

IGWEBUIKE AND ABRAHAM'S MODEL OF DIALOGUE IN GENESIS 13:5-

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**Abstract**

*A cursory glance at history reveals the reoccurrence of religious conflicts and violence between Christians and Muslims, especially in the twenty first century. Islam and Christianity are sister religions and monotheistic in worship; yet, the ancient long rivalries as well as modern day conflicts have so accentuated differences as completely to obscure the shared monotheistic roots. Despite many common beliefs and values, throughout history, Muslim-Christians relations have often been overshadowed by misunderstanding as both struggles for power and for souls. Employing the Igwebuiké method of research, this work has sought for a common denominator between the sister religions of Christianity and Islam as a uniting factor. It discovered that both religions revere the patriarch Abraham as their ancestor and father in faith. With this understanding, it proposed the Biblical Abraham as the patriarch for dialogue in view of his encounter with Lot in Gen.13:5-9 as an example for both Muslims and Christians. This research would employ the Igwebuiké wholistic method of research which emphasizes and searches for common grounds between two or more realities. This search for common ground is anchored on the Igwebuiké philosophy of the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of reality. In this case, an attempt is made to discover a common ground for Christianity and Islam by exploring their beliefs and values.*

**Keywords:** Igwebuiké, Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, Philosophy, Abraham, Genesis, Dialogue, Christianity, Islam

**Introduction**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the major religious conflicts and violence is between Christians and Muslims. Islam and Christianity are sister religions and monotheistic in worship; yet, the ancient long rivalries as well as modern day conflicts have so accentuated differences as completely to obscure the shared monotheistic roots. Despite many common beliefs and values, throughout

history, Muslim-Christians relations have often been overshadowed by misunderstanding as both struggle for power and for souls.

This research would employ the Igwebuike wholistic method of research which emphasizes and searches for common grounds between two or more realities. This search for common ground is anchored on the Igwebuike philosophy of the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of reality. In this case, an attempt is made to discover a common ground for Christianity and Islam by exploring their beliefs and values. As sister religions, Christians and Muslims revere the patriarch Abraham as their ancestor and father in faith. With this understanding, it would be proposed that the Biblical Abraham as the patriarch for dialogue in view of his encounter with Lot in Gen.13:5-9 as an example for both Muslims and Christians. The purpose is to reduce to the barest minimum that sense of differentness very strong in both religions and to promote a strong sense of unity and identification with the other.

### **The Igwebuike Approach**

The word *Igwebuike* is an Igbo word. It is a composite word made up of three dimensions. Therefore, it can be employed as a word or used as a sentence: as a word, it is written as *Igwebuike*, and as a sentence, it is written as, *Igwe bu ike*, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space. The three words involved: *Igwe* is a noun which means number or population, usually a huge number or population. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is another verb, which means *strength* or *power*. Thus, put together, it means 'number is strength' or 'number is power', that is, when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force<sup>20</sup>. However, it is employed within this context not only as a philosophy but

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<sup>20</sup> Kanu, I. A. (2016) "Igwebuike as an Expressive Modality of Being in African ontology." *Journal of Environmental and Construction Management*. 6. 3; Kanu, I. A. (2016). "Igwebuike as the consummate foundation of African bioethical principles." *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 2. 2; Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike and the logic of African philosophy." *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 1; Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike and the question of superiority in the scientific community of knowledge." *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 1; Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike as a Complementary Approach to the Issue of Girl-Child Education." *Nightingale International Journal of Contemporary Education and Research*. Vol. 3. No. 6; Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike as an Igbo-African ethic of reciprocity." *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 2; Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Philosophy for the Protection of the Environment". *Nightingale International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol. 3. No. 4; Kanu, I. A. (2017). "Igwebuike as an Igbo-African

a method of research. It is a method of research that searches for relationships of reality, and the unity of reality in spite of its plurality and diversity.

The Igwebuiké indigenous method of investigation is anchored on the African worldview which holds that reality is related- each aspect relates with the whole. It, therefore, understands reality within the context of relationships and experiences of interrelationships and interconnections. It is also within this context that it understands the relationship between Islam and Christianity. It strongly believes that the points of inter-relationships and interconnectedness are only discovered when the burden of differences are lowered and dialogue prevails. Dialogue is a very strong principle of Igwebuiké philosophy. It understands dialogue as a very important stage in the search for and discovery of the unity of reality. This method of inquiry, therefore, forms a framework capable of harmonizing our thoughts and actions into active processes that unifies.

### **Dialogue (Interfaith)**

Dialogue has become one of the most used words in our world today. The Chambers English Dictionary defines dialogue as a “conversation between two or more persons especially of a formal or imagery nature; an exchange of views in the hope of ultimately reaching agreement.”<sup>21</sup> Dialogue is a special kind of discourse that enables people with different perspective and worldviews to work together in order to dispel mistrust and create a climate of good faith, breaking through negative stereotypes and preparing the ground for negotiation or decision making on emotion-religious-cultural-social-laden issues.

Dialogue is one of the sure ways to heal memories and wounded hearts. In dialogue, understanding is the keyword. Thus, dialogue is not about judging, weighing or making decisions, but about understanding and learning.<sup>22</sup> In dialogue, one can identify the need for intra-personal dialogue (self examination), inter-personal dialogue, intra-community dialogue, inter-

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wholistic response to the problem of evil and human suffering.” *Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 3. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Chambers English Dictionary, (W&R Chambers LTD, 1990), p.

<sup>22</sup> Cornelius Omonokhua Dialogue in Context: A Nigeria Experience (Kaduna: Virtual Insignia, 2014), p.13.

community dialogue, intra-religious dialogue and inter-religious dialogue. For want of space, I would like to focus on inter-religious or interfaith dialogue.

Interfaith dialogue provides opportunity for Christians to examine the commonalities and differences that Islam has with Christianity. Dialogue is not merely a forum for self-definition; it also has the advantage of permitting inquiry through personal interaction. Thus, one learns from listening to the practitioners of another faith rather than only reading its theoreticians. Christians frequently discover a great gap in perception as they engage Muslims face-to-face in discussion. Stereotypes and misperceptions rapidly begin to vanish.<sup>23</sup>

The New Testament sets some broad guidelines for Christians who engage in dialogue. Dialogue entails listening with understanding: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak" (cf. Jas.1:19). Thus, to listen and to seek to understand- not necessarily acceding to the other's viewpoint- is perhaps the most important quality necessary in dialogue. St. Peter confirms this: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (cf.1Pet.3:15). In any conversation it is easy to pose and answer questions that one's partner has never asked. Here, when one's partner in dialogue initiates interest in hearing about the Christian hope, then one should be prepared to give an answer. And that answer must not be presented arrogantly or thoughtlessly, but with sensitivity to and respect for the inquirer.

### **The Purpose of Dialogue**

Christians and Muslims approach dialogue with differing motives. For this reason, Christians and Muslims often have a certain apprehension and wariness about making themselves vulnerable in a dialogue. Too frequently in the past dialogues have exposed hidden agendas and tactics.

Thus, dialogue must never be viewed as an opportunity to overcome the "opposition." That is, dialogue is not an arena wherein people assemble in order to choose sides, and then cheer their team to victory as they score verbal points or a stage for angrily venting one's frustrations or blaming others for the sins of the past. Furthermore, the object of dialogue is not to convert one's partner from one faith and tradition to another. Conversion is the work of God, not human

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<sup>23</sup> Marvin R. Wilson *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Root of the Christian Faith* (Ohio: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), p.326.

beings. Though dialogue provides each religion with a format for witness to one another, but not to impose one's faith on another. In addition, the purpose of dialogue is not the seeking of reconciliation through theological compromise. It is not to melt down Islam and Christianity to their lowest common denominators.

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The purpose of dialogue is an invitation for everyone involved to learn. Dialogue is a means for enhancing personal growth and understanding through a mutual search for truth. Thus, neither Christian nor Muslim must be content with mutual toleration of each other's errors and caricatures. Dialogue provides the context whereby Christians and Muslims can achieve a new rapprochement as they explore ancient sources and forge new links together. Dialogue gives occasion to broaden and enrich one's spiritual capacity without need to compromise or relinquish one's deepest faith commitments. Through dialogue the Christians reveal a new image while exploring the richness of Islam. It gives opportunity not only to enhance one's knowledge through personal encounter, but also to demonstrate by true humility and brotherhood an attitude conducive to further growth through mutual trust. <sup>25</sup>

### **The Life and Personality of Abraham**

Abraham is the son of Terah, the father of Isaac and grandfather of Jacob. He is the first of the three patriarchs of the Jewish people. The life and story of Abraham is recorded in the book of Genesis (11:27-25:18) and in the Koran. Many critical scholars see in this account a welding-together of different traditions and the migrations of Abraham as a later attempt at mirroring the journeys of the children of Israel towards the land of Israel in order to provide a theological scheme in which later events are anticipated through the divine promise to Abraham and his seed.<sup>26</sup>

In the Jewish tradition, Abraham is the father par excellence of the Jews and Judaism. The numerous legends that have been woven around Abraham's life from the earliest time were partly intended to depict him as the ideal 'Jew'. According to biblical tradition, though Abraham's ancestors (including his

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<sup>24</sup> Marvin R. Wilson, *op.cit.*, p.325.

<sup>25</sup> Marvin R. Wilson, *op.cit.*, p.326.

<sup>26</sup> Louis Jacobs. *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.12.

father, Terah) worshiped many gods (cf. Jos.24:2), he was the first to worship only one God and is considered the founder of the monotheist tradition and the first Hebrew (or Israelite or Jew).<sup>27</sup>

The biblical account begins with God speaking to Abraham (first called Abraham [Gn.11:27-17:5] then a dialectical variant, Abraham, interpreted in Gn.17:5 as "Father of a multitude of nations") and commanding him to leave his native Mesopotamia and to go to the land of Canaan (Gn.12). Thus, Abraham, at the age of seventy-five, and his wife Sarai immigrated to Canaan and there lived in various cities, notably Hebron. God promised Abraham offspring who would develop into a great nation and possess the land of Canaan (the Promised Land). However, at Sarah's insistence, Hagar the maidservant bore a son, Ishmael; and later, Sarah miraculously gave birth to a son in old age, Isaac (Gn.21), who was to be the heir of the covenantal promise.<sup>28</sup>

The covenant established between God and Abraham (Gn.15) forms the basis of biblical religion: God will be the God of Abraham and his descendants, and Abraham and his descendants will be the people of God. God's covenant with Abraham was given its expression in the rite of circumcision (Gn.17). The circumcision rite of Jewish male children is called 'entering into the covenant of Abraham our father', and the name of the rite itself is the *berit*, the 'covenant'. But the idea of Abraham as the 'father' of the Jews is not understood only in terms of physical parenthood. Abraham is the spiritual father of all who are converted to Judaism. At the conversion ceremony, the convert is given a Hebrew name and is called a 'a child of Abraham our father.'<sup>29</sup>

Abraham is held up for admiration and emulation as a symbol of hospitality. Abraham sits at the door of his tent ready to welcome weary travelers and provide them with food and drink (cf. Gn.18:1-18).the Rabbinic Midrash imagines Abraham's tent as having openings on all four sides so that anyone seeking help could enter immediately from whichever direction he came. Thus, in Eastern Europe, a home famed for its hospitality was called 'a house with Abraham's doors'. In the Ethics of the Father, to follow Abraham's magnanimity and humility is the ideal: "He in whom are these three things is of the disciples of

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<sup>27</sup> Gary A. Rendsburg. "Abraham" in The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion. Ed. By R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.5.

<sup>28</sup> Gary A. Rendsburg, op.cit. p.6.

<sup>29</sup> Louis Jacobs. The Jewish Religion: A Companion, op.cit. p.12

Abraham our father: a good eye and a humble spirit and a lowly soul” (5:19). Also, Abraham is depicted as one who does not retreat from the worship of God no matter how severe the temptation, as when Abraham was tempted in the incident of the binding of Isaac, the *Akedah* (cf. Gn.22). He stood steadfast to show how great his love and faith in God was.<sup>30</sup>

The Bible notes that, in addition to Hagar and Sarah, Abraham had a third wife, Keturah, whom he married after Sarah’s death, and through her six additional children were born (cf. Gn.25:1-6). When Abraham died at the age of one hundred and seventy-five, his sons Isaac and ismael buried him next to Sarah in the cave of Machpelah at Horeb, which he has purchased as a burial place for Sarah (Gn.25:7-10).<sup>31</sup>

### **An Exegesis of Genesis 13:5-9**

Lot, who went with Abram, also had flock and herds and tents, so that the land could not support them if they stayed together; their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together. There were quarrels between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and those of Lot’s... So that Abram said to Lot: “Let there be no strife between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land at your disposal? Please separate from me. If you prefer the left, I will go to the right; if you prefer the right, I will go to the left.”

This scope of Gn.13 is often view by biblical commentators as the separation of Abram and Lot. It describes Abraham's disengagement from Lot. According to the literal interpretation of the text, the background to this development is clear in that Abraham's voluntary parting from Lot is understandable and even justifiable: both Abraham and Lot have become quite wealthy, their flocks have become numerous; the grazing lands are no longer large enough to meet the needs of Abraham and Lo. It is not surprising that disputes broke out between the shepherds of Abraham and Lot; as the text itself informs us.

According to the Jerome Biblical commentary, this passage, principally J’s presents an authentic picture of shepherd nomads grazing their flocks in the hill

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<sup>30</sup> Op.cit. p.12-13.

<sup>31</sup> Geoffrey Wigoder ed, *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p.21.

areas between the great cities. The area indicated is North of Jerusalem in the territory of Benjamin from which the Jordan valley is visible. Abram's journey, first to the Negeb and then, by stages, north to Bethel, was typical of this picture of nomads in search of pastures for their flocks. The strifes were accentuated by the presence of Canaanites and Perizzites (v.7b), the latter probably ancient Hurrian inhabitants of Canaan (Gn.34:20; Jgs.1:4-5, where the two are associated). As in Gn.26:20, which suggest that the disputes may have been over the use of wells (cf. v.10, where the "well-watered" Jordan region is a motive for Lot's choice).<sup>32</sup>

However, P's insertion in v.6 attributes the cause of the dispute to "great possessions."<sup>33</sup> Both Abram and Lot are described as having large flocks, and their movements were dictated by the need to find pasture for their flocks in areas that were already partially settled and cultivated. Given the large increase in the patriarchal herds in Egypt (12:16), genuine problems of sharing the limited pasturage would have arisen. Similar problems precipitated wrangles between Isaac and the Philistines (26:12-22), Jacob and his uncle Laban (30:43), and Jacob and Esau (36:6-7).<sup>34</sup>

Thus, Abraham and Lot agreed to separate to forestall future arguments between them over rights to pasture land. Their herdsmen have already begun to quarrel. However, when peaceful community is impossible Scripture prefers amicable separation (Acts.15:39; 1Cor.7:12-15). Abram invites Lot to share the land with him, either to "take the right," often used of the south, or "the left," i.e., the northern part of the country.<sup>35</sup> Abram, though older and by rights the one who could choose first, very magnanimously defer to Lot. Lot picks the land that looked lush and fertile, the Jordan Plain, and settles near Sodom. Lot's choice is ironic, for this is a territory that will be destroyed by Yahweh.<sup>36</sup> The story is connected (perhaps originally) with an ancient tradition found in Gn.19 (cf.13:13). Thus, it is used as an introduction to the renewal of the promise in

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<sup>32</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S. S. ed. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p.18.

<sup>33</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S. S. ed. *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> Gordon J. Wenham. *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis. Vol.1* (Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1987), p.296.

<sup>35</sup> Gordon J. Wenham. *Op.cit.*, p.297.

<sup>36</sup> Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris Eds. *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1989), p.54.



vv.14-18. Again, looking at Lot's free decision, although inspired by human wisdom (cf. v.10), will work ultimately for the fulfillment of the divine plan.<sup>37</sup>

However, Robert Alter argues that Abraham's language is "clear, firm and polite" in suggesting the peace condition. Lot accepts the peace deal, for the partition of the Land, and chooses the area of the plain of the Jordan. Thus, the story ends with Abraham and Lot separately settling in different areas of the Land

### **Other Examples: Genesis 18-19.**

The men set out from there and looked toward Sodom...then Abraham drew nearer to him and said: "Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty? Suppose there were fifty innocent people in the city; would you wipe out the place, rather than spare it for the sake of the fifty innocent people within it? Far be it from such a thing, to make the innocent die with the guilty, so that the innocent and the guilty would be treated alike! Should not the judge of all the world act with justice?" The Lord replied, "If I find fifty innocent people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."... "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered; for the sake of ten I will not destroy it." And the Lord departed as soon as he had finished speaking with Abraham, and Abraham returned home.

This periscope of Gen.18 is titled by many scholars as "Abraham bargains with God" or "Abraham intercedes for Sodom." This periscope is imbued with different interpretations but what I wish to bring out apart from the idea that God the judge of the world, is indeed just, distinguishing between the righteous and the wicked, as in the case of Noah and sinful humanity in Gn. 6-9, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16-19:29) which is closely integrated; is the idea of dialogue between God and Abraham. Thus, God announces to Abraham his plan, and he intercedes for Sodom through his dialogue with God.<sup>38</sup> In addition some scholars argue that no doubt Abraham's motives were not entirely disinterested, for his nephew Lot lived in Sodom. But it was Sodom's fate he concentrated on. Abraham was conscious of the distance between God and himself; meticulously, he dares to dialogue with Yahweh (27-32).

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<sup>37</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S. S. ed. op. cit.p.18.

<sup>38</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S. S. ed. op. cit.p.23.

The ensuing dialogue testifies to his energetic and daring experience that took place in the gathering dusk, within sight of Sodom, still lush and thriving, yet doomed to be reduced before sunrise to a smoldering ruin. Such an advocate was tolerated by the Judge of the whole earth. Would, he asked, the presence in it of fifty, down to forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, to the point that only ten righteous suffice to avert destruction. Each time God's answer was that it would. For the sake of such a number, even ten, "I will not destroy it."<sup>39</sup> Ten became the natural limit in Abraham's dialogue; below that number God can save the individuals within the city as will happen with Lot. God has been revealed as just in the dialogue, so each partner departs.<sup>40</sup>

According to Gordon J. Wenham in his commentary, Abraham is portrayed in his intercession for Sodom as fulfilling not only a role of a middle man but a role particularly associated with the prophets. For example, the role of Abraham in this periscope is linked with Moses' great intercession in Ex. 32-34. Samuel (1Sam.12:23), Amos (7:1-9), and Jeremiah (14:7-9; 13; 15:1) also pleaded with God on the nation's behalf. Here Abraham is not praying for his own people (he does not mention Lot) but for Sodom, and this makes this episode unique among prophetic intercessions.<sup>41</sup>

The role of Abraham in dialogue is very extensive in Genesis both in interfaith and intercultural dialogue. This is seen in Abraham encounter with Abimelech, king of Gerar (20:14-18) which is a parallel to the story of how Abraham presented his wife Sarah to be his sister in his journey in Egypt and encounter with Pharaoh (Gen.12:10-20). Also, Abraham is presented in Gen. 24:1-6 as a model for intercultural dialogue.

### **The Place of Abraham in Islam**

Abraham (Ar. Ibrahim) is the ancient patriarch of Islam, as he is of Judaism. Abraham is called the "friend of God" (*Khalil Allah*) and the greatest witness of monotheism and the brave destroyer of idols. According to the Qur'an, Abraham was a brave and faithful servant of Allah who preached the worship of Allah to his kinsmen:

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<sup>39</sup> John C.L. Gibson. *The Daily Study Bible Series: Genesis Vol.2.* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), p.81.

<sup>40</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S.S. ed. *op.cit.* p.23.

<sup>41</sup> Gordon J. Wenham. *Op.cit.*, p.53.

He said unto his fathers: O my fathers! Why worshippeth thou that which hearest not nor seeth, nor can in aught avail thee? O my fathers! Lo! There hath come unto me of knowledge that which came not unto thee. So follow me, and I will lead thee on a right path (Qur'an 19:42, 43).

In Islam, Abraham is held in esteem, as the ancestor of the prophet, who is his descendant through Abraham son Ishmael and one of God's special messengers. The Qur'an names both Abraham and Ishmael as Divine Messengers (*rasul, pl.rusul*).<sup>42</sup> Abraham established the pilgrimage to Mecca and joined with prophet Ishmael, they build the *Ka'ba*, that is, the "house" of Allah, which serves a central function in the Hajj pilgrimage and he called mankind to the "ancient house" (*al-bayt al-'atiq*). The Qur'an says:

And when We appointed the House to a place of visitation for the people, and a sanctuary, and: take to yourself Abraham's station for a place of prayer.' And We made covenant with Abraham and Ishmael: 'Purify My House for those that shall go about it and those that cleave to it, to those who bow and prostrate themselves (2:118-119. And when Abraham, and Ishmael with him, raised up the foundations of the House: 'Our Lord, receive this from us; Thou art the All-hearing, the All-knowing; and, our Lord, make us submissive to Thee, and of our seed a nation submissive to Thee; and show us our holy rites, and turn towards us; surely Thou turnest, and art All-compassing (2:122-123).<sup>43</sup>

Abraham was a prophet and messenger of dialogue. He dialogued with Allah and men. He resolved many great disputes and conflicts with his opponents and kinsmen: "dispute ye with me concerning Allah when He hath guided me. Your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, Who created them; and I am of those who testify unto that" (Qur'an 21:56).<sup>44</sup> Abraham is also regarded as the first "submissive one" (*muslim*) of history. The Qur'an (3:67) says that Abraham was neither Jew, nor Christian, but a submitted *hanif* ("adherent to perennial Monotheism") and he was not of the idolaters. He had a submissive spirit that enabled him to receive the messengers of God who announced to him the

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<sup>42</sup> Cyril Glasse, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), p.17.

<sup>43</sup> Cyril Glasse, *op.cit.*

<sup>44</sup> Maurice Borrmans, *Interreligious Documents I: Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*. Trans. by R. Marston Speight (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 50.

destruction of the sinful cities and the birth of Isaac. He was willing to sacrifice even the son whom God had given him, the son whose name the Qur'an strangely does not mention in the passage regarding this event. This act of exemplary obedience is commemorated each year by one of the rites of the pilgrimage to Mecca. This rite, the 'great festival' (*al-'id al-kabir*), is also called the "festival of sacrifice" (*'id al-adha*).<sup>45</sup>

Accordingly, Abraham is regarded as the representation of the primordial man in universal surrender to the Divine Reality before its fragmentation into religions separated from each other by differences in form. This religion of Abraham is a reconsecration, a restoration of the *fitrah*, or primordial "norm", a spontaneous and sacred conformity to reality that is not externalized to the level of a law; it is called in the Qur'an *millaat Ibrahim* (the creed of Abraham). Islam necessarily has a form because it has a codified law, established ritual, creed, dogma, and so forth, but inwardly, in its essence, Islam sees itself as a restoration of the primordial tradition of Abrahamic spirituality when idolatry had overtaken the Arabs spirits who were descendants of Abraham.<sup>46</sup> Thus, in the Qur'an Abraham is described as a faithful and exemplary Muslim from whom all future Islam-believers are descended, and Mohammed is regarded as a descendant of Abraham with regards to faith. In closing this brief overview of the Islamic perspective of prophet Abraham, the Qur'an states that Prophet Abraham was the person who coined the term "Muslim" (Qur'an 22:78).

### **Christians and Muslims One in Abraham**

The Abrahamic faith in monotheism unites and divides Judaism, Christianity and Islam as consecutive articulations of trust in God. According to Michael A Signer:

The biblical figure of Abraham unites and divides the three great monotheistic religions. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all trace their spiritual ancestry to Abraham, viewing him as a paradigm of the human-

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<sup>45</sup> Maurice Borrmans, op.cit. p.51.

<sup>46</sup> Cyril Glasse, OP.cit., p.18.

divine relationship and the consequences of the search to live in the presence of God.<sup>47</sup>

As Abraham answered the call of God, he migrated and he broke with the old gods and did not accept the gods of the new land. Rather, he put his trust in the nameless God, who had called him out of his land to a new home. This religion of trust in God became the common root of Judaism, the religion of hope; Christianity, the religion of love; and Islam, the religion of faith. Judaism is based on the belief that God has spoken to Israel, his chosen people; Christianity has seen the word of Christ Jesus as the messianic fulfillment of its predecessor, Judaism. Islam, however, has defined itself from the outset as superseding its twin forebears by returning to the original religion of Abraham.<sup>48</sup>

The term 'Abrahamic religions' however implies a reference to history which points to the fact that Judaism, Christianity and Islam share a common history which distinguishes them from other monotheistic religion such as Zoroastrianism. Thus, on the basis of this shared history, the concept of 'Abrahamic religions' identifies that the religions are related to each other. This kinship has a biological dimension which is why Jewish believers often emphasize Abraham as their ancestor with reference to their being descended from his son Isaac while many Muslims regard Abraham as their ancestor through his oldest son Ishmael. At the same time, this kinship also has a spiritual dimension, which is primarily emphasized by Christians and Muslims when they speak of Abraham as the righteous believer as such.<sup>49</sup>

Since its advent, Islam has been the world religion closest to Christianity in space and time. The self-perception of Islam as a reform re-establishing the religion of Abraham lends support to a view of the relationship between Islam and early

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<sup>47</sup> Michael A Signer "Abraham" in *A Dictionary of Jewish- Christian Relations* Ed by Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.2.

<sup>48</sup> Hans Kung and Jurgen Moltmann, *Islam: A Challenge for Christianity* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1994), p.106.

<sup>49</sup> Erik Borgman and Pim Valkenberg, *Concilium Islam and Enlightenment: New Issues* (London: SCM Press, Ltd, 2005), p.103-104.

Christianity that lacks exact historical proof but rest on solid ground of common origin.<sup>50</sup>

Accordingly, Cornelius Omonokhua in his book: "Dialogue in context" argues from the common origin of Christians and Muslims that

If the Christians and Muslims really have a common origin, it means that they have every reason to dialogue in love and live together in peace and unity as a family. The contrary will make Abraham sad and weep in heaven. This belief in the one family of Abraham must have enabled the Abyssinian Monks and the Christians welcome, accommodate, and protect Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) followers. This encounter must have given rise to some dialogue of life and dialogue of theological exchange. The Holy Prophet while on a caravan trip with Khadija also encountered the Abyssinian monks who were very hospitable to them.<sup>51</sup>

### **Common Theological Themes Shared by Christians and Muslims**

There are common theological themes that need to be well understood and shared in the dialogue between Christians and Muslims in order to build on the foundations of existing coalitions and cooperation among Christians and Muslims working together.

Christianity and Islam find their roots in a common Origin of biblical Judaism and place great importance on the Torah or Pentateuch. They shared common Patriarch in Abraham "sons of Abraham." Christianity and Islam share the theological theme of belief in a common God. Thus, both are monotheistic religions and ascribe attributes to the One and Only God including Creator, Sustainer, Ultimate Judge, Merciful and Compassionate; The One Only God willing to intervene in man's history for the ideals of peace, justice and harmony.<sup>52</sup>

There is the common theological belief such as a Divine command to spread their faith to the entire world; and common belief if the Virgin Birth of Jesus and high

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<sup>50</sup> Hans Kung and Jurgen Moltmann, *Concilium Islam: A Challenge for Christianity* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1994), p.107.

<sup>51</sup> Cornelius Omonokha, op.cit., p.20.

<sup>52</sup> Bill Baker, op.cit. p. 99-100.

esteem for Mary (*Maryam*). Christianity and Islam believe in common eschatology that the world and human life will end with the consummation of the ages and Jesus Christ will return in what both call "the last day" or "second coming." They also held the common belief in a Last Judgment when all who have lived will stand in judgment to answer for their deeds. Christians and Muslims believe in the Resurrection from the dead and after life in heaven (paradise) or Hell (fire).<sup>53</sup>

### **The Patriarch Abraham as the Model of Dialogue**

From the above exegesis of Gn.13:5-9, one would observed that the patriarch Abraham being a man of peace was able to dialogue with Lot in order to avoid any strife between them and their herdsmen. Thus: "Let there be no strife between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine," reveals Abram's personal relationship with Lot. Abraham and Lot were kinsmen, and between them there was the further bond of a long-shared experience. It would be easy to understand that Abraham, being the sort of man he was, wanted to prevent any strife with Lot and would go a long way to avoid it.

Abram, in his God-given wisdom said, "Let us not have any of this. We are brethren, so do not let this become an issue between us. Let us calmly settle the matter now before it breaks out in open conflict." Then Abram did a magnificent, God-honoring thing; he gave up his own rights without a murmur. He was the older man of the two and the acknowledged leader, Lot's superior in every way. Yet he said to him. "Lot, you take the first choice, I will give up my right to first choice. If you want to go this way, I will go that way."<sup>54</sup> This is a characteristic of a man of peaceful dialogue. Abraham was a man of understanding, affirmation and sharing.

Thus, the way of mutual understanding is an essential condition of any true dialogue. It is the willingness to listen to the partner and allowing the other to define his terms rather than ours. The patriarch Abraham understood the terms and conditions of true dialogue. He knew understanding the terms and condition of the thought of Lot was necessary for peace; thus, he affirmed the Lot's condition, and proposed separation from each other or sharing of the land.

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<sup>53</sup> Bill Baker, op.cit.

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/genesis/letting-god-choose>

Again, the model presented by Abraham for dialogue is worth emulating as viewed from his pattern of presentation in his dialogue with God in Gen.18-19. He also gave the first choice to God to decide what the best option is: "Would, he asked, the presence in it of fifty, down to forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, to the point that only ten righteous suffice to avert destruction." Abraham, a man of peace would hardly impose himself or conditions on the other. He was a man of tolerance who conquered the self ego in order to live for the good of the other and community as a whole.

The part of Abraham in dialogue is very exemplary. His role could be interpreted and applied to areas of interfaith dialogue and intercultural dialogue as in the case study of Muslims and Christians in the Middle East, Africa and especially in the Northern part of Nigeria. In Nigeria, especially in the Northern part, the crisis or conflict between Christians and Muslims could be seen as the conflict between brothers in the same family or culture. Christians and Muslims are often brothers of the same parents or relatives that could be liken to the relationship between Abraham and Lot. They argue and fight over religious doctrines and teachings, over politics, economy, landed properties and territories that could even results in taking up arms and sword against each other. The patriarch Abraham serves as a role model for Christians and Muslims.

### **The Relation of the Catholic Church to Islam Today**

The Catholic Church is not unaware of the differences, the conflicts and the deadly enmities which have existed throughout the centuries between Christians and Muslims especially in Africa, the Middle East and Europe. With the advent of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church have been open to dialogue with lay down guidelines in seeking to promote better understanding, and, laying the emphasis on what we have in common in order to aid constructive dialogue between people of all religions.<sup>55</sup>

The Second Vatican Council expressed in the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions "*Nostra Aetate*" its high esteem for "what in those religions is true and holy." With regard to Judaism the Council Fathers had inserted the reference to Abraham into the text. Christians are "spiritually

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<sup>55</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church: Pontifical council for Justice and Peace (Nairobi: Paulines Publication Africa, 2004), p. 10.



connected with Abraham's tribe" because they are Abraham's sons and daughters "regarding faith" (Gal 3.7). The Catholic Church in her relationship with Islam has great respect for the monotheistic faith in the God of Abraham:

The Church has also a high regards for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they worship Jesus as prophet, his virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of Judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-giving and fasting (*Nostra Aetate*, 3).<sup>56</sup>

The work of the Secretariat with regards to Islam is based on a spirit of dialogue, openness and respect. The Secretariat organizes meetings and encourages the establishment of Episcopal commissions responsible for dialogue with Islam and Muslim communities. There are regional and state meetings held to study the possibilities of dialogue with the largest non-Christians faith. These meetings have not been without short-comings, tensions, and so on.

The first stage in dialogue is to know one another and this dialogue has hardly begun. In West Africa, for example, various Episcopal commissions concerned with Christian-Muslim relations meet every three years to plan and evaluate their activities. "Tools of dialogue" are prepared to remove ignorance on the part of both Christians and Muslims, of the basis of the other's religious life. It is this ignorance which has caused such lack of understanding and intolerance throughout centuries.<sup>57</sup> Thus, religious dialogue will be a tool for understanding the order in order to be better understood by him and the positive result will be a deepening of one's own faith and the demand for a more evangelical Christian life. True dialogue is unbiased.

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<sup>56</sup> Austin Flannery, O.P., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (Mumbai: St.Paul's Publication, 1975), p. 654.

<sup>57</sup> Medard Kayitakibga, *Christian Presence and Witness in Relation to Muslim Neighbor*(Kenya: Mombasa Conference, 1979), p.25.

### **Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Any Possibility?**

Muslim-Christian dialogue or Christian-Muslim dialogue dates back to the rise of Islam in the seventh century. Both traditions are rooted in the monotheism of the patriarch Abraham, Muslims and Christians share a common heritage. For more than fourteen centuries these communities of faith have been linked by their theological understandings and by geographical proximity. The history of Muslim-Christian interaction includes periods of great tension, hostility, and open war as well as times of uneasy toleration, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation.

Several developments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries set the stage for contemporary Muslim-Christian dialogue. The dialogue movement began during the 1950s when the WCC and the Vatican organized a number of meetings between Christian leaders and representatives of other religious traditions. These initial efforts resulted in the formation of new institutions. In 1964, toward the end of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI established a Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions to study religious traditions, provide resources, and promote interreligious dialogue through education and by facilitating local efforts by Catholics. Several major documents adopted at Vatican II (1962–1965) focused on interfaith relations.<sup>58</sup>

The gap between Christians and Muslims is becoming smaller as each is more tolerant towards the other. Thus, Muslims feel closer to Christians than to Jews and the Idol worshippers and atheists. The Qur'an in a way encourages the possibility of dialogue:

“Thou wilt find the most vehement in hostility to those who are Muslims (to be) the Jews and the Idolaters. And thou wilt find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe; those who say: Lo! We are Christians. This is because there are among them priests and monks (i.e. persons entirely devoted to the service of God as are the Muslims) and because they are not proud” (Sura.5:V82).

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<sup>58</sup> <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0567>

The most visible Christian leader during the last quarter of the twentieth century, Pope John Paul II, was a strong advocate for the new approach to interfaith relations. During his papacy (1978–2005), John Paul II met with leaders from various religions and was the first pope to visit a mosque (in Damascus in 2001). The spirit of his approach to Islam is evident in his 1985 speech delivered to over 80,000 Muslims at a soccer stadium in Casablanca:

"We believe in the same God, the one God, the Living God who created the world ... In a world which desires unity and peace, but experiences a thousand tensions and conflicts, should not believers come together? Dialogue between Christians and Muslims is today more urgent than ever. It flows from fidelity to God. Too often in the past, we have opposed each other in polemics and wars. I believe that today God invites us to change old practices. We must respect each other and we must stimulate each other in good works on the path to righteousness."<sup>59</sup>

The Qur'an tells Muslims to find a common word between them and other believers (Q. 3.64) and states: 'Our God and your God are one and the same' (Q. 29.46). In other words, the invitation to embrace Christianity does not contradict the common faith ('a common word'). Referring to this phrase from the Qur'an, a large group of Muslim leaders have recently urged Christians and Muslims to recognize the fact that we all obey the same command to love God and one's neighbor.<sup>60</sup>

There have been many possibilities for dialogue between Christian and Muslims rooted in an increasingly pluralistic and interdependent world. Living together brings blessings but also problems; pluralism can be a dynamic and enriching process but it can also be intrusive and destabilizing. Muslims and Christian have a spiritual and moral duty to come together and relate to each other in mutual respect for each other's religious convictions and commitments. Thus, both religion adherents are to accept a common God-given responsibility to work for peace and justice.

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<sup>59</sup> Bill Baker, *More In Common Than You Think: The Bridge Between Islam and Christianity* (USA: Defenders Publication, 1998), p.100.

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.parliamentofreligions.org/content/sharing-our-paradoxes-steps-dialogue-between-christians-and-muslims>

Both religious faithful should draw upon the riches of the Scripture, doctrines and traditions in promoting good relationship with each other. However, it is good to be aware of the suspicions, confusion and syncretism which still surround dialogue in the minds of some Christians and Muslims especially in attempts to worship together. The process of dialogue calls for patience, generosity and courage; we should never appear to be imposing the claims of dialogue. Nevertheless, Christians and Muslims should recognize the necessity for consultation and cooperation in order to ease tensions, for example concerned with human right.<sup>61</sup> Both adherents should imitate the Patriarch Abraham in overcoming stereotypes, biasness, ignorance, misunderstandings and the falsifications and caricatures of each other's faith which appear in the mass media, textbooks etc.

The possibility of dialogue between Christians and Muslims in the twenty-first century is still very hopeful in all the various level both in religions, local, international, cultural and interfaith, etc., as particular efforts are made to stimulate the enthusiasm about improving understanding, affirmation, sharing and relating to one another as shown by some of the younger generation.

For example in Africa and especially Nigeria, the quest for dialogue between Christians and Muslims has not been too rosy because of the long-standing conflict and violence. Nigeria have gone through many faces of violence, slavery and colonialism to the extent that the value of trust has been replaced with prejudice, preconception and mutual suspicions. But in spite of the present challenges in Nigeria, there are areas where dialogue has worked. In the aspect of dialogue of life: many Muslims and Christians live in the same family and household, attend the same school and work together in the same office and other places of work. These are avenues and occasion for some Nigerians to share life together in love and peaceful coexistence.

Also, dialogue between Muslims and Christians have been successful in area of social engagement where people in different life situations, like ceremonies, trade and even join together to fight injustice and diseases. This collaboration between Christians and Muslims has promoted the integral development and liberation of many Nigerians. Again, there has been dialogue of theological

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<sup>61</sup> Medard Kayitakibga, *Christian Presence and Witness in Relation to Muslim Neighbor*(Kenya: Mombasa Conference, 1979), p.84.

exchange where scholars go beyond the study of their theology to the study of the theology of the other.<sup>62</sup>

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

Whilst dialogue with all faith is highly desirable, there is a special relationship between Christianity, Judaism and Islam. All three of these religions see themselves in a common relationship to Abraham, the father of the faithful and friend of God. Moreover these faiths, which have been fiercely antagonistic to one another, have a particular responsibility for bringing about a fresh, constructive relationship which can contribute to the well-being of the human family, and the peace of the world, particularly in the Middle East and Africa where there is often crisis.

There are some objections and questions that seek answers, even as Christianity and Islam continue to claim the two fastest growing religions in the world. Men and women, both Christian and Muslim, are now asking the question, must these two religions collide? Is there no common ground between them? Many Muslims are taught that Christianity seeks to eliminate Islam; that Christians have no knowledge and understanding of their faith; that Christians condemn Islam, and holds the teachings of Islamic Fundamentalism responsible for many if not all the terrorist activities throughout the 21th Century.

On the other hand, many Christians are taught that Islam teaches the worship of a false God; that Islam was and still spread her doctrines and teachings by force and terror; that all Muslims are Arabs that oppose the essential policies of democracy. Millions of Christians have been taught that Islam is an intolerant religion, forbidding the free choice and practice of any other religion except Islam. Thus, great majority have continued to teach, repeat and believe the distortions and prejudices created centuries ago by European civilization which regarded Islam as the traditional enemy.

As one who has lived, studied and interacted with Muslim believers for some years, I would like to note, here, that Abraham is a very important model among Christians and Muslims for building the bridges of dialogues, peace and understanding among adherents of Islam and Christianity, if both religion

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<sup>62</sup> Cornelius Omonokhua, *op.cit.*, p.13-14.

adherents would imitate the peace character of Abraham. Dialogue is the work of tolerance, patient love and an expression of the ministry of reconciliation. It involves understanding, affirmation and sharing.

The patriarch Abraham understood Lot, affirmed his conditions and shared the land between them. Christians and Muslims are often ignorant of the mutual understanding of one another, even when they think that they possess some knowledge of the other religion. The first need is for objective information on both sides concerning all levels of human spiritual experience. This objective information must come through mutual understanding and acceptance of each other for the discovery not only of who they are, but also of what they would like to become. Hence, it is the duty of the Christians to investigate the Islamic culture, theology and mystical teachings, even as Muslims should learn from Christians the content of their culture, and how their theology has developed. Gradually, each side should be able to put themselves in the place of the other. It would be ideal if Muslims would finally be capable of presenting Christianity in such a way that Christians would recognize themselves completely, and if Christians could also give a picture of Islam in which Muslims would recognize themselves perfectly.<sup>63</sup>

The role of Abraham in dialogue is extensive and could be seen as a model of peaceful dialogue especially for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East and Africa, especially for Nigerian Christians and Muslim.

The story of Abraham and Lot in the Book of Genesis depicts how separation can be used to resolve conflict or dispute among men, groups or religions. Their dispute ended in a peaceful way, in which Abraham concedes a handful piece of the Promised Land, which belongs to him, in order to resolve the conflict peacefully.<sup>64</sup> Whenever strife develops between kinsmen, it always has the result of cutting off your nose to spite your face. Christians should not hurt their Muslim brothers in Abraham instead understanding, affirmation and if possible sharing could be better ways to peaceful dialogue.

I hope, feel, and trust that there are sufficient common grounds for Muslims and Christians to meet, understand each other, affirm each other, share between each

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<sup>63</sup> Maurice Borrmans, *op.cit.* p.32.

<sup>64</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham\\_and\\_Lot%27s\\_conflict](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_and_Lot%27s_conflict)

other, join hands with each other and move together in the Path of Truth, Peace, and Justice. Both should look to Abraham as Sons and draw strength from his peaceful personality in order to surmount their difference and unite in faiths, understanding, affirmation and dialogue bringing each other closer. I propose Abraham as a worthy model of dialogue for Christians and Muslim in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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