaceful coexistence among diverse religious groups. The proposed recommendations will be valuable for policymakers, religious leaders, practitioners, and faith-based organizations seeking to harness the potential of interfaith dialogue for sustainable peace in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Ethics, Interfaith Dialogue, Religious Conflict, Religious Pluralism, Sustainable Peace in Nigeria

**Introduction**

Ethnic, cultural, social, and religious pluralism are integral issues that mark Nigerian society (Aguwa, 1993). As a heterogeneous nation, Nigeria is populated with innumerable multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups (Abdus-Sami'i, 2017) with traditional religion, Christianity and Islam easily standing out as the three major religions in Nigeria (Okwueze, 2003). As Akah (2017) argues, these religions dominate the daily lives of their practitioners and because their adherence tends to be ethically oriented, they have generated intolerance and deadly violence that threaten the corporate existence and development of Nigeria as a nation.

As the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (2012) argues, hostilities along ethnic and religious lines have the most far-reaching consequences for the nation's unity, democracy, and development. Religious pluralism is part of the fabric of peoples' lives and is strongly tied to their

cultural identities (Imaekhai, 2010) and shapes their social realities. This foundation lied the context for religious issues to play roles in conflict generation and resolution, and conflict serving as one key issue that affects Nigeria's national life. Across the north-south divide of Nigeria, religious conflicts have featured prominently as one core source of violence resulting in human deaths, injuries, property destruction, insecurity, and widespread humanitarian emergencies.

Depicted as the major conflict parties, Christians and Muslims have competed for power, dominance, and spheres of influence in areas they claim as their strongholds owing to religious cosmological exclusivism and unhealthy competition. As a result, the history of religious pluralism in Nigeria is replete with all kinds of sad experiences as religion seemingly becomes a step that facilitates the country's movement towards deep-seated crises (Okwueze, 2003). Since the country returned to civil rule in 1999 after decades of military rule, crises of religious dimensions have become a regular and constant feature of social interaction (Njoku and Kolapo, 2022).

### **Statement of Problem**

One solution often recommended by scholars and researchers for the management of religious conflicts as a result of Nigeria's pluralism has been interfaith dialogue with its various types and contexts. However, little efforts have gone into exploring the ethical principles that are relevant in engaging interfaith dialogue as a tool of conflict resolution in Nigeria. Hence, this study is aimed at determining an ethic of interfaith dialogue beyond the challenges of religious conflicts in pluralistic Nigeria.

### **Research Methodology**

The study is based on library research, adopting secondary data such as journals, books, newspapers, and reports. The collected secondary data will be thematically and critically analyzed.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

Some concepts will be briefly clarified in this section.

#### **a. Ethical Principles**

They serve as basic judgments for many particular ethical prescriptions and evaluations of human actions (The Belmont Report, 1978). Ethical principles are fundamental guidelines that shape behavior, decision-making, and actions. They serve as a moral compass, helping individuals and organizations distinguish right from wrong and make choices that respect the rights and dignity of all individuals (National Institutes of Health, n.d.).

#### **b. Interfaith Dialogue**

Dialogue is contextually defined as an ecumenical attempt to bring people of different faiths together on the platform of peaceful co-existence, cooperation, and tolerance (Danij, 2007). Interfaith dialogue also referred to as interreligious dialogue, is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences (Ashu, n.d.). Chaudhari (2016) explains that the term inter-religious dialogue refers to positive interaction between people of different communities. It also refers to as interfaith dialogue, which is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. On a contextual note, Akinwumi (2021) construes the term as referring to cooperative, constructive, and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, (i.e. faiths') at both the individual and institutional levels. Each party remains true to its

own beliefs while respecting the right of the other to practice their faith freely.

**c. Religious Conflicts**

Religious conflict means different things to different people. According to Otite and Olawale (1999), religious conflict is “the struggle over values and claims to scarce resources, status and power in which the opponents aim to neutralize or eliminate their rivals”. In the view of Oyeshola (2006) religious conflict is the disagreement, dispute or controversy in ideas or viewpoints held by two or more individuals, communities, or religious groups. For Davies and Egbuchu (2019) it refers to a specific type of conflict between groups based on ideological dispositions along religious lines within a plural society with each striving for political relevance. In a related but comprehensive note, Aliyu (2004) cited in Anwuluorah, Udeh, and Sapientia (2019) posits that religious conflict is a process of interaction involving a struggle over claim in resources, power, status, beliefs, and other preferences and desires.

**d. Religious Pluralism**

Akah (2017) presents religious pluralism as connoting the existence of many religions in a particular society. Ilesanmi (1997) observes that religious pluralism is the presence of diverse beliefs and communities that are religious. Hooft (2001) cited in Ogunleye (2021) avows that religious pluralism is a situation in which various religions live side by side with each of them holding a privileged status. Idowu-Fearon (2009) construes of religious pluralism as a situation where people of different religious faith live together and interact at all levels without fear or prejudice. It is an attitude or policy regarding the diversity of religious belief systems co-existing in society.

**Theoretical Framework**

The Contact theory of Allport (1954) and the Dialogical Model of Intergroup Relations (DMIR) by Kimmerie (2015) were adopted in this study. The contact group theory was first introduced by psychologist Gordon Allport in the year 1954. Contact theory is also known as intergroup contact theory. It proposes that interactions between different groups can reduce prejudice and improve relationships. Key components of the theory include equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation and personalized interaction.

On the other hand, the dialogical model of intergroup relations was developed by psychologists Tajfel and Turner (1979). Their original view emphasizes the importance of intergroup dialogue in shaping relationships between groups. This theory holds that individuals derive social identity or a sense of belonging and self-esteem from group members. Also, groups are interconnected with their relationships influencing individual attitudes and behavior. Inclusively, dialogue which entails open communication and mutual understanding between groups can reduce tensions and promote cooperation (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). The dialogical model encourages empathy, mutual respect and cooperation.

Kimmerie (2015) has contributed to the discourse on the dialogical model of intergroup relations. Kimmerie views DMIR as framework that is valuable for understanding and improving intergroup interactions. The model for Kimmerie further acknowledges the crucial role played by social identity and interdependence in intergroup dynamics. The fact that dialogue is not just a means of exchanging information, but a way of creating a shared understanding was highlighted by Kimmerie. In addition, the importance of addressing power imbalances and promoting equal status in intergroup dialogue is advocated (Kimmerie, 2015).

In its application to this study, both the social contact theory of Allport (1954) and the perspective

of Kimmie (2015) on the dialogical model of intergroup relations suggest that intergroup contact and dialogue can reduce prejudice and improve relationships between religious groups that engage in dialogue in Nigeria if such conditions and principles like equal status, common goals, and institutional support are considered as principles that should be met for an effective encounter.

### **Literature Review**

Literature on relevant themes in this study will be reviewed.

#### **The Challenges of Religious Conflicts in Pluralistic Nigeria**

Oguche (2009) argues that religious conflict has resulted in the loss of human lives especially in Northern Nigeria. This for him, raises the concern and throws a question as to whether Nigeria is truly one nation, as Southern Muslims or Christians can be killed in the name of religion within their own country. From a broader social perspective, Oji (2015) using the Boko Haram example, argues that religious conflict as a challenge of Nigeria's pluralism has rendered millions of Nigerians homeless making them live as destitute without good shelter and adequate health care. Religious conflicts in Nigeria, for Ejigbo (2015) has created social divides between people making their coming together difficult. He clarified his stand by remarking that Christians and Muslims have not been able to co-exist and work harmoniously for decades, leading to the polarization of Nigerian religions. A dimension to this challenge is what Samuel and Anadi (2021) describes as reduction of every critical issues to religious sentiment. Thus, religious conflicts in Nigeria birth the beclouding of objective reasoning of most citizens particularly the political elites whenever national issues are to be discussed.

For Enejor (2000), the reality of religious conflict in Nigeria has effects on the survival of the Nigerian state, because it is a threat to national integration which has a bearing on the country's socio-cultural, political, scientific, and technological development. As an extension to Nigeria's survival, the challenge has equally tarnished the image and stature of the country among other members of the comity of nations. Samuel and Anadi (2021) maintain that the dented national image of the nation in the international community has become widespread due to repeated violent religious conflicts.

Associated with the wanton destruction of lives, and personal and public property, is the problem of survival that religious conflict creates. Thereby discouraging investment in the country (Samuel and Anadi, 2021). As a result, the country is faced with a huge problem of internally displaced persons (IDPs). IDMC (2018) argues that most of the IDP centers in the country are in the North where religious crises are prevalent. This has implications for foreign direct investments as most multinational corporations and wealthy donor states will shy away from engaging in business with the country due to the risk and uncertainty associated with a conflict-ridden polity (Adadu, 2015).

### **Types of Interfaith Dialogue**

#### **Dialogue of life**

This form of religious encounter can take place in all the ordinary interrelations between people of different religions without pre-planning. It arises naturally out of the processes of life that is, from interaction, positive and negative, obvious and subtle, verbal and nonverbal, between various peoples or persons (Ashu, N.d.).

#### **Dialogue of Common Action or Social Dialogue**

This is a very creative and deliberate effort to bring understanding and peace through dialogue. In



this circumstance, people from various faiths cooperate and involve themselves in joint projects for a common good such as building a road, bridge, a hospital, or a center for learning that will be beneficial to all irrespective of religious creed or affiliation. This could also come in form of establishing organizations by different religious groups to address social problems or a public policy concern (Arinze, 1990).

### **Theological Dialogue or Discourse**

Theology which entails the academic study of God or the study of a particular religious organization's understanding of God and his relationship to man, is not an everyday knowledge accessible to all folks. Hence, specialists who are well-schooled in their faith tradition are the agents of this form of dialogue. This takes place on academic or official levels between experts, theologians, and religious leaders. The usefulness of this form of dialogue is that it helps to clarify issues, to create greater understanding, and eliminate prejudices.

Ashu (n.d) cautions that the aim of this form of dialogue is not to reach a common belief, but rather to clarify what each partner believes in order to appreciate the uniqueness of each other and note the spiritual values they bring.

### **Dialogue of Religious Experience**

People hold or have different experiences due to their religious beliefs and affiliations. Efforts can be made to explain these unique subjective experiences to others by showing how different people experience their religion. Prayer and meditation, for example, could be the subject of a dialogue of religious experience. Here,

### **Relevance of Interfaith Dialogue**

The importance of interfaith dialogue is based on its several relevant uses to individuals, group relations, and national life.

### **People Learn to Coexist in a Pluralistic Society**

It is learning to coexist with radically different community by appreciating the beliefs and practices of other religions. This enhanced understanding can in-turn lead to a more peaceable coexistence in a pluralistic culture as is evident in the 21st century.

### **Most faiths have more in Common**

People learn when they talk about differences by engaging in interfaith dialogue. As people of different religious communities encounter each other in their neighborhoods where they live, in mutual service, in schools, in government, and in civic activities, the foundations established through dialogue enable and empower them to know the areas in which mutual activity can ease their living and work together in society. On the other hand, it enables them to know the areas in which religious differences can make mutual undertakings difficult. A broad openness and mindedness is gained which allows the parties to understand the common themes and similarities between their faiths. In the end, mutual dependence and complementarity are born.

### **It births Peace Initiatives**

Through interfaith dialogue, religious fundamentalism, extremism, fanaticism, and exclusivism which predispose people to acts of violence like arson, looting, genocides, gruesome murder, and violent rape among other forms of atrocities, are minimized or if not completely eliminated. In this regard, healthy interreligious relations are built and the experience of peace is guaranteed. In regions where religious differences contribute to tensions and conflicts such as Nigerian society, interfaith dialogue plays a significant role in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and

reconciliation. This is the case as religious leaders and dialogue participants can use interfaith dialogue to mediate and resolve conflict parties, thus breaking down barriers.

### **It Shapes One's Identity**

It helps people to understand their religion better in the context of pluralism, especially in the 21st-century world that is not only multicultural but also globalizing. This avails believers and those in dialogue an opportunity to re-read their scriptures, doctrines, and dogmas in the context of pluralism as an inevitable social reality.

### **Ethical Principles Necessary for Effective Interfaith Dialogue in Nigeria**

From an Islamic ethical perspective, Shah, Hussin, Majid, Mohamad, and Othman (2013) identified some moral values that serve as guidance for conducting dialogue with non-Muslims.

### **Sincerity and Integrity**

Planned dialogue should be fostered under the sincerity and preserving truth. Facts about each religion should be properly conveyed. Participants should approach issues with sincerity of heart and active involvement by each religious community (Akinwumi, 2021). As a corollary to this, some measure of self-criticism is needed to showcase the level of sincerity of participants in dialogue. Akinwumi (2021) argues that lack of such criticism implies that one's tradition has all the answers and that will connote defeating the aim of dialogue.

Participants should not come with preconceptions as to where the points of disagreement lie. Participants are free to agree with their dialogue counterparts in the dialogue process provided they do not violate the integrity of their own religious tradition. By doing this, as Akinwumi (2021) remarks, this will reveal the real boundaries between the religious traditions.

### **Common Goals and Clear Objectives**

One relevant ethical principle is beneficence. It concerns the willingness of dialogue participants to have uppermost in their hearts and minds the desire to do well. Doing good is loving one's neighbor as one's self as captured in most world religions. Another clear objective of interfaith dialogue is for participants not to compare their ideals with their partners' practice. In this regard, ideals should only be compared with ideals across religious traditions and likewise practices.

### **Honoring the Feelings of the Listeners, Managing the Dialogue Properly**

Humans are religious beings who enjoy the dignity of persons because they are created in the image and likeness of God. As a result, their autonomy of person should be respected. In this context of interfaith dialogue, people should be treated with respect whether they belong to our religion or not. Their status, race, decision-making capacity, and position they occupy in their religious community should not determine if they should be respected or listened to. There is a need to honor the feelings of listeners. It should go without curse and humiliation to others.

### **Equal Status of Interlocutors**

It is vital to note that dialogue as a form of peaceful communication can only take place between equals. This implies that interlocutors are meant to learn from one another and not show signs of supremacy by attempting to teach one another (Akinwumi, 2021). For this to happen, there must be mutual trust at the individual level. Institutional support from local, state, and federal governments should be accorded the building of trust with sensitivity given to dialogue issues and actors. Minority religions and groups are in this regard entitled to a place on the dialogue table.

### **Convincing the Listeners about the Credibility of the Dialogue Makers**

Listeners should be convinced of the credibility of interlocutors to build their trust and confidence in them as worthy representatives. Interfaith dialogue thrives better when the authenticity and reliability of those participating in the dialogue are not in doubt. Their training, expertise concerning extensive knowledge and years of experience, genuine representation of their faith community, and track record of collaboration will serve as qualities that will compel co-religionists to respect the agents or participants of dialogue from their religion.

### Conclusion

This study has explored the ethical principles relevant to interfaith dialogue in pluralistic Nigeria. From the research, it is obvious that interfaith dialogue is crucial for fostering mutual understanding, respect, and peaceful coexistence among diverse religious communities in multicultural and religiously diverse Nigeria. The ethical principles of sincerity and integrity, common goals and clear objectives, managing the dialogue properly by honoring the feelings of the listeners, equal status of interlocutors, and convincing the listeners about the credibility of the dialogue makers should guide interfaith dialogue in Nigeria if effective and efficient engagements are expected. By embracing these principles, individuals can engage in open and honest discussions, acknowledging differences, while finding common ground. This is the context that can guarantee a display of empathy, cooperation, and peaceful resolution of religious conflict in Nigeria. As a tool of conflict resolution, prioritizing ethical interfaith dialogue can effectively enthrone Nigeria's thrive for the betterment of harmonious relations, peaceful coexistence, and equitable society despite the diverse religious identities in the country.

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