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INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

Inter-religious dialogue has gained prominence in Nigeria against the backdrop of culture and religious plurality cum tools violence, loss of life, vandalism, and disruption of peaceful co-existence in the nation. Huge resources have been invested into various forms of inter-religious dialogue. However, inter-religious dialogue has proved quasi-effective due to misuse, dishonest, and lack of promoting mutuality in a religiously plural society. The cycle of killings continuous unabated with its corresponding effect on political and economic situations. This study, therefore, looks at the imperatives of inter-religious dialogue and its role in promoting peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. The study relied on secondary data drawn from an airy of published and unpublished materials relevant to the study. These include books, journals, magazines, conference Papers, Encyclopedias, News Paper and the Internet. The results of findings revealed that inter-religious dialogue is a panacea to inter-religious crisis in the Nigeria society. The study concludes that forging inter-religious peaceful co-existence through dialogue demands a lot of courage, sincerity of purpose and commitment. The study recommended that, there should be sincerity of purpose among stake holders in inter-religious dialogue. Moreso, religious leader's leader should sensitize peaceful co-existence.

Keywords: Dialogue, Inter-religious dialogue, Peaceful Co-existence.

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Introduction

This study looks at the imperatives of inter-religious dialogue and its role in promoting peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. The need for inter-religious dialogue has become more imperative and pertinent due to incessant religious conflicts in Nigeria. An understanding of the concept of dialogue and its fundamental components and guidelines are very germane to religious peace in Nigeria. Writing on this theme, El-miskin notes that "It is a civilized vogue to resist to dialogue in order to promote mutual cordiality. (El-Miskin, 1995). El-Miskin further observed that the promotion of dialogue is also an enlightened option adopted by a select group of countries and organizations around the world in Europe, the Americans, and Middle East (El-Miskin, 1995). Inter-religious dialogue has become a major feature in Indonesia, Sudan, and Nigeria. When the Society for Inter-Religious Dialogue (SIDA) was formed in zoo in Indonesia, it notes:

We were bound together by a shared realization of the imperative for dialogue, which saw as perhaps the most important imperative of the future. We are convinces that due to the frenetic flow of modern communication, dialogue between religious had become more important than before and would become an undesirable part of each religion and faith in the coming millennium (An Experiment Named Media,3).

The founding of SIDA is significant given the fact that Indonesia has the largest Muslim Population in the world. (Tanja, 1993) the World Council of Churches today has spearheaded the inter-religious dialogue of Christians and other religious such as Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism and others.

The concept of Dialogue

The Oxford Advances Learners Dictionary defines "dialogue" 'as a Conversation'. It is a formal discussion between two groups or countries especially when they are trying to solve a problem from



the dictionary definition, dialogue involves people who are engaged in talking. It is organized and aimed at solving a problem in order to end a disagreement discord or conflict. Dialogue could be the founding of SIDA is significant given the fact that Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. (Tanja, 1993) the world council of churches today has spearheaded the inter-religious dialogue of Christians and other religious Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism, and others.

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Dialogue is a continuous process that involves peace making and of strategies towards building peace. In our context, we are using dialogue to refer specifically to Christian/Muslim engagement involving discussions towards evolving means in order to forge greater relationships, harmony, understanding, tolerance and peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

The Need for Dialogue

1. Religious dialogue promotes peace: it is not an exaggeration to state that religious dialogue promotes peace the aim of engaging people of other faiths in dialogue is to forge people which people need. In most crises that we have witnessed in Nigeria over the years; it is through religious dialogue that tensions have been doused and confidence rebuilt in people. In an international interfaith peace forum in Bangkok, Thailand, 2003; it was rooted that; People of all nations are thirsting for peace and all of us are searching for effective ways to transform the destruction phenomena of polarization, conflict, violence and war into productivity ways of living together on this planet. (Thomas, 2003) This is a shared concern today around the world, including Nigeria.
2. In Samuel Huntington’s, *The Clash of civilizations*, he had predicted a shift from ideological- based conflicts to religious ones. Hence today, we have more religiously induced conflicts than the ideological wars of the cold war era. We now have more religious and identity wars than ever before. This implies that we need to find ways

to stem these wars and conflicts using dialogue.

3. Most religions share common concerns that call for dialogue. These common concerns are human development, social justice, equality, peace, and basic necessities of life. on issues of common concerns, a commentator observes: The main concerns facing people from Korea to Guatemala to Egypt to Canada, do not revolve around ideology or civilizational attitudes, they are rather the bread and butter issues of job and wages, personal and familial security, the availability of affordable and adequate education, health care, facilities that can alleviate some of the burdens of ageing and the preservation of a moral climate in which one can confidently raise one’s children. (The contribution of religious believers to the dialogue of civilization, 5-6)
4. Need to prevent modern values from degenerating. All religions, particularly Islam and Christianity uphold high moral standards as fundamentals to true spirituality. Religious adherents of these two faiths can achieve great strides together if they are all united in condemning social and moral vices in Nigeria. Examples of such vices include; pornography, sex, corruption, drug abuse, and indolence. These vices could easily be stemmed or completely eradicated religions unite to fight them.
5. The need to fight mutual suspicion and fears. the *society for inter – religious dialogue* in Jakarta, Indonesia, notes that, “history of interaction between the various religions of faith, both nationally and internationally, had been coloured by mutual suspicion, chauvinism, condescension, traumatic conflict and exclusive and arrogant theologies.” (An experieriment named Media, 3) This picture captures the Nigerian scene very well and calls for dialogue. Religion is a major fact of Nigeria. It is very emotive, sensitive and is a public life style of most Nigerians. But the fact remains that some of the adherents of Christianity and Islam are not educated on religious interactions among people of other faiths. As a result of this, anything that affects their religion easily creates critical and sometimes controversial reactions and responses. It is to stem these negative tendencies that dialogue becomes very necessary.
6. The politicization, radicalization and manipulation of religion in Nigeria today, call for dialogue. It is a fact that religion most often is politicized by the rich and the ruling elite for their selfish ends. The manipulation of religion as was referred by late Yusufu Bala usman, has continued in Nigeria, giving rise to militant religious groups and intolerance. The recent upsurge of the *Boko haram and Dar ur Islam* in some parts of northern Nigeria, calls for caution and restraint. Dialogue is still the indisputable tool.
7. Religious pluralism in Nigeria, itself calls for dialogue. Due to increasing, urbanization and social movements occasioned by several factors, people do not live today as

island to themselves. The need therefore to accept, understand, and to live within plurality of religious beliefs, practices, emphases, and experience challenge every Nigerian to live with this fact, and hence the imperative of dialogue encounter. *The World Council of Churches* captured this need thus. Greater awareness of religious plurality has heightened the need for improved relations and dialogue among people of different faiths, increased mobility, large – scale movement of refugees and economic migrations have resulted in more people of diverse faiths living side by side. Where mechanisms for dialogue and encounter exist, there are opportunities to foster greater knowledge and awareness among people of different religions (Guidelines for dialogue and relations with people of other religions, 2002) The plurality of the Nigerian state has led to Nigerian being referred today as a *multi – religious or multi – faith country*.

8. Desire for Interaction. Arinze had appreciated this when he noted that, “in the world of our times, people of different religious meet much more frequently than in past centuries”. (Arinze 1997) opportunities to travel and instant communities worldwide are now greater than in any other period of human history. Other factors due to economic interests, trade pleasure trips, internal conflicts, job research, and so on have increased contact between people of religious traditions. (Arinze 1997) And in Nigeria, which has one of the most mobile (travelled) populations in Africa, this reality cannot be easily denied. The need therefore for dialogue becomes necessary for peaceful encounters, harmony, and mutual relations.
9. Mutual Enrichment. Arinze notes that, Inter-religious dialogue can help each participant to grow in his or her own faith when that partner in dialogue encounters a person of another religious persuades and engages in sincere and calm confrontation of religious beliefs, practices, and values. (Arinze, 1997) We learn a lot from other religious faiths when we enter into dialogue with sincere and open hearts. Christians and Muslim in Nigeria need to enrich themselves with religious values of love, forgiveness, neighborliness, and reconciliation.
10. Harmony between citizens. In a country of diverse religions. Like Nigeria, it is inter – religions dialogue that can help to build up and strength harmony and unity. It helps to reduce tension, suspicion, hatred and factions. The late Pope john Paul II caught this well when he observed that, “either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart to ruin ourselves and others.” (Arinze 1997). This need cannot be more accurate than it is today in Nigeria.
11. Unity of the human person. We share the same common nature as human person created by God. We are created to be able to relate to God and men, but God created us from several backgrounds, locations, and experiences. We need to accept this God’s gift divine design, and learn to relate with in order to promote the well-being of

humanity.

Types of Dialogue:

Four types of Dialogue have been identified. They include: *Dialogue of Discourse, Dialogue of spirituality, and Dialogue of action*.

1. Dialogue of life: Dialogue of life is an encounter of people of different religious in the course of everyday life (Arinze, 1993) it is a relationship at the level of the ordinary everyday life. For example, at the family level, school, and place of trade or commerce: “when neighbors of different religions are open to one another when they share their projects and hopes, concerns, and sorrows, they are engaged in dialogue of life.” (Arize 1997) Arch bishop Ignatius kaigama brought out the dialogue of life when he writes: There are many activities, which can bring Christians and Muslim close together in daily life. Nigerians love celebrations. In the course of one week many celebrations are held with pomp and pageantry. These are opportunities for interaction and demonstration of genuine friendship. At weddings, marriages, festivals period such as Sallah, and Christmas, school graduation, naming ceremonies, etc, deliberate effort should be made to broaden them to include neighbors or friends of other religions. (Kaigama, 2006) This form of dialogue promotes mutual trust and harmonies living together. Kaigama sees it as a demonstration of religious accommodation and empathy. (Kaigama, 2006) It breeds acceptance, which is a major ingredient of genuine dialogue.
2. Dialogue of Discourse: Dialogue of discourse involves people of different faiths coming together to exchange information and the ideas on their respective religious beliefs and heritage. They articulate faith perspective, and encounter one another, in an effort to understand the religion of the other at a deep level, and as articulated by qualified and well–prepared representatives of the other religions traditions. (Arize 1997) In *Nigeria, the Nigeria Association for the study of religions* (NASR) was forms to achieve this goal. Over the years, the association has drawn membership from university teachers of religion, from Christian and Muslim faiths, who organize conferences with themes on current challenges and of common concerns to Nigerians. Through some have criticized it as a dialogue of the ivory tower and elitist, it cannot be denied that it familiarizes people with issues relevant to harmonious living and also creates avenues for friendship. today, therefore are centres such as *centre for Peace Advancement in Nigeria* (CEPAN) and *centre for Gender and Social Research* (Inter-Gender), all in Jos that have been involved in such kinds of dialogical discourses.
3. Dialogue of Spirituality: Dialogue of spirituality involves encounter at the level of religious experience. It involves the totality of the person’s religious experience. In

meditation, prayer, faith, and its expression. It is the dialogue of the heart. kaigama has demonstrated this type of dialogue with two examples: the first was by the former Nigerians President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, who fasted during the Muslim Ramadan period in solidarity with Muslim, and shared in meals with some Muslim dignitaries. The second was when Yasser Arafat, the late Palestinian Leader attended midnight mass at the church of Nativity, Bethlehem, Israel, any time it was possible for him to do so. (Kaigama, 2006) When General Muhammadu Buhari attended the *Nigeria prays* service in Lagos some years ago, it sent some very significant inter – faith signals of co-operation and tolerance across Nigeria. While some people have criticized it as compromising one's religious, others see it as tending towards uncritical syncretism. (Arirajah, 1993) But it cannot be denied that dialogue of spirituality holds immense benefits for peaceful co-existence, and provides exemplary vistas for Nigeria's Christian/Muslim relations.

4. Dialogue of Action: this form of dialogue involves people of different faiths, coming together to co-operate in a joint action, toward the promotion of human development and in things that concern them. For example, on issues that promotes peace, justice, protection of the environment, defense of human rights, HIV/AIDS, poverty eradication, and so on. Today, *faith* – based projects and NGOs have taken the lead in promoting such dialogue. Similarly, the *Justice Peace and Reconciliation Movement (JPRM)* have embarked on joint projects for the development of people. Such collaborations have yielded immense benefits in Nigeria, rather than confronting, which need to be encouraged.

Some Guidelines of Dialogue

Just like in every game, there are rules which guide for effectiveness and good play, so also, inter- religious dialogue is nurtured through guidelines or what constitute its major ingredients. To forge some meaningful dialogical endeavor, certain guidelines are necessary for consideration.

1. Dialogue does not seek to convert. Dialogue is not crusade ground or a jihad arena where you come in order to convert or force the other into one's faith. Attempts therefore to convert through preaching or insinuations towards conversion should be discouraged as it does not anger will in dialogical encounter.
2. Dialogue respects other people's views, opinions, fears, and so on. It provides avenue for people of other faiths to express themselves without molestations, intimidation and threats. Locations for dialogical engagement must be free, fair and devoid of insecurity.
3. Dialogue does not engage in controversial doctrinal discussions. It discourages controversial debates and open disagreements. Controversial doctrinal disputes can generate bitterness, hate, fight, and open war.

4. Dialogue does not impose particular doctrines or views on other. It does not impose particularly practices as superior other. Dialogue presumes that all are equal partners. Therefore are no superior or inferior partners.
5. Dialogue must learn to listen and hear what the others are saying. Dialogue must understand people's fears, prejudices, anger and stereotypes of others. This is to help to understand the other better for effective and mutual confidence building and its promotion.
6. Dialogue learns about the other person's religion for example, why do they teach? What do they believe? What are their practices? What are their common concerns? And so on. Understanding these, help to build areas of respects of the other religion which provides genuine basis for dialogue. Understanding such issues will help to engage in dialogue of life, to combat issues such as HIV/AIDS, child abuse, drug abuse, and crime.
7. Dialogue discourages hypocrisy in both discussions and real life. Act what you profess and believe. Do not say one thing about tolerance and religious understanding and exhibit intolerance in real life situations. Arinze cautions further when he states that "where there is no serious engagement in religion itself, no enthusiasm is to be expected in inter – religious dialogue". (Arinze, 1997)
8. Embrace major values of tolerance: These include acceptance, love, friendship, respect, consideration, understanding, patience, and brotherhood. Promote justice and dignity of person, which are the hall marks of major world religions.
9. Assist people of other faiths by caring and sharing with them. Identify with them at their moments of joy and sadness. This is the level of dialogue of life which we had discussed earlier.
10. Be master of your faith. This means that you must be knowledgeable in your faith. Know what your religion teaches and various views and opinion on some doctrinal statements, etc., Strive towards versatility and competence in your religion. Arinze corroborates this when he notes that those who are involved in dialogue "should have a programme of formation for leaders who will spearhead their dialogue initiatives." (Arinze, 1997)
11. Dialogue encourages openness and respect. Openness includes readiness to reverse preconceived ideas about others, prejudices, long standing generalization and judgment of others, etc. (Arinze, 1997)
12. Dialogue must forgive and forget the past. It does not recall past memories and wrongs. Arinze says: Some of the older religions have burdens of the past which their followers today inherit from history and for which the present followers are not responsible. Some of these historical memories are loaded with misunderstandings, exaggerations, un-clarified historical details, un-headed anger handed on from generation, unjustified generalization and a forcing of the mentality of our times to ages gone by. (Arinze 1997:63) . Past injustice and

hurt can be major stumbling blocks to genuine dialogue. When past wrongs are bottled up, they wait for the slightest provocation and opportunity in order to explode. These have been the cases with most crises that we have witnessed in Nigeria.

13. Advocates of inter-religious dialogue must learn to work together. The Nigeria Inter – Religious Council (NIREC) has demonstrated this very well. The same is true of most inter – religious committees at the state levels in Nigeria. This should be the model and catalyst for Christian – Muslim relations in Nigeria.
14. Restraint of religious leaders and bodies. Dialogue councils and committees should be able to restrain the excesses and sometimes religious extremism of their leaders and bodies such as the *Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)*, *Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI)* and the *Council of Ulama*

Conclusion/ Recommendations

Forging inter – religious peaceful co – existence through dialogue demands a lot of courage, sincerity and commitment. It demands a collaborative approach. It demands respect and mutual responsibility, Most importantly, it demands people who are well religious dialogue still has the prospect of helping to moderate the ever – growing proliferation of diverse religious voices in Nigeria, each trying to find a space for expression. And amidst the ever – rising upsurge of religious revivalism and fundamentalism in Nigeria, inter – religious dialogue holds hope for meaningful relations that will guarantee religious peaceful co – existence, mutual respect and the stability of the Nigerian nation.

Despite the immense worth of inter–religious dialogue and religious freedom Nigeria still faces other noteworthy challenges comprising political manipulation and violence.

Therefore it is expected of the various stakeholders to emphasize religious literacy and education in order to dispel stereotypes under – development and misconceptions. More so, there is the need by the legislative arm of the country to enact and implement laws that protect religious freedom, and there should be community engagement as this will promote local level inter – religious dialogues and community–led initiatives to sensitize the people on the need to co- exist.

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