THE NEED FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE NIGERIAN PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

AMBROSE OBODOEZEOJIAKOR OGUECHE (PhD)
REV. FR. DR. WILLIAMS PETER AWOSHIRI,
JOSEPH UMAR BIBINU (Ph. D in view),
HABILA KATUKA (Ph.D in view),
BENJAMIN SERGIUS (MA in view),
Faculty of Arts
Department of Christian Religious Studies
Taraba State University, Jalingo, Nigeria

Abstract

The thrust of this work is on the need for inter-religious dialogue in the Nigerian pluralistic society. It is in controvertible fact that healthy inter-religious dialogue can avert inter-religious crises in Nigerian Society. The researchers made use of secondary sources of data collection as their methodology. The work found out that inter-religious dialogue is a panacea to inter-religious crises in the Nigerian society. The work also identified roles of both the government and religious leaders I the religious dialogue in order to maintain peace and stability in the Nigerian society. They work recommended that there should be sincerity of purpose among stake holders in inter-religious dialogue. Another is that religious leaders should sensitize their subjects and the government should put inter-religious dialogue in both primary and secondary schools curriculum.

Keywords: **Need, Inter-religious Dialogue, Pluralism, Nigerian, Society.**

Introduction

Nigeria as a country is a pluralistic religious state. It has three major religious: African traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity and Islam. The Country is characterized by the diversity of cultures and traditions that are very complex; each of these religions relates to the Nigerian society and they fulfil their different roles which are deeply noted in the nature of each of them. In addition, each of these religions offers hope of salvation to their adherents. However, because of the inbuilt weakness in a pluralistic religious state, one would not be surprised that manipulators capitalized and cashed on the sensitive nature of religion to create confusion, violence and conflict in Nigerian society. As a result of this, Nigerians have been witnessing series or religious conflicts which had led to the early death of many Nigerians and property worth millions of naira destroyed (Mukti, 2002).

Inter-religious dialogue is the means of attaining mutual trust. This can be graphically illustrated thus: peaceful co-existence depends on mutual trust; mutual trust is build through inter-religious dialogue. On the other hand, inter-religious dialogue is the means of resolving religious differences that can negate peaceful co-existence. Among Nigeria in any case, inter-religious dialogue is indispensable to any society, be it theocratic, secular or pluralistic in as much as peaceful co-existence is desirable (Otite, et al, 1999).

If the inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims is in nature, it will pave way for a peaceful co-existence in a pluralistic society like Nigeria. For example, one can quickly observe that, in our schools, neighbourhood, and even extended families, Muslims and Christians are living together. This work suggests ways and means of promoting mutual trust and understanding among followers of different faiths, and with a capacity to: (a) live in peace with people of opposite faith; (a) build bridges among adherents of different religions; (c) promote mutual trust among people of different religious background (Boer, 1988).

Causes of Inter-Religious Conflict

There are two primary religions in Nigeria- Islam and Christianity, competing with each other for centuries, causing intolerance and socio-political crises. Conflict is a great predicament in any human society. History indicates that conflict is an on-going process in human relations and may occur within and among groups and communities at any time. In the case of Nigeria, the frequency of religious conflicts in the northern part between 1987 and 2011 has left adverse effects on the socio-economic polity of the people. In these conflicts, Christians have at certain times, taken up weapons to counter the attacks from the Muslims, claiming to do so in self-defense. This study gave an overview of the general concept and causes of religious conflicts in Nigeria and, advocated for ethical principles such as the common solidarity of humanity by origin, forgiveness and tolerance that could engender cordiality and understanding rather than sustained hostility and suspicion in Christian-Muslim relation in Nigeria (Onabanjo, 2011).

Gofwen, identifies four reasons that inflame the religious bigotry prevalent in Nigeria. These are (i) the differing political philosophy of the major religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity. (ii) the mutual suspicions and fear of domination between the two religions. (iii) mutual ignorance of the beliefs and teaching of each other's religion and sometimes even of one's faith. (iv) provocative acts of pronouncements that hurt the religious sensibilities of people of other faith, whether they are intended or inadvertent (Gofwen 2004).

Kukahis of the view that, "based on mutual ignorance and misinterpretation, adherents of either religious group have tended to assert themselves or even to react violently when they felt their religion was threatened or its heritage was ridiculed. Thus, violent conflicts in which lives were lost and properties destroyed were caused by acts like the misquotation/interpretation of the Quran or the Bible, the construction of a church or mosque, religious assemblies, inciting statement and/or publications and even the protest against alleged prosecutions of religious fellow members in other countries' (Kukah, 1993).

Inter-Religious Dialogue as Panacea for Conflict Resolution

Various means and avenues have been employed to address the issue of religious conflict in Nigeria; unfortunately, none has yielded the desired result. Nevertheless, all hope is not lost; research and investigations have revealed that the strongest instrument to be used in order to achieve religious tolerance, peace and harmony is dialogue. To be specific, the dialogue we are referring to here is interreligious dialogue. This is a discussion and exchange of religious views by various religious adherents or groups.

Nigeria has various religious associations such as: Ecumenical Council of Nigeria (ECN) Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), various Islamic Movements and Religious Advisory Council of Nigeria. Now that arms and ammunitions had failed to restore peace and order, inter-religious dialogue is now attracting a considerable interest in recent years (Ogunleye, 2017).

Relevance of Inter-Religious dialogue in Nigerian Pluralistic Society
The value and relevance of inter-religious dialogue in Nigerian conflicts resolution cannot be overemphasized. The involvement of this kindof dialogue will surely produce positive effect on the Nigerian society. In Nigeria, incessant religious conflict has set governments at all level on their toes toward finding means of ensuring peaceful coexistence among people of different faiths in the country. Sequel to the failure of arms and ammunition to produce a peaceful atmosphere, inter-religious dialogue has been suggested to be better alternative measure towards conflict resolution.

In the word of Ignatius Kaigama, President, Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) as cited by NAN said inter-alia: "Multiplying security agents on the street can only bring about artificial peace. Even if we supply five soldiers to every family in Nigeria, peace cannot be achieved in total. Peace in neither enforced nor decreed. It is cultivated in the heart, inspired and taught at home, school and places of worship." In addition to the quotation, the Amir, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat, Mashhud Adenrele, advised Nigerians to make dialogue a positive agent for the attainment of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence in the country.

Inter religious dialogue is necessary and essential for Nigeria society so as to repudiate the arrogance andaggression that often manifest in religious fanaticism. Moreover, it is a necessity for peace and peaceful co-existence in a pluralistic religious environment like Nigeria. In addition, inter-religious dialogue is very relevant to the Nigeria situation it involves sharing of understanding and experience. This no doubt, is an effects method of building community, as it is preferable way of preventing clashes and settling conflicts between religious groups. In the final analysis, inter-religious dialogue is an ecumenical encounter that can bring together people of different belief system with respect for one another's faith (Ogunleye, 2017).

Roles of Religious Leaders in Inter-Religious dialogue
Religious leaders were known as high-level persons in faith Leadership which refers to the group of religious leaders holding high positions in their religions, be it Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and others, with their religious educational background. Generally this group has the potential to influence policy and law makers such as the government, as well as the people in the broader context. They also function as mediators for conflict resolution. They were involved as representative in dialogue at the beginning of interfaith conflict or interfaith dialogue programmes, during the time of the conflict, at the post-conflict period, and the dialogue that is moving toward reconciliation. Among the examples of religious leaders involved in dialogue for conflict resolution are the Muftis for Islam, Rabbi for the Jews and the priest for Christianity (Khairulnizam, et al, 2012).

Therefore, this group of religious leaders is critical in the implementation of inter-faith dialogue especially in conflict resolution. Religious leaders have a fundamental role to play, given their spiritual leadership and influence over their communities and the broader society. When they speak out, their voices are heard and their messages have the power to multiply.

i.   Religious leaders and actors should promote the fundamental value of accepting others as they are whatever their beliefs, without insisting that others should change their beliefs.

ii.   Religious leaders and actors shoulddiscard ideas of being superior to other human beings.

iii.   Religious leaders and actors should be role models within their communities; preach the value of fraternity in humanity and contribute to educating the people on peace, social cohesion and the acceptance of "the other faith." This role is vital when peace and social cohesion are threatened.

iv.   Protection of human rights, preventing discrimination based on religious or other fundamental beliefs, and the exercise of freedom of religion and belief, could help stem the misuse of religion to drive violence and war and help promote peace and reconciliation in places marked by religiously motivated violence.

v.   Religious leaders and actors should be the mothers and fathers not their congregations, but of all those within their communities.

vi.   Religious leaders and actors should engage in activities with a solid symbolic relevance to promote peaceful co-existence and inter-religious harmony.

vii.   Religious leaders and actors should promote anddisseminate best of peaceful co-existence and lessons learned, bearing in mind, however, that there are no "fix all" solutions and that every context is different.

viii.   Religious leaders and actors should establish and strengthen councils of peace and solidarity at the national or sub-regional level.

ix.   Religious leaders and actors should move beyond tolerance and preach universal messages of peace and respect that are aligned with international human right standards.

x.   Religious leaders and actors should develop an inter-faith code of conduct for preaching, based on ethical and human rights principles that should become a blueprint for all religious leaders preventing and countering incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence.

xi.   Religious leaders and actors should prevent and contribute to eradicating incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence.

xii.   Religious leaders and actors should involve youth in the community, sport, cultural and interfaith work.

xiii.   Religious leaders and actors should identify and train influential youth who can spread tolerance and respect messages among their peers.

xiv.   Religious leaders and actors should undertake advocacy with state institutions and the private sector on the importance of providing youth with economic opportunities and vocational training and preventing and countering incitement to gender-based violence.

xv.   Religious leaders and actors should condemn and advocate against gender-based violence and its use as a weapon of war.

xvi.   Religious leaders and actors should promote a "healing of memories" approach to gender-based violence, whereby they welcome back survivors into their communities and encourage the re-acceptance and reintegration of survivors instead of isolating and stigmatizing them.

xvii.   Religious leaders and actors, especially women, should be trained in faith-based counseling to support survivors of gender-based violence engagement with state authorities.

xviii.   Religious leaders and actors should work to ensure that states demonstrate respect for all religions anddo not discriminate against any religion, or the practitioners of any religion.

xix.   Religious leaders and actors should lobby national authorities to establish national days, for example national days of reconciliation, social cohesion, tolerance, mutual respect or peaceful co-existence. On these days, religious leaders should organize community and youth gatherings (Antonio, 2017).

Role of Government in Inter-Religious Dialogue

The protection of populations and the prevention of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity (atrocity crimes) is primarily the responsibility of states. Here are four possible solutions to cope with the religious crisis, improvement of education and religious awareness. One of the reasons why the crisis of religion is observed in Nigeria is a lack of education. Thus, one has to mobilize the power of administrative organs anddirect them on reducing the number of illiterate people and creating new jobs. An opportunity to obtain a job, earn money and provide proper well-being for a family is one of the primary goals of every citizen. Furthermore, a person who has enough money will hardly ever undergo the influence of terroristic organizations trying to buy his life or convince him to commit violent actions. Fourth take new reforms to change the current bodies, which are in charge of protecting citizens and conflict regulations, and make this structure more efficient to protect human life and private properties (Elochuwu, 2003).

The government should establish special organs that will maintain equal rights to all ethnic groups, religion and hold a constructive dialogue. They will be a kind of regulator, who can find the best solution for resolving disagreement based upon the needs of different ethnic groups, how Europeans affected African culture. As you see, the current religious crisis is a fault of one specific side of the population. It is a complex matter formed under the pressure of opposed religious groups, a lack of knowledge and administrative regulations. Only when they cooperate and hear each other, they will be able to cope with the crisis.

i.   States should ratify, domesticate anddisseminate information on national treaties relevant to preventing violence and its incitement; they, together with religious leaders and actors, should raise awareness about these treaties and their relevance.

ii.   States should ensure the implementation of these treaties at the national level.

iii.   State should provide political and financial support for religious leaders to implement this plan of action at the national and local levels.

iv.   National and local authorities should publicly support and protect religious leaders who speak out against incitement.

v.   State should support education curricula that include knowledge of world religions and their respective ethnical frameworks.

vi.   States shoulddemonstrate respect for all religions and not discriminate against any religion or it practitioners.

vii. State should encourage and support religious diplomatic engagement as a tool to prevent, manage and solve conflicts (Ogbole et al, 2013).

Benefits of Inter-Religious Dialogue

The benefits of inter-religion dialogue include promotion of respect anddiversity, development of a cohesive community, restoration of trust, and reduction of the feeling of theat. Its significantly improves one's understanding of the other. While one can learn a significant about another religion from books, talking to people who practice that religion, about what they believe, what they do and how they feel about it, transform one's knowledge and more importantly one's understanding. Inter-religious dialogue helps the people to understand the religion, by taking part in inter-religious dialogue helps the people to understand the religion, by taking part in inter-religious dialogue help adherents to understand themselves. Inter-religious dialogue helps society as a whole by producing better mutual understanding among the believers of different religions (Mohammed, 2008).

Pope Benedict taught that when different religious are protected and respected rather than ignored or attacked, society benefits from a climate of dialogue and a commitment to upholding common values (Benedict, XVI).

Previous attempts to promote Inter-Religious Dialogue in Nigeria

Several inter-religious dialogue efforts have been organized to tackle religious conflicts in the Nigeria pluralistic society, but to no avail because some religious leaders and politicians use religion to gain their selfish interests. Some of the inter-religious dialogue was organized to reduce religious tension in Nigeria; the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) operates at the National and state levels in Nigeria respectively. The psychology of peace being critical to development also rules the thought flow of Lagos state Governor, Akinwunmi Ambode. This was evident when he hosted an inter-faith parley of Religious leaders and organizations in Lagos. It was his two years after he assumedduty at the Governor of the Centre of Excellence (Gbenga, 2017). DSK (David Sabo Kente) Foundation organized inter-religious dialogue in Wukari LGA, Taraba State in 2014 with the aim to tackle reoccurrence of inter-religious conflicts in the area.

Conclusion

There can be no religious pluralism where there is no freedom of religion. This implies that the only platform for religious pluralism is religious expression and practices. Different religions must then acknowledge that fact they need each other which is why dialogue is crucial in a religious pluralistic society. For us to reach a situation where we can respect ourselves and the values highly honored by others without having to give up our values; this we should uphold in a religious pluralistic society. Dialogue is part of the living relationship between people of different faiths and ideologies as they share in the community's life as well.

References

Joseph A.I (1996). Dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria: how Feasible. A paper presentation. Occasional paper presented at the Department of Christian Religious Studies Education, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Retrieved 23/5/2020 www.richmann.org>article>

Khairulnizam Mat Karim. (2015). Role of religious leaders in interfaith dialogue towards conflict resolution: a Muslim analyses is on Christianity's perspective: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Kukah, M.H. (1993). Religion politics and power in Northern Nigeria. Ibadan:

Mohammed, A. (2008). "why engage in Inter-religious dialogue. Retrieved 20/7/2020 www.richmann.org>artcle>

Ogbole F.A. and Ogunrinade A.O. (2013). Nigerian Pluralistic Society and the Relevance of religious dialogue as an Instrument of peace. Journal of Education and Social Research MCSER Publishing. Rome-Italy Vol. 3 No3.

Ogunleye Adetunbi Richard; Sch. J. Arts. Humanit Soc. Sci. jun 2017;5(6B):638-643 Available Online; http://sasjournals.com/sjahss 640)

Olurode, L. S. (1989). The politisation of Religion in Nigeria. In momoh, C.S. etal (eds.) religions and their doctrines; Nigeria studies in Religious Tolerance. 1(3). 352-377.

Onabanjo, D. (2011). What if Nigeria Breaks? Tell Magazine. October 17. Pp.48-54.

Otite. O and Isaac O. A. (1999), community Conflicts in Nigeria; Management Resolution and Transformation. Ibadan: Spectrum.

Sperber, J. (2000). Christians and Muslims: the dialogue activities of the world council of Churches and their theological foundation. Berlin & New York: de Gruyter. Google Scholar.

Takaya, B. J. (1992). Religion Politics and peace: resolving theNigerian dilemma. In Olupona, J.K (ed) Religion, Peace and Multi-faith Nigeria. IIe-Ife: O.A.U. Press. Pp.109-123.