# Religious Dialogue as an Instrument for Promoting Peaceful Co-Existence in Nigeria

By

**Ayodele Margaret Olanireti PhD**
**Department of Social Science Education**
**Bamidele Olumilua University of Education,**
**Science and Technology Ikere**
**Ekiti State. Nigeria**
**Email: Ayodele.Margaret@Bouesti.Edu.Ng**

**Abstract**

Nigeria as the most populous country in African continent is characterized by diverse religious beliefs and faith in the supernatural. As a result of these religious differences, religious tension such as: intolerance, socio-ethnic crises, bias, violence and hatred have eaten deep into the fabrics of the society, and has resulted in the destruction of lives and properties of innocent citizens. This paper critically examines the two major religious beliefs in Nigeria against the background of our indigenous religion. It further shows the importance of religious dialogue as an instrument in promoting peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. Finally, the paper concludes by examining some means by which religious dialogue can bring peaceful co-existence to the society for example, engaging government machinery and all the Social Institutions to ensure dialogue is enforced whenever there is agitations or conflict that can jeopardize the peace of the country. It recommends that government at all levels should involve all religious leaders in dialogue from time to time for peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

**KEYWORDS**: Religion, Dialogue, Peace, Co-Existence, Nigeria.

## Introduction

Religion deals with people's belief system that is based on conviction, either by humans or the supernatural powers, which has contributed immensely to the development of the nation. Afolabi (2015) viewed religion as an instrument that has contributed to the progress of the society, while Ajaegbu (2012) stressed that the level of development of a country is affected by many factors, which include religion. Ijala (2013) reiterated that religion gives people hope, which in itself is not a bad thing, especially when one considers the hopelessness of leadership in the society. Oluwaseun and Issa (2014) opined that anti-religion activity has been a tool for political manipulations and direct slavery over the years by some greedy and selfish individuals who hide under religion to perpetrate evils. Adefenwa (2013) stressed that there have been cases of brutal killings, kidnapping and destruction of properties in all parts of the country by some religious extremists, in the

name of religion which has hindered peace, unity and development in the country. This act negates the principles of religious ethics, which preaches fairness, peace and good governance. Familugba (2008) stressed that some religious extremists have not allowed religion practitioners to connect their belief system to social life, especially the political elites who have taken the advantage of the activities of religious extremists for their political and economic gains. This therefore results in repositioning religion from its norms to suit their political advantage to the detriment of good social life, peace and unity enjoyed by the masses. This situation calls for repositioning and dialogue amongst the major religious leaders, especially the Christian faith and Islamic worshippers, who are the major stake holders of these religious crises.

**Concept of Religion**

Religion is the belief *in the sup*ernatural for the existence of human being. It is the worship of the Supreme Being as the only source and supply of human needs. Religion has been defined in different ways by various scholars, for example, Okechuwu (2012) defined religion as the belief in spiritual beings. Ayodele (2021) defined religion as faith or belief based on conviction, while Adeniran (2012) defined it as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, set apart and forbidden, which unite people into one single moral community called a church or mosque, and noted that it is the self validation of a society by means of myth and ritual.

**Brief history of Nigerian Indigenous Belief Systems (ATR)**

Long before the advent of the two major religions in Nigeria viz-a-viz; Christianity and Islam, there existed an indigenous religion peculiar to Nigerian natives. Hence, these modern religions did not meet an empty space in Nigeria as there were already existed cultures and philosophies whose roots are traceable to religion and belief in a supernatural being. Dominant religion was the traditional religion popularly known as African Traditional Religion. Omotoye (2011) defined African Traditional Religion as the religious beliefs and practices of the African people before the coming of Christianity and Islam. These indigenous beliefs were popularly practiced by many African countries as the native religion, which Nigerians have been practicing long before the advent of Christianity and Islam. African Traditional Religion came into being as a result of the native people's curiosity to understand and comprehend certain events and mysteries that shaped the African human life, as well as their societies in general.

Long before the advent of Christianity and Islam, Nigerians practiced the indigenous traditional religion common to Africans. Though, Nigeria is a country with diverse tribes and cultural inclinations, one major similarity between the traditional religions that existed

amongst the different cultures includes; beliefs in spirits and other divinities, veneration of ancestors, use of magic and traditional medicine. The role of humanity is generally seen as one of harmonizing nature with the supernatural. These beliefs in a supernatural being was passed on to coming generations orally via rituals, customs, rites, names of places and people, traditions, art practices, proverbs, myths, food, stories, songs and dances. African Traditional Religion, which is indigenous to Nigerians, was practiced by past generations and has, since its inception, been passed onto so many generations. These indigenous beliefs have helped in shaping our identities as many of our cultural heritages can be traced to the indigenous African tradition.

While it appears a little too cumbersome to arrive at a concrete estimate of persons who practice traditional religion in Africa due to existence of Christianity and Islam, practitioners are estimated to number 100 million or 10% of the population. (CIA World Factbook, 2019).

According to Mbiti (2015), religion came about as a result of the experiences and thinking of our fore fathers. It was as a result of their responses to various mysterious factors found in their surroundings such as; huge trees, mysteriously shaped rocks, heavy rainfall, thunderstorm, and other unusual things.

Long before the coming of foreign missionary religion, Nigeria practiced the African traditional religion, and there exist no written document on these beliefs and religious practices, it is pertinent to note that it was orally transmitted from one generation to the other, written in people's hearts and minds, old age rituals, and African traditional shrines. Indigenous traditional religion in Nigeria has no specific founder or sacred book, it has existed for a very long time; it is as old as Nigeria itself according to Adeniran, Ayodele and Babarinde (2012). The African traditional religion is a way of life of not just Nigerians, but Africans everywhere, as there is the concept of God, called by different names, there is also the concept of divinities, spirits as well as beliefs in the ancestral cult. Every tribe has its own local deities, festivals, names for the Supreme Being, but in essence, the pattern is the same, according to George Ahulo ( 2017).

**Brief History of Christianity in Nigeria**

Christianity in Nigeria dates back to the 25th century. It was introduced by the Portugese whose mission was more in the interest of slave business than the missionary work. They were not able to plant religion as a result of their involvement in slave trade. In the 17th century, other attempts were made by the Roman Catholics as they journeyed through the hither lands to trade with the local communities and also preached Christianity to them.

This act was embraced by many of the Kings and traditional rulers who showed interest in the guns and mirrors brought by the Europeans. Slave business was later abolished towards the end of the 19th century, and some of the freed slaves returned back home, especially slaves from Nigeria, and Serria Leone came back to Lagos and Badagry. Some also settled in Abeokuta where they had opportunities to acquire education given by the missionaries. They also practiced and preached Christianity to their family members and some of the freed slaves were converted to Christians. Olupona and Toyin (2020) affirmed that Christians were first called Christians in Antioch, which means followers of Christ.

Oluwaseun and Adedoyin (2021) opined that the origin and the basic beliefs of Christianity stated in the Acts of Apostles who received a call from God

**Brief History of Islam in Nigeria**

Islamic religion was founded in the 7th century A.D by Prophet Mohammed who received a call from God to restore the worship of Allah. Abdullahi (2021) cited that the spread of Islam in Nigeria dates back to the 11th century in Borno State while the pre-dominant Muslim sect in Adefenwa (2013) opined that Nigeria is the Sunni, while others are Ahmadiya, Sanusiya, and Quadriyya. Nigeria had contact with Muslim traders as far back as the 9th century in the Northern regions of Kanem and Borno. George (2017) cited that Islam became popular after the independence through Ahmadu Bello who helped in spreading the religion to the Northern parts of Nigeria. The message of Islam according to Prophet Mohammed is, there is no god but Allah, which means that apart from one and only Allah, nothing else must be worshipped

**Religious Tension in Nigeria**

Religion is considered as the channel of propagating and promoting morals and peaceful co-existence of people in any given society, however, so much religious tension and unrest exists in Nigeria despite the primary aim of religion in fostering peace and security. Seeds of discords have been planted by religions in recent times (Adeniran, Ayodele and Babatunde, 2012). Instead of the major aim for the existence of religion in promoting stability, peaceful co-existence and tolerance, it has recently promoted serious conflict which had heightened instability, killing of innocent people, destruction of properties, civil unrest, undermined development, and rendered the citizenry security a mere myth in Nigeria. There exists mutual suspicions, and discord between the two dominant religions viz; Christianity and Islam. It was observed that since the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914, there has been serious troubles and unrest amongst the dominant Christians in the South and the dominant Muslims in Northern Nigeria.

History has it that religious tension in Nigeria dates back to as far back as the 1950s with the 1966 anti Igbo Pogrom being the most prominent. There was a series of massacre against the Igbo People of Nigeria and other tribes from Southern Nigeria who settled in the Northern parts of Nigeria. These unpleasant events finally led to the secession of eastern Nigeria and the declaration of the Federal Republic of Biafra, which ultimately led to the war between Nigeria and Biafra, and the subsequent tension that still exists between Igbo People and local Muslims.

The 1980s also experienced serious religious tension between Christians and Muslims in Southern Kaduna where two religious extremists were able to convince a group of organized and educated young people to join their movements towards the advancement of their religion.

In recent past, Nigeria has been troubled by religious crises which have undermined security, peace and Unity in the country. An Islamic terrorist group called Boko- Haram started violent operations, and this has resulted in the loss of many people, and destruction of properties since 2009. This Sect (Boko Haram) is a group of Islamic extremists who believe that western education is forbidden, hence, they have caused so many havoc mostly in the northern parts of Nigeria by engaging in series of bombings and kidnaps, for example, the Chibok girls saga, and lots of kidnaps that have claimed the lives of innocent people. The Boko Haram sect and the Fulani herdsmen killings in Benue, Kaduna Borno and other parts of the country are the most recent religious crises in the country which has resulted in many killings, kidnapping and destructions of properties. Quite a number of illiterates and poor unemployed young men have been initiated into joining the sect for promises of certain benefits to them and their families. Many schools have been shut down, while many villages have been deserted as a result of banditary caused by these people. In fact, the country has been thrown into dilemma and confusion as a result of these social vices and other criminal acts by these religious extremists.

Adeniran et al (2012) reported that in 2011, about 800 lives were lost during the presidential elections as a result of various confrontations from the heated presidential elections and the differences that existed between the followers of the potential presidents. George (2017) cited that violence started with a widespread protest and rejection of the result of the presidential election by supporters of the main opposition candidate who is a Northern Muslim from the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), and the election of the then president, who is a Christian from the Niger Delta in the Southern region of the country who was the Candidate for the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), then. The report noted that Violent protests started across the Northern States of Nigeria, which led to

various religious riots and killings in Northern States of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, kano, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara.

Within the two major religions in Nigeria (Islam and Christianity), there have been internal divisions and sub-division that sometimes produce sharp contentions. Religion which is supposed to be the agent of peace, unity and harmony is not the case in Nigeria. Many of the Muslims in Northern Nigeria are herdsmen, while the middle and southern parts are farmers, and are mostly Christians. Practitioners of Islam and Christianity have developed judgmental attitudes towards each other as they both see their religion as the only true religion, hence, any other belief system that does not align with their faith is not acceptable. Gorge (2017) opined that some of these religious practitioners have openly regarded non-followers of their own religion as enemies, and as such, should be crucified. Religious crises in Nigeria play a major role in hindering peace, unity, and security, and therefore hindered development.

**Religious Dialogue**

Ogbu (1980) stressed that dialogue is a process of inviting people or groups for written or spoken conversational exchange on issues of political or religious issues, while Jibrin (1989 ) cited it as an exchange between two or more people with a view to reaching an amicable agreement or settlement. The importance of dialogue in conflict resolution cannot be over emphasized in the society, as it has been seen as an instrument for peace, unity, security and stability of the society. Scholars have defined dialogue in many ways, for example, Ogbole and Ogunrinde (2013) saw dialogue as a process in which individuals and groups learn to wipe out fear and distrust of each other and develop new relations based on mutual trust. Sabdis (2013) defined religious dialogue as a dynamic contact not only between one rational being, rather, an invitation to break through isolation, self-centeredness and self-sufficiency, it is an invitation to recognize and accept each other.

Nnoruga (2012) defined dialogue as word spoken or conversation between two people who are concerned about cooperation in work and worship as well as about sustained mutual relationship or involvement in local level contact. Dialogue is used to settle long standing conflicts and to build deeper understanding of different issues. It is used to achieve a common desire in the exchange of information and insights amongst one another, which involves the sharing of understanding and experience in building a community. Dialogue is needed in areas where there are conflicting issues that may result in intolerance and mistrust, especially in political and religious situation where people have different opinions and ideas, for example, religion in Nigeria. Religion is under serious attack and needs an urgent solution before the situation is beyond control.

Religious dialogue as an instrument in promoting peace, unity and security can be used to curtail violence and destruction of lives and properties of people in the society. Religious dialogue can also be viewed as interfaith dialogue, where different religious leaders meet to discuss religious differences that hinder development of individuals and the society. The objectives of religious dialogue are peace and stability of the society. Sabdi (2013) referred to religious dialogue as a process whereby people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. It noted that it is not just words or talk, but it includes human interaction and relationships which take place between individuals and communities. To avoid religious intolerance amongst the two famous religion in Nigeria, (Christianity and Islam), Nnoruga (2012) noted four reasons why there must be dialogue, which include:

- To initiate better relationships between Muslims and Christians on the basis informed understanding, critical appreciation and balanced judgment of each others' beliefs.
- To see how the spiritual resources of two religions can contribute to the solution of some common problems facing our society today. Problems which are neither Muslims nor Christians, but common human problems we all face.
- To suggest practical ways of corporation among Muslims and Christians in particular situations, and also suggest ways of extending it to brothers of all living faiths.
- To raise basic questions on human life and existence for long- range reflection and action to deepen and renewal of spirituality.

The report noted that Pope John Paul stressed that experience of history has clearly shown that dialogue is necessary for true peace and lack of it leads to conflict and war.

**Ways by Which Religious Dialogue Can Promote Peace, Unity and Stability in Nigeria.**
Peace, unity and stability can be enjoyed through religious dialogue when religious leaders participate in local inter-faith meeting whereby people of one religion find out more about other peoples' religions, and get to know people of different faiths and belief system. In this kind of dialogue, each religious representative must bear in mind the value orientation of each faith, for example, Christianity is a gospel that brought good tidings of Jesus Christ, which is salvation to the whole world. While Islam preaches that there is no god but Allah. Johnson (2016) stated the principles behind religious dialogue to include: practicing fairness, expressing empathy, avoiding misuse of Scripture, staying open to change and challenge, steering clear of denunciations or debates, showing reciprocity, avoiding preconditions, being cautious of sweeping generalizations (positive or negative), facing

frankly areas of disagreement, avoiding selective use of scripture, tradition, and history when discussing issues. The simple logic behind these religious' inclination is the fact that individual belief system is attached to the values each person holds esteem, which should not be contended with by another person. Each religious leader should be able to understand and inform their followers the need to live in peace amongst neighbors so that the society will be a good place to live.

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

Religious dialogue is frequently considered as an important factor in conflict resolution as it has the resources to help promote peace, unity, security and development in the society. Johnson (2016) identified ways by which religious leaders can bring peace, unity, security and development through dialogue to any society, for example, a respected set of values, moral warrants for opposing injustice on the part of government, unique leverage for promoting reconciliation among conflicting parties etc. When dialogue as an instrument of peace, unity and stability is employed to solve misunderstanding in any society, such society will experience peace, unity and stability. It is therefore recommended that all the social institutions in Nigeria should ensure that dialogue is enforced whenever there is any conflict amongst the people.

Secondly, government has a role to play in ensuring peaceful co-existence among the citizens whenever there is any riot, be it religious, political or any form of agitation that can affect the peace of the nation.

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