

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN NIGERIA: AREAS OF CONVERGENCES FOR PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

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Abstract

The paper examines the constitutional nature of Nigeria as a secular state where the citizens are either Muslims, Christians, or adherents of African Religion. But the concern of this paper has to do with the relations that exist between Christians and Muslims being the larger proportion of the three officially recognized religions in the country, influencing the thinking and values of a great percentage of Nigerians. The methods employed are historical, descriptive, and phenomenological. Findings revealed that, although, notable scholars have written extensively on Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria from different perspectives all aimed at promoting good inter-faith relations for peaceful coexistence among all and sundry regardless of religious affiliations. Conferences on inter-religious dialogue have been held on several occasions, but despite all these moves to promote good Christian-Muslim relations and the areas of convergences of these religions, the nation has continued to witness cases of untold crises that have today led to mistrust, suspicion, and fear between the adherents of the two prominent faiths. It is on this premise that the paper stressed selected theological doctrines common to the two religions which can be employed to bring about good neighborliness, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence, especially among the adherents of Islam and Christianity. The historical development of each of these religions is also exploited. The paper concludes that religious leaders, instructors, Government, ecumenical movements, and other stakeholders in religious matters should endeavor to be more committed to the truth claim of religion.

Keywords: Christianity, Islam, Cordiality, Peaceful Coexistence.

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INTRODUCTION

It has been a protracted and difficult relationship between the Christian and Muslim civilizations. The balance of power has fluctuated over the centuries in a pendulum-like manner; at times it appears that the Muslim community has taken the initiative, with the Christian world simply being forced to respond to events outside of itself, while at other times it appears that Muslims have been forced to respond to Christian challenges in various ways (Goddard 2000). Christian and Muslim people have interacted with one another throughout Nigeria's pre- and post-Independence history. Additionally, there have been crises and disputes between the two communities. Therefore, it is important to look for opportunities for peaceful interaction and communication between followers of Nigeria's two most popular religions, Christianity and Islam. As a strong human drive, religion has a contradictory impact on society since it simultaneously plays a major role in influencing the spiritual, sociopolitical, and economic well-being of millions of people while also catalyzing conflict. The tragic interreligious war in Nigeria calls into question the notion that Islam and Christianity are peaceful religions. For instance, Tamer (2020) explores the history, meaning, and application of the term "peace" in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It reveals the similarities and distinctions among the three monotheistic faiths as well as the various discussions of peace that have taken place within each of these three traditions.

Many books have been written on the history of Christian-Muslim relations, their engagements in Africa as well as in the field of dialogue (Thomas 2017; Goddard 2000; Thomas and Mallett 2010; Congress and Hock 2004). These days, several researchers focus on the crisis and conflicts between these two religions (Salawu 2010; Ojo and Lateju 2010; Çancı and Odukoya 2016). It is on this note that it becomes imperative to realize that matters relating to religion are issues that should be handled with care considering the constitutional nature of Nigeria as a multi-religious state, which allows every citizen to practice a religion of his or her choice. With this constitutional provision, places of worship, especially Churches and Mosques exist in every nook and cranny of the country, and those that have the privilege to hold key posts in the affair of the nation also practice either of these religions. This view, therefore, connotes that, Islam and Christianity are two of the major religions that influence the thinking and values of a great percentage of the population of the country, but the religious situation in the country today calls for the immediate and urgent need for dialogue that would lead to peaceful coexistence among all and sundry. This is because.

Worshippers of God in whatever form, are generally viewed belong to one family of God, and should, as a result, promote brotherly love, and mutual kindness towards one another. In fact, they are expected to put hands together for the betterment of the community in which they live. But this is not always the case in most parts of the world, and Nigeria in particular (S. A. Fatokun 2013, 315).

Similarly, events in the country have also proven that many adherents of Islam and Christianity are very intolerant as shown in the various cases of inter and intra-religious crises, which have for decades affected Nigerian developments negatively. These two religions that are expected to proclaim and project the love and kindness of God are frequently at war with one another. This is further made evident in the charter of Muslim-Christian dialogue, which states that:

Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have risen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred council now pleads with all to forget the past and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding, for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice, and moral values (Imo 1993, 27).

It is against this background that we try to examine the areas of convergences in these religions that could be employed to bring about mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence among the citizens. At this juncture, we must examine the historical developments of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria.

CHRISTIANITY

The Portuguese were the first to introduce Christianity to Nigeria in the fifteenth century, but their attempts failed because they were mainly interested in politics and commerce (Olayiwola 1984, 34). Thus Christianity failed to take root in Nigeria until about four centuries later (Farounbi 1997, 13) precisely during the nineteenth-century missionary endeavors of the Methodist and the Church Missionary Societies from Europe. It is one of the major religions in the world founded through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ some two thousand years ago. The religion believes very strongly in God as the Father Almighty, Jesus Christ as the Savior of mankind, the Holy Spirit as the sanctifier of mankind, the immaculate conception of Jesus Christ, and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Encyclopedia of Religions and Ethics defines Christianity as “an ethical, historical, universal, monotheistic, redemptive religion in which the relation of God and man is mediated by the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ” (J. Hastings (ed.) 2000, 655). It further teaches that God is Almighty and Righteous, and above all “God is Love”. The creation of the world out of nothing, and that of humans were expressions of that love. This classic statement was expressed in the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount “Look at birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they”? (Matthew 6: 26). This teaching of love is also expressed in the Islamic religion.

ISLAM

Islam is an Arabic word meaning submission. It came into Nigeria through the Sahara (North) (Adiele 1993, 199). It is the name given to the religion founded by Prophet Muhammed (S.A.W), in AD 600, an Arab born in Mecca. In the words of Adewale, “Islam believes in the existence and power of God. Everything a Muslim does is directed by God. Muslim use the Arabic name for God which is Allah (Adewale 1993, 255). Prophet Muhammed’s (S.A.W) belief was that he had been sent to warn and guide the people of the world; and call them to worship God, focusing on the idea that, there is only one God, and he Muhammad (S.A.W) is His messenger. Islam considered one of the world’s ‘largest religions has large followership in the Middle East, North Africa, Pakistan, etc. Mecca and Medina are the sacred cities of Islam. Generally, the Islamic religion teaches about the absolute unity and power of God, the Creator of the entire universe who is also kind, just, and merciful and wishes man to repent and purify himself on earth for a better life in paradise after death. It disapproves of games of chance, and the consumption of pork and alcohol. It forbids lying, stealing, adultery, and murder. It teaches

important virtues of right and wrong, and that life on earth is a period of testing and preparation for the life to come as death is the gate to eternal life, but there would be a day of judgement when the good would be separated from the evil and the latter would be sent to hell.

AREAS OF CONVERGENCES FOR PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

The need for peaceful coexistence becomes very germane in a secular state like Nigeria arising from her history of diverse religious crises. Peace is synonymous with tranquility which every society desires. It is a situation that is free from violence, commotion, or disorder. Therefore, Peaceful coexistence is the ability to live amicably with one another without friction, regardless of religious affiliation. Wambutda (2012) defines it as “equal partners working harmoniously in a system for a noble cause” (p. 10). Generally speaking, the two religions have many things in common, that should call for peaceful co-existence. There are areas of belief they both shared. According to Dr. Mahamudu Bawumia, the current Vice President of Ghana in a lecture to mark the Ghanaian National Chief Imam’s 100th Birthday; he stressed the areas of cordiality between Christians and Muslims which should be food for thought to adherents of the two religions, Islam and Christianity, globally. In his lecture, he opined as follows:

Many people don’t realize that between Muslims and Christians, there is more that unites us than divides us. What’s more, we worship the same God, Allah, the God of Abraham, the God Moses, the God of Isaac, and the God of David. Same God we all worship. We all believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. As the two religions, we both believe that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. We reverence Mary so much that she is the only female who is mentioned directly by name in the Quran, the only female. And you have a whole chapter in the Quran Surat Mariam which is dedicated to the virgin Mary. Indeed, there are more mentions of Mary in the Holy Quran than in the whole New Testament, we all believe in the miracles of Jesus Christ. We believed as Muslims, He talked when He was in the cradle. We believe in the miracles He performed to give sight to the blind and so on. As Muslims and Christians, we all believe that Jesus will come back before the day of judgement to defeat the false prophets or the anti-Christ. We all shared that common belief. But what is also more important is that the Prophet Mohammed (SAW), told all of us as Muslims that among all the faiths that we have, we as Muslims should be close to the Christians, that is what he told us, that we as Muslims should be closest to the Christians because they are good people. So, today, if you are a Muslim, and you say you don’t like Christians, it means you don’t understand Islam. And if you are a Christian, and you say you don’t like Muslims, then you don’t understand Christianity. There is more that unites us as the two religions than divides us. There is so much more. But we allow people like terrorists to hide under the cloak of religion to try to divide us (Youtube.com 2019). From the discussion above, it could be said that Christianity and Islam shared so many things in common. They are both revealed religions. Both religions are missionary to the core (Boer 2009, 8002:106). Also, Quadri in supporting the aforementioned was of the view that; “the Quran contains much information about the life of Jesus” (Quadri 2012, 32).

Other areas of convergences that could be employed for peaceful coexistence are belief in the oneness of God, in life after death, the day of judgment, and the fall of man because of disobedience.

The Holy Bible and the Glorious Quran gave us very important and similar information about these concepts. For instance, the Holy Bible in the following biblical passages gave the attributes of God, as explained by Abashiya and Ulea:

1. **There is only One God.** Deuteronomy 6:4- “O Israel: The Lord our God, The Lord is one.”
2. **God is Spirit.** John 4:24- “God is Spirit, and His worshippers must worship in spirit and truth.”
3. **He is the Divine Creator.** Genesis 1:1- “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”
4. **He is forgiving:** 1 John 1:9- “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all our unrighteousness.”
5. **He is Omnipresent:** Psalm 139:7-8, “Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go to the heavens, you are there, if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.”
6. **He is Omniscient:** Psalm 147:5- “Great is our Lord and mighty in power; His understanding has no limit.”
7. **He is Omnipotent:** 1Chronicle 29:11- “Yours O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours O Lord is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all”
8. **God is Love-** 1 John 4:8- “Whoever does not love, does not know God, because God is love.” (Abashiya and Ulea 2009, 13–14).

Similarly, in the glorious Quran, God is spoken of with the following salient information:

1. **There is only one God-** Sura 2:163- “Your God is one God; there is no God save Him, the Beneficent, the Merciful.”
2. **He is the Creator.** Sura 2:29- “He it is who created for you all that is in the earth. Then turned He to heaven and fashioned it as seven heavens. And He is the knower of all things.
3. **He created the Heavens and the Earth in Six Days.** Sura 7: 54-“Lo! Your God is Allah, who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then mounted He the Throne.”
4. **He is Loving.** Sura 11:90- “Ask pardon of your Lord and then turn unto Him, Lo; my Lord is Merciful, Loving”
5. **He is forgiving:** Sura 5:74, says “Will they not rather turn unto Allah and seek forgiveness of Him? Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.”
6. **He is Omnipresent:** Sura 2:115- “Unto Allah belong the East and the West, and whithersoever ye turn, there is Allah’s countenance. Lo! Allah is All-Embracing, All-Knowing.”
7. **He is Omniscient:** Sura 6:59-“And with Him are the keys of the invisible. None but He knoweth them. And He knoweth what is in the land and the sea. Not a leaf falleth but He knoweth it, not a grain amid the darkness of the earth, naught of wet or dry but in a clear record.”

8. **He is Omnipotent:** Sura 3:26- “O Allah; Owner of Sovereignty; Thou giveth Sovereignty unto whom Thou wilt, and Thou withdrawest Sovereignty from whom Thou wilt. Thou exaltest whom Thou wilt and abasest whom Thou wilt. In thy hand is the good. Lo! Thou can do all things.” (Abashiya and Ulea 2009, 22–24).

Emphasizing the above attributes of God as taught by Christianity and Islam, it is evidenced that theological issues like the love of God and other believers, and immortality, are major themes common to the two religions. These themes have assisted believers to live a life of absolute trust in the sovereignty of God. In periods of national crises, leaders and adherents of these religions have always looked to God in prayers for help and solutions. For instance, during the last presidential election, leaders of the two religions impressed their members in churches and mosques to pray to God for the peaceful conduct of the election and a smooth transition. All these are indications that individual groups in the two religions have reliance on God as the only one who can save Nigeria.

In addition, it is not uncommon to see that Muslims and Christian communities co-exist in villages and towns, government, and private parastatals, and in political associations where they work, eat, drink and interact together. Some families have Christians and Muslims as brothers and sisters living under the same roof. In most cases, we have seen Christians marrying Muslims, and vice versa. Though, on this note findings have shown that some fanatical Christian or Muslim parents have always opposed such inter-religious marriage, which according to Fatokun;

often degenerate into a “children-parents clash” as some children in love in defiance of parental opposition proceed to marriage. Some parents even go as far as disowning their children for failure to comply with their dictate (S. A. Fatokun 2013, 317).

Concerning the above view of Fatokun, it is my opinion that when there are occasions for such inter-marriages, provided the couples love one another dearly, parents should not be barriers, but shower them with prayers and blessings.

Additionally, events have also revealed that Islam and Christianity teach tolerance, hospitality, and good neighborliness regardless of religious differences. This is expressed during social functions or festival periods where we have an exchange of gifts, and food items. The kind of relationship that exists between them further explained the concept of salt which Jesus spoke about in Matthew 5:13-14; “you are the salt of the earth”. This ought to be the position of Christians among their neighbors in the world. The Holy Quran as well teaches this concept in Quran 32:19 which says “But as for those who believe and do good works, for them are the gardens of Retreat.” here it urges one to do well and refrain from evil practices.

Similarly, believers of the two religions are admonished to live in peace with all men. For instance, Psalm 34:14, says; “Turn from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.” Romans 12:18, also declares; “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Also, the Glorious Quran in Sura 8:61; “And if they incline to peace, incline thine also to it, and trust in Allah. Lo! He is the Hearer, the Knower.” Sura 9:26, also declared, “Then Allah sent His peace of reassurance down upon His messenger and the believers and sent down hosts ye could not see and punished those who disbelieved. Such is the reward of disbelievers.”

Furthermore, teachings about the dignity of labour and discouraging harvesting where one has not planted are adequately explained in the two glorious books. For instance, Paul in

Thessalonians 3:6-13 warned that: ‘If anyone will not work, let him not eat’. On the other hand, the Quran too condemns seeking wealth illegitimately. It condemns the vanity of this world as the Quran puts it in Quran 57:20: “The life of this world is but a matter of illusion’.

In line with this is the concept of God judging all men on the last day taught by the two religions. To the Muslims, the Quran 23:117 mentioned the idea of a man appearing before Allah as a judge. And in various places, God is called the avenger. Likewise, among Christians, God is called the Judge. In Romans 2:16, the apostle Paul talked about the day when God shall judge the secret of man by Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it is apparent that none of these religions preach violence. They are consistent in encouraging peaceful co-existence and harmonious living in society. This is because, evidence abounds that in this kind of social structure and dispensation, adherents of the different faiths, without doubt, relate with one another in every aspect of life socially, economically, and politically. Thus, they should mutually and reciprocally interact well to further be of benefit one another and improve individual and national productivity. This is because we are all citizens of the same country. We have no other nation we can call our own, hence the need to protect and guide our common heritage and identity.

Similarly, arising from, several attempts have been made by individuals and governments in the past as far back as 1958, 1974, and 1978, on official and unofficial levels to promote dialogue. For instance, it was recorded that in December 1978, an official attempt at the dialogue was made when at Jos;

Under the auspices of the National Catholic Bishops Conference, Chukwulozie organized a dialogue meeting at a national level. In the meeting, it was advocated that Christian-Muslim committees in every state in the country should be set up. Such committees were never created, and even where they had existed, like the Jos, at the time of this dialogue meeting, the committees were dormant (Ottuh, Ottuh, and Aitufe 2014, 60).

The above is an indication that some Muslims and Christians have genuine motives and good intentions to promote dialogue. Why it is also germane for us in a secular nation to promote peaceful co-existence is that the three officially recognized religions in Nigeria hold God in very high esteem above any creature. No wonder it was opined that;

Whether in the shrine, the mosque, or the church, the recognized final arbiter who accepts all prayers and supplications made in each of the places of worship is God. It does not matter then what ways or methods are employed to reach the omnipotent God, long as the ways or methods do not infringe on the right of others (Balogun 2012, 4).

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN NIGERIA TODAY

Histories of religious interaction between adherents of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria today have not been encouraging despite their diverse areas of convergences. Originally, none of these religions preach violence going on their theological concepts, but the present situation is that; Today, Muslim-Christian relations have been affected by mistrust, suspicion, and fear. There have been cases of religious war, bitterness, destruction, and killings. This should not be so. Instead of cooperating for their common good, Muslims and Christians have been estranged and alienated from one another (Akande 2016, 140).

Unfortunately, the situation described above has led to unfortunate incidences, especially in places like Kaduna, Zamfara, Bauchi, and Plateau States, to mention but a few. In the words of Hans Kung, quoted by Gwamna; he says “there is no peace among nations and within nations unless there is peace among religions” (Akinwumi 2021, 166). One is therefore quick to mention that, in Nigeria today, the expected peace among adherents of the different religions is yet to be attained because most Christians and Muslims seem to dwell more on their areas of divergence than those theological concepts and ideas that unite them. However, despite these suspicions and lack of cooperation for peaceful coexistence among the adherents of diverse faiths, it should be borne in the minds of all and sundry regardless of religious affiliation, the need to promote harmony and peaceful coexistence as contained in the prayerful words of the last stanza of Nigerian National Anthem that, “In love and honesty to grow, And living just and true. Great lofty heights attain. To build a nation where peace and justice shall reign” (Adiele 1993, 203).

Similarly, the statement in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria that, “the Government of the Federation or a State shall not adopt any religion as a State Religion” is intended for all religious groups or adherents to understand the secular nature of Nigeria, and work towards peace (Yesufu 2016).

CONCLUSION

Attempts have been made in this paper to examine the areas of convergence that exist between the two religions of the Book in Nigeria, that is Islam and Christianity. These areas have been carefully explored as reference points that could be employed to bring about peaceful existence among the Christians and Muslims of Nigeria, which in turn can immensely contribute to the nation’s religious, socio-economic, and political development.

To achieve this, it is suggested among others that; adherents of each faith should think more of what brings them together by acknowledging and recognizing the rights of individuals to their philosophies of life and letting them live. There should be adequate respect for the beliefs and doctrines of the adherents of other’s religions. Similarly, the educational system at all levels should be employed to promote religious peace and harmony as stressed in the following words.

Religious tolerance should be taught right from the home to the school at all levels of our education system. The syllabus should be designed in such a way that Christian students can offer some courses in Islamic studies, African religion, and vice versa. The religious instructors, teachers, and lecturers should be well-informed and have some measure of commitment to the truth claims of religion (Akande 2016, 146).

Above all, it has been well established in Islam and Christianity that God is One. This common and strong belief should propel individual adherents of these faiths to peaceful and harmonious living as we conclude in the words of Akande; “Let Christians invite Muslim families into their homes for meals and vice versa. Let there be discussions about Abraham, Noah, Jonah, Moses, the Psalms, and the Gospels, because all are mentioned in the Quran and are safe subjects” (Akande 2016, 146).

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