Towards Better Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria

Rev. Simon A. Kolawole, Ph.D.

Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary,
P. M. B. 4008, Ogbomoso, Nigeria
Kolawolesimon@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion are the three major religions in Nigeria. Since the adherents of the religions live in the same society, it is desirable that there be peaceful co-existence among them. This, however, is not what obtains always especially between Christians and Muslims. The focus of this paper, "Towards Better Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria," is improving the relationship between Christians and Muslims in the nation. The paper gives a brief survey of religious violence in Nigeria and makes six suggestions for improving Christian-Muslim relations. These are: i) Demonstrate Concern for National Growth and Development ii) Affirm Freedom of Religion iii) Interpret the Qu'ran in Context iv) Uphold the Dignity of Human Beings and the Sanctity of Life v) Maintain the Unity of the Nation and vi) Affirm Inter-religious Dialogue. The suggestions can be adapted in similar contexts in the world.

Keywords: Christianity, Islam, Relations, Peaceful co-existence, Growth, Development, Unity and Nation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria oftentimes have been characterized by tension, distrust and violence. These characteristics have again and again resulted in riots which have led to injuries and death of many people and destruction of millions of naira worth of properties. Thus religious violence has brought setback to the growth and development of the nation. Also, it has aggravated political instability and has had negative effects on the economy with reference to driving investors away.

Against this background, it is necessary to have better Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. Such improved relationship will create a more conducive environment in the nation, enhance peaceful co-existence and unity, reduce wanton destruction of lives and properties, and promote the growth and development of the nation. This is the goal of the paper, "Towards Better Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria." The paper cites examples of negative Christian-Muslim relations and makes suggestions for better relations between the two most dominant religions in the nation.

II. A BRIEF SURVEY OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA[1]

It is in the northern part of the country that the negative Christian-Muslim relations patterns have been most prevalent. A. Z. Apenda and A. P. Adega's comment on religious violence in Nigeria is appropriate as the paper discusses some examples.

> Religious violence has taken the front burner in contemporary discourse on Nigeria's democracy. Since the re-commencement of democratic rule on 29 May 1999, religious violence has come to occupy the center stage. The ubiquity of religious violence is attested to by the sheer dramatic rise in the incidences as well as the volume of destruction of lives and property that have accompanied them and the palpable tension and animosity it has generated in the relationship between different groups in the country.[2]

Initially, the religious violence following the re-commencement of the democratic rule in 1999 was perceived as a reaction against the Christian leadership of the nation in the person of President Olusegun Obasanjo but it has persisted up till now. Indeed, it has become more aggravated.

Of course, even before 1999 there had been cases of religious violence. For instance, in 1980, the Maitatsine riot broke out in Kano killing over 4,177 people and millions of naira worth of properties were destroyed. In 1982 Muslims set 8 big churches ablaze. In 1987, violence erupted in Kaduna, Zaria, Kafanchan and Katsina. In Zaria alone 100 big churches were torched. Several Christians were butchered and many others were roasted to death.

In April 1991 Muslims in Bauchi went on a religious riot. They burnt down churches and destroyed a great deal of personal property. About 350 people died. In May 1992 there was the Zangon-Kataf crisis. Muslims clashed with the indigenous church-going Kataf. The entire town was devastated and farmlands destroyed.

On July 1-7, 1995, Muslims attacked Sayawa Christian community in Bauchi State. Over 1000 houses were razed in the inferno and thousands of Christians were killed. 77 churches were burnt and properties worth millions of naira were destroyed. 36 women and children were killed in Gungu-Zango. In Bunnu, 22 school children were killed.

In May 2000 over 1500 people were killed and property worth millions of naira destroyed in a clash between Muslim and Christian communities in Kaduna. In February 2001, Muslim 'Shariah enforcement' unit broadened the scope of violence when an estimated 3000 people lost their lives in clashes between Muslims and Christians. There was a reprisal attack in Aba and about 450 people were killed.

In August 2001, Muslim Jihadists launched attack on the Christian communities in Bunuu (Bauchi State). Many persons were killed and property destroyed. In September and October 2001, there was religious violence in Jos leading to carnage and destruction.

On May 22-23, 2002 over 300 lives were lost in clashes between Muslims and Christians over the proposed introduction of Islamic criminal code in Kaduna State. In June 2002 several people were killed in a clash between some Christians and Muslims in Yelwa, Shendam (Plateau State). On November 22, over 100 people were killed and several buildings were burnt in a clash between Muslims and Christians in Kaduna.

Even though not targeted specifically against Christians, the ongoing Boko Haram violent eruptions in Borno State especially can also be seen as an example of religious violence. This is so because the Boko Haram group consists of Islamic fundamentalists. The celebrated case of Leah Sharibu, a young girl who has not been released along with other Dapchi girls because she refused to renounce her Christian faith, is a good illustration. In the larger context of the nation, Jacob Segun Olatunji and Kolawole Daniel reported that the Nigerian Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Prof. Tijjani Bande, told the UN Security Council that 14.8 million people were affected by the 9-year-old Boko Haram insurgency. "He said 1.7 million people were internally displaced with the most adversely affected being women and children."[3]

The Fulani herdsmen attacks have now compounded the situation with their senseless killings, even sometimes sacking whole villages. It is significant to note that Benue State where the attacks have been most persistent and virulent is one of the Christian sections in northern Nigeria. On April 14, 2 priests and 17 parishioners of St. Ignatius Quasi Parish, Mbalom were murdered in their church and they were given mass burial on May 22. The Editorial of *Nigerian Tribune* of May 24 commented on the incident thus:

> We believe that the April 14 carnage is a frightening twist to the raging bestiality in Benue. The church/mosque should remain a sanctuary deserving all honour and reverence. The attack is an act of sacrilege and poses grave danger to the country given, in particular, the passion that most Nigerians attach to their faith.[4]

The incident is a sad commentary on the state of the nation. The nation has moved to the edge of the precipice. It is tragic that mass burials have now become recurring phenomena. The palpable tension and general insecurity in the nation has reached an all-time high level. The situation of the country now must be a concern to all well-meaning Nigerians irrespective of religious affiliations.

III. TOWARDS BETTER CHRISTIAN-MUSLIMS RELATIONS IN NIGERIA

A. Demonstrate Concern for National Growth and Development

Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria should be guided by concern for national growth and development. As citizens of the nation, the nation's growth and development should be of paramount interest to all. Since religious violence militates against national growth and development, and indeed brings great reversals to the nation, it should be eschewed.

The effects of religious violence, such as loss of lives and destruction of properties, political instability and hostile economic environment, impact negatively on national growth and development. Thus leaders and security agencies need to see the problem of religious violence in its true perspective so as to prevent it, or reduce it to the barest minimum and punish offenders.

It can be argued that failure to punish offenders of religious violence has contributed to its repeated occurrences and this is a great disservice to the nation. For instance, in the attack on Sayawa Christian community mentioned above, Ali opined: "Wouldn't you think the police or military would come to the rescue of these defenseless people. Not a chance, and no Muslim ever stood before a court of law to answer for the numerous acts of vandalism, not to mention the countless murders they committed in Bauchi state."[5] Sadly, this is the repeated pattern which has reached a climax in the present government.

As a country, national growth and development will continue to elude us, with the corresponding goal to be one of the great 20 economies by 2020, if we do not tackle the problem of religious violence, among other problems confronting the nation. Potentially, Nigeria is a great nation, but the actuality of the greatness will come when the major problems confronting the nation are addressed with the seriousness they deserve, and one of these is religious violence.

B. Affirm Freedom of Religion

A second principle that should guide Christian-Muslim relations is the affirmation of the freedom of religion. Nigeria affirms fundamental human rights and the freedom of religion is enshrined in the constitution. John A. Yakubu asserted that the 1999 constitution upholds Nigeria as a secular state as it provides in Section 10 thus: "The government of the Federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as a state religion."[6] With reference to fundamental human rights, section 3(1) of the 1979 constitution states unequivocally thus:

> Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.[7]

The import of the above is that the impression that the North is an Islamic region is dangerous and should be changed. Also, Muslims must respect the constitution which guarantees freedom of religion for all citizens. It is significant to note in this regard that even the Qur'an believes in the concept of fundamental human rights. Jamiu Ade Raji observed that Muhammad unequivocally affirmed the equality of humans and that freedom of religion, the right to life, freedom of person, freedom of person and freedom of opinion, among others are guaranteed by Islam.[8] Also, H.A. Abdulsalam noted that the concept of human rights was revealed to Muhammad which include the right to life, individual's right to freedom and equality of human beings.[9] As Efe N. Ehioghae stated, "If all efforts at redressing the endemic problem of violence in Nigeria will not be misdirected the starting point is to recognize that Nigeria is a pluralistic nation."[10] Ehioghae also said that respect for others' religion is a step beyond violence and it creates a meeting link between one's religion with others' religions.[11] Since the provisions of the constitution are clear with respect to freedom of religion, what is needed is to affirm and defend the freedom of religion. This is where the government needs to do more than it has done. Once again, the leaders have the constitutional responsibility to ensure that no one is denied freedom of religion and the constitutional basis to punish those who perpetrate religious violence, especially killing others.

C. Interpret the Qu'ran in Context

A third principle to promote better Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria is the interpretation of the Qu'ran in the context of the contemporary age. Several sections of the Qu'ran talk disdainfully about non-Muslims as objects of subjugation and annihilation. For instance, Sura al-Tauba 9:29-30 says:

> Fight against those who do not believe in Allah and not in the Last Day and who do not forbid what Allah and his ambassador have forbidden and do not judge *according* to the right religion from those who received the book until they pay the tax with their own hand….
>
> The Jews say that Ezra is the Son of God. The Nazarenes say that Christ is the Son of God. This is what they pronounce with their mouths. They only imitate the saying of those who were disbelieving before them. Allah kills them. How far they have turned away.[12]

Such an injunction supercedes some other glowing testimonies about Jesus Christ in the Qu'ran in the Islamic fundamentalists and Jihadists' minds. However, the point is that it is wrong to take such injunctions as giving Muslims the right in this century to slaughter other human beings in the misguided zeal that they are thereby doing the bidding of Allah. It would be naïve, to say the least, to make words of the 7th century Arabian world absolute for all times. The Jihad mandate, an avowed war against non-Muslims, is anachronistic and in-congruous with the modern context of the world. It has caused so much damage in history and is long overdue for abandonment.

It is curious to note that Muslims again and again refer to Islam as a religion of peace. The contradiction of this claim and what obtains in practice periodically has surprised Christians for centuries. One challenge for Muslims is to demonstrate sincerity and commitment to the claim that Islam is a religion of peace, even where Muslims are in the majority.

D. **Uphold the Dignity of Human Beings and the Sanctity of Life**

Ensuring better Christian-Muslim relations also requires upholding the dignity of human beings and the sanctity of life. The dignity of human beings underscores their inestimable value and the need to treat them with honor and respect. This is because they are created in the image of God. Genesis 1:26-27 affirms:

> Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

As I have noted in another context, "man is the most important being in creation. His creation after other things and creatures, the divine pronouncement about his creation, nature of his creation and the divine responsibility entrusted to him at creation, make him unique among all of God's creatures."[13] Thus to slaughter human beings wantonly under any guise is against the dignity of human beings and displeases God, the Creator who has endowed human beings with the avowed dignity.

Related to the dignity of human beings is the sanctity of human life. Human life is sacred and should be protected. This is why one of the express commandments of the Lord is, "You shall not kill" (Ex. 20: 13). Surely, slaughtering human beings like animals negates the dignity of human beings and the sanctity of life. It is significant to note, as Ehioghae observed, that: "The adherents of the three major religions in Nigeria, namely, African Religion, Islam and Christianity have a high regard for human life - this should be held inviolable. Any act of wanton destruction of life was highly condemned and often times attracted the most severe penalty."[14] The common understanding among the three major religions on the concept of the sanctity of human life is an advantage which should be upheld to promote better Christian-Muslim relations.

So it can be affirmed that there is a divine dimension to Christian-Muslim relations. In other words, those who kill others, even in the name of religion, are acting contrary to God's law and are liable to His judgment. This understanding should further guide Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria as we endeavor to have a more conducive atmosphere and actualize the potentiality of our great nation.

E. **Maintain the Unity of the Nation**

A fifth principle for better Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria is to maintain the unity of the nation. The differences among the various groups in the nation notwithstanding, the amalgamation of the nation in 1914 has made it necessary for successive generations of Nigerians to work for the unity of the nation. It is appropriate to underscore the great sacrifices the fathers of the nation, and many others, have made for the unity of the nation. One way to sustain the unity is to overcome the problem of religious violence. One sad dimension of religious violence is the unfortunate impression it creates of some people being second-rate citizens where they reside in the country.

S.A. Alanamu, et al noted that "religious pluralism is an inevitable aspect of national cohesion."[15] This means that the diversity of religions must be maintained in order to have unity in the nation. The unity of the nation should be of greater importance than the interest of any group or section of it.

F. **Promote Inter-Religious Dialogue**

Inter-religious dialogue is the sixth principle to enhance better Christian- Muslim relations. The goal of inter-religious dialogue is to promote understanding and peace among adherents of the religions in dialogue. Some have observed that the many years of dialogue have not prevented violence between Christianity and Islam in Nigeria. For instance, Mustapha Abdul-Hamid noted: "Dialogues at conferences on Christian-Muslim relations have largely failed to bring the people of these faiths together."[16] Also, AI-Masih wrote:

> There are still some idealistic or humanistic Christians who hope that a sincere dialogue with Muslim(s) could lead to a common denominator between those two religions. They are blind of the reality of the Islamic spirit. As long as this curse - a command for Allah to kill all Christians on the spot as long as they claim that Jesus is the Son of God - against all followers of Christ is in the Qu'ran and engraved in the minds of Muslims, their affirmation or admiration for Christians is either ignorance or deception.[17]

In spite of the above comments, dialogue should be promoted. The writer believes that it is truth and commitment to dialogue that are needed to make religious dialogue more effective. Certainly it can be one of the tools in promoting better relations between Christians and Muslims if it is done rightly. As S. Olu Owoseni affirmed, inter-faith dialogue "is a forum where leaders of various religious groups gather together with a view to exchanging ideas on how to create an atmosphere of peace and harmony for various religious communities living together in the same society."[18] He also noted that it "is a tool capable of creating a conducive atmosphere for the practice of one's chosen faith."[19] Similarly, P. O. O. Ottuh, J. A. Ottuh and V. O. Aitufe affirmed that interfaith dialogue is "aimed at cordiality, togetherness, tolerance and acceptance that will be the true sign of a new era in the religious history of humanity."[20] Cornelius Afebu Omonokhua even stressed dialogue as a means of averting future religious war in Nigeria thus:

> The cloud on religious and ethnic co-existence is getting thicker on daily basis. Dialogue as a tool that ought to beam light on this apparent dark relationship needs to be given a renewed impetus in the face of criminal activities that now carry the label of religion. Some of the government policies and political appointments are often given a religious interpretation such that some people even perceive these as indicators of a systemic method of endorsing a particular religion as National religion. There is an escalation of mutual suspicion between Christians and Muslims because of these. To drive home this enquiry, there is need to be honest and frank if we must avert the sword that is daggling over the head of the nation. Religious war has never been funny in world history.[21]

Omonokhua's words are worthy of serious reflections and concerted actions by all who are patriotic and care for the future of the nation. Thus the potentials of inter-religious dialogue should be explored more than it has been done to promote better Christian-Muslim relations and also to avert a calamitous religious war in the not too distant future in Nigeria.

IV. **CONCLUSION**

The paper has done a brief survey of religious violence in Nigeria and also given suggestions for better Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. The writer opines that except the problem of religious violence is solved, the desire to build Nigeria as a great nation cannot be realized. Apart from the present dangers of religious violence to the nation, it also impacts negatively on the future of the country as it breeds suspicion among religious groups, corrupts the younger generation, and can lead to religious war. So, greater seriousness should be demonstrated to address the problem of religious violence. Political and religious leaders especially should desist from using religion as a means of personal and selfish interests, and as an instrument for division, destruction and hindering of the peace, and development of the nation.

ENDNOTES

[1]The information on the pre 1999 incidents is from M. Ali (1999), *Islam Reviewed*. Fort Meyers: Fish House Publishing, 84-86 while that of post 1999 is from A. Z. Apenda and A. P. Adega, "Interaction Between Religions and Maintenance of Peace and Nation Building in Nigeria: Lessons from Afrel" in *Religion and Democracy in the 21st Century*, ed. NASR Publication, 2010, 108- 110.

[2]Apenda and Adega, 109.

[3]Jacob Segun Olatunji and Kolawole Daniel, "14.8m People Affected by Boko Haram, Nigeria Tells UN," *Nigerian Tribune*, 24 May 2018, 3.

[4]Editorial, "Benue's Descent into Anarchy," *Nigerian Tribune*, 13.

[5]Ali, *Islam Reviewed,* 86.

[6]John A. Yakubu (2003), *The Dialectics of the Sharia Imbroglio in Nigeria.* Ibadan: Demyaks Law Books, 13 citing the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

[7]Efe N. Ehioghae, "Curbing Religious Violence in A Pluralistic Society; A Christian Perspective" in *Religion and Democracy in the 21st Century,* 82 citing the Constitution.

[8]Jamiu Ade Raji, "Islamic Concept of Human Rights in Nigeria," in *Perspective in Religious Studies,* Vol. II, ed. Rasheed Raji (2007) Ibadan: Ontop Publishers Limited, 140-143.

[9]H.A Abdulsalam, "Religion and Human Rights: The Islamic Perspective," in *Religions,* ed. NASR Publication, Vol. 19 December, 2008/09, 63-67.

[10]Ehioghae, "Curbing Religious Violence in A Pluralistic Society," 82.

[11]Ehioghae, 83.

[12]Abd AI-Masih, *The Great Deception* (Villach, Austria: Light of Life, 1995), 140-141. AI-Masih argued that Muhammad took this position following his failure to win the delegation of 60 Christians of Wadi Nadjran Church, led by the bishop Abu Haritna B. Alqama and their King, AI-Aqib Abd al-Masih.

[13]Simon A Kolawole, "Man As God's Representative on Earth," in *A Creation Sacred to God*, ed. Adetoye Faniran & Emiola Nihinlola (2007). Ibadan: Man and Nature Study/Action Centre, 38.

[14]Ehioghae, "Curbing Religious Violence in A Pluralistic Society," 83.

[15]S. A. Alanamu,, et.al, "Religious Pluralism and the Challenges of National Cohesion in Nigeria," in *The Relevance of Religion in Contemporary Society,* ed. NASR Publication, 2010, 2.

[16]Mustapha Abdul-Hamid, "Christian-Muslim Relations in Ghana: A Model for World Dialogue and Peace," in *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* (IJOURELS), Vol. 1, No.1, June 2011, 25.

[17]AI-Masih, *The Great Deception,* 147.

[18]S. Ola Owoseni, "The Relevance of Inter-Faith Dialogue to Theological Education in the 21st Century Nigeria," in *WAATI (Nigeria Zone) 2006 and 2007 Papers.* West African Association of Theological Institutions, Nigeria Zone Publication, ed. Samuel P. Ango and J.D. Adewale (2008). Ilorin: Modern Impressions, 144.

[19]Owoseni, 145.

[20]Cornelius Afebu Omonokhua, "Nigeria: Hope in Christian/Muslim Relations in Nigeria." https//allafrica.com/stories/201606060211.Accessed: August 23, 2018.

[21]P. O. O. Ottuh, J. A. Ottuh and V. O. Aitufe, Christian – Muslim Relations in Nigeria: The Problem and Prospects." https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ijah/article/view/104292 Accessed: August 23, 2018.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abdul-Hamid Mustapha (2011). "Christian-Muslim Relation in Ghana: A Model
 for World Dialogue and Peace," in *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* (IJOURELS), vol. 1, No. 1, June 2011.

Abdulsalam, H. A (2009). "Religion and Human Rights: The Islamic
 Perspective," in *Religions*, ed. NASR Publication, vol. 19, December 2008/2009.

Alanamu, S. A. et al (2010). Religious Pluralism and the Challenge of National
 Cohesion in Nigeria," in *The Relevance of Religion in Contemporary Society*, ed. NASR Publication.

Ali, M (1999). *Islam Reviewed*. Fort Meyer: Fish House Publishing.

Al-Mashid, Abd (1995). *The Great Deception.* Villach Austria: Light of Life.

Apenda, A. Z. and A. P. Adega (2010). "Interaction between Religions and
 Maintenance of Peace and Nation Building in Nigeria: Lessons from AFREL," in *Religion and Democracy in the 21st Century*, ed. NASR Publication.

Editorial. "Benue's Descent into Anarchy." *Nigerian Tribune*, 24 May 2018.

Ehioghae, Efe N (2010). "Curbing Religious Violence in a Pluralistic Society: A

Christian Perspective," in *Religion and Democracy in the 21st Century*, ed. NASR Publication.

Kolawole Simon A (2007). "Man as God's Representative on Earth," in *A Creation Sacred to God,* ed. Adetoye Faniran & Emiola Nihinlola. Ibadan: Man and Nature Study/Action Centre.

Olatunji, Segun Jacob and Kolawole Daniel (2018), "14.8m People Affected by Boko Haram, Nigeria Tells UN," *Nigerian Tribune,* 24 May 2018.

Omonokhua, Cornelius Afebu. "Nigeria: Hope in Christian/Muslim Relations in Nigeria." https://allafrica.com/stories/201606060211.html. Accessed: August 23, 2018.

Ottuh, P. O. O, J. A. Ottuh and V. O. Aitufe. "Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria: The Problems and Prospects." https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ijah/article/view/104292. Accessed: August 23, 2018.

Owoseni, S. Ola (2008). "The Relevance of Inter-Faith Dialogue to Theological Education in the 21st Century Nigeria," WAATI (Nigeria Zone) 2006 and 2007 Papers, ed. Samuel P. Ango and J. D. Adewale. Ilorin: Modern Impressions.

Raji, Jamiu Ade (2007). Islamic Concept of Human Rights," in Perspectives in Religious Studies, vol. II, ed. Rasheed Raji. Ibadan: Ontop Publishers Limited.

Yakubu, John A (2003). The Dialectics of the Sharia Imbroglio in Nigeria. Ibadan: Demyaks Law Books.