



INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The cultural and religious diversity of Nigeria as a nation has no doubt made peaceful co-existence which enhances the quality of life an unattainable grandiose most especially in the last two decades. The intricacy of diverse faiths, beliefs, traditions and languages coupled with religious fundamentalism and fanaticism has led to religious communalism, arson, looting, killing, rape and damage to properties. Since there can be no peace among the people without peace among religions, there can be no peace among religions without dialogue among religions. The thrust of this work therefore is to examine the place of interfaith dialogue in peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. Being an historical study, the work employs historical method in its analysis. The findings of this study however reveal that interfaith dialogue provides scope for the removal of misconceptions and misunderstandings, helps each religion to grow and develop mutually. Interfaith dialogue helps to develop pluralistic perspective by annihilating the exclusive claims of our religions, alleviates communal violence and brings peace. In view of the findings of this work, it is recommended that inter-faith dialogue should be encouraged and persistently allowed to thrive among different religions.

Keywords: *Religion, diversity, traditions, interfaith, dialogue, peaceful co-existence*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant questions people constantly ask amidst the many puzzles and challenges of contemporary life, is about whether peaceful co-existence is possible in a deeply fragmented and violent world. Unfortunately, some are even tempted to believe that Religion is responsible for the greatest percentage of violence in the world. However, the search for a society where peaceful co-existence is achievable remains the hope and desire of many people; most especially those of the world for whom daily life is a grind and without hope.

The search for viable, sustaining human society, which enhances the quality of life belongs to the deepest aspirations of the diverse religious traditions of contemporary Nigeria. How these religious traditions and the inter faith dialogue they foster might contribute to



peaceful co-existence is a critical matter (Bretherton, 2010). As religious traditions are emerging on a daily basis, people's desire to listen to one another across differences as they accept the natural vulnerabilities that attend to such an exercise become known. Without inter-faith dialogue, human community disintegrates and social cohesion becomes a fantasy.

Peaceful co-existence entails curiosity, responsiveness; trying to see the situation from the point of view of one's neighbor, striving to go beyond the narcissism of fear and anxiety. Through peaceful co-existence, we are able to see another person who is different as a full human being. According to Aristotle as cited in Peter (2011), peaceful co-existence is a means by which people attain virtue and live well with others. Moreover, Aristotle maintains, if the State fails to achieve a good ordering for the welfare and maturation of its citizens, this task could at least be achieved through friendship. It is precisely in this context that inter-faith dialogue can become a key element in nurturing friendship and peaceful co-existence. Inter-faith dialogue offers an opportunity for peaceful co-existence across diversity and difference to thrive. However, this is never a simple or easy task. Patience and attentive inter-faith engagement remain the true cost of peaceful co-existence and will no doubt offer a seed of hope for a more sustainable, healthier and vibrant society.

In this work, the meaning and history of inter-faith dialogue shall be examined. We shall also elucidate the aims and objectives of inter-faith dialogue, principles and guidelines for inter-faith dialogue; how inter-faith dialogue can be used to enhance peaceful co-existence and the challenges of inter-faith dialogue.

What is inter-faith dialogue?

Dialogue is a means of building the openness, understanding and trust needed for people to live and cooperate with one another despite their differences (<https://www.coistine.com>). Inter-faith dialogue implies the coming together of people of different faiths to a mutual understanding and respect. (<https://www.coistine.com>). The term refers to cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, (i.e. faiths') at both the individual and institutional levels. Each party remains true to its own beliefs while respecting the right of the other to practice their faith freely.

It is distinct from syncretism or alternative religion, in that it often involves promoting understanding between different religions or beliefs to increase acceptance of others rather than to synthesize new beliefs. Some inter-faith dialogues have more recently adopted the name "inter-belief" dialogue, while other proponents have proposed the term "interpath"



dialogue, which exclude those with ethical or philosophical beliefs without religious faith such as atheists, agnostics, and humanists (https://m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inter_faith_dialogue). Inter-faith dialogue is essentially a conscious attempt to build bridges of understanding, respect, harmony, and friendship among religious communities. Those involved in dialogue tend to focus on common ground rather than that which divides them to overcome stereotypes and historical grievances (http://www.new_world_encyclopedia.org/entry/interreligious_dialogue).

As we live in close proximity with people of other faiths, cultures, races and those who speak different languages, dialogue then becomes an obligation. The present and the future generations have to be more pluralistic in their attitudes, perspectives and day to day activities. Many men and women have been shaken out of their isolation and have been brought face to face with one another in common problems and tasks. Men and women of all religions and of no religion are together involved in united struggle to build a new communities. The situation therefore demands openness and understanding of one another as individuals which includes relation to their faiths whether these are religions or secular. In view of this inter-relatedness, inter faith dialogue can be described as a process of mutual understanding among men at the level where they seek to know the mystery of human existence. It refers to the union of two or more faiths, beliefs, or practices in the context of a specific situation.

History of Interfaith Dialogue

The rise of interfaith dialogue has been made possible by two fold processes. The first process is the unprecedented global interaction in the modern age, which has provided abundant opportunity for religious communist and individuals that interact with one another. The second process is an awareness of the need to overcome religious conflicts often associated with theological imperialism and colonialism. Inter-faith dialogue therefore had started in the ancient time, though with little or no success because the believers in different religions either kept their distance or had been in conflict. The sad reality has been that most of the time believers had remained ignorant about one another. The situation became worse, especially in the case of Christians and Muslims, attracting themselves.

The first notable dialogue in the world history was organized by Paulus (Pablo) in July 20th 1263 and was named “Disputation of Barcelona” which involved the Jews and Christians. (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/inter-faithdialouge>) Nachmanides was the only



Jewish representative while Apostate Paulus, Dominicans Raymond de Penaforte, Raymond Martini, and Arnoid de Segarra, and the general of the Franciscan can order in the kingdom, Peter de Janua, were among Christian disputants. The four sessions of the dialogue took place in July 20, 23, 26 and 27. Nahmanides was guaranteed complete freedom of speech in the debate. He took full advantage of the opportunity thus afforded and spoke with remarkable frankness (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interfatih_dialogue). It was recorded that the dialogue was not formally concluded, but was interrupted and Nahmanides the only Jewish representative fled prematurely from the city. While the dialogue might have been a great achievement for Paulus Christiani in his innovative use of rabbinia sources in Christian missionary efforts, for Nahmanides it represented an additional example of the wise and courageous leadership which he offered his people (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/inter-faith_dialogue).

The origin of formal interreligious dialogue in the modern period can be traced to the 1893 World's parliament of Religions that brought together people of different religions from the East and the West and was held as part of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago (<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/interreligions>). It was often regarded as the birth of interfaith movement. Although some participants of the interfaith dialogue were apologists for their religions, even to the point of comparing their own religion at its best with others at their worst, in retrospect the World's Parliament Religion has come to be seen as the beginning of a process of more positive assessments of other religions that had previously happened and of respectful engagement with their devotees. Despite its limitations, the 1893 parliament was a significant achievement (http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/interreligions_dialogue)

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of various interfaith organizations. In 1900, the international Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) was founded. In December 1914, just after World War I began, a group of Christians gathered in Cambridge, England to found the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). The membership includes, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Indigenous religious practitioners, Bahai and people of other faith traditions as well as those with no formal religions affiliation (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/inter_faith_dialogue).

In 1936, the World Congress of Faiths (WCF) was formed in London. One of its purposes is to bring people of faith together to enrich their understandings of their own and tradition of others. Following the devastation of World War II, the Fellowship In Prayer was



founded. Other interfaith organizations that emerged include: the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) 1952; the Center for the Study of World Religions (1958); Temple of Understanding (1960); World Council of Churches Conference (1967); World Conference of Religions for Peace (1970) and the Inter Faith Conference of Metropolitan Washington (IFC) (1978); (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/interfaith_dialogue).

In 1994, the Interfaith Alliance was created to celebrate religious freedom and to challenge the bigotry and hatred arising from and political extremism infiltrating American politics. The Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum and Rumi Forum were founded in 1998 and 1999 respectively.

In the 21st century, many interfaith organizations also emerged. One of these organization include: Untied Religions Initiatives (2000); the Children of Abraham Institute (2001); World Council of Religions Leaders (UNCRI) (2002); Interfaith Centre for Sustainable Development (2010) King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz international Centre for Inter-religious and Intercultural Dialogue (2012) and interfaith Association for service to Humanity and Nature (2017) (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_dialogue).

In spite of the long history of interfaith dialogue as discussed above, it is still very unfortunate that religious intolerance still persists in many places. Most especially African countries. Nevertheless, there is hope that interfaith dialogue can still change the trend.

Aims and Objectives of Interfaith Dialogue

Before itemizing the aims of interfaith dialogue, we need to discuss what it is not as this will remove every misconception people are having about it. The aim of dialogue is not to reduce living faiths and ideologies to lowest common denomination. It is also not about talking away or brushing aside differences. It does not also at coming to a common belief. Interfaith dialogue is not a way of converting the other. In dialogue, each party remains true to its own faith. It must also be emphasized also that interfaith dialogue is not a space for arguing attacking or disproving the beliefs of others.

The purpose of dialogue is three-fold: (i) to remove ignorance and misconceptions about participants' beliefs and practices and to promote informed understanding, critical appreciation and balanced judgment on matters of faith (ii) to work together for a common purpose in society, particularly where human rights, social and economic justice and peace in the community and the nation are concerned and lovely (iii) to bring to bear the deeper



resources of our respective faiths on the basic problems of human existence that arise because of human finiteness

Principle and Guidelines for interfaith dialogue

Before interfaith dialogue can bring about the expected peaceful co-existence in Nigeria, there are some principles and guidelines that the participants must take cognizance of. These principles shall be discussed below:

Inter-faith, interreligious and inter ideological dialogue must be a two-sided project within each religious or ideological community. It should not be seen as a one-man-show. It should not be the affair of a particular religion or community but rather cooperate affairs. All the religions and the communities involved should be made to participate actively. Each participant must come to dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity. Dialogue at every level should be done with all sincerity. The participants should approach issues with sincerity of heart.

For interfaith dialogue to bring expected result in Nigeria, the participants must not compare their ideals with their partners' practice, but rather their ideals with their partners' ideals, their practice with their partners' practice. Each participant must define himself – conversely, the interpreted must be able to recognize himself in the interpretation. For example, only a Muslim can describe what it really means to be an authentic member of the Muslim community. At the same time, when one's partner in dialogue attempts to describe back to them what they have understood of their partner's self-description, then such a description must be recognizable to the described party.

Participants must not come to the dialogue with any preconceptions as to where the points of disagreement lie. A process of agreeing with their partners as much as possible, without violating the integrity of their own tradition, will reveal where the real boundaries between the traditions lie; the point where he or she cannot agree without going against the principle of their own tradition.

Dialogue can only take place between equals, which means that partners learn from one another and do not merely seek to teach one another. Dialogue can only take place on the basis of mutual trust; because it is individuals and not entire communities, that enter into



dialogue, it is essential for personal trust to be established. To encourage this, it is important that less controversial matters are discussed before dealing with the more controversial ones.

Participants in dialogue should have a healthy level of criticism toward their own traditions lack of such criticism implies that one's tradition has all the answers, thus making dialogue not only unnecessary, but unrealistic. The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, which is impossible if one's tradition is seen as having all the answers. To truly understand another person's religion or ideology, one must try to experience it from within, which requires a passing over, even if only momentarily, into other participant's religious or ideological experience.

How inter-faith dialogue can be used to enhance peaceful co-existence in Nigeria

In a multi-religious society like Nigeria, it is only interfaith dialogue that can make peaceful co-existence a reality because it represents a process of mutual understanding among men at the level where they seek to know the mystery of towards existence. Dialogue being a mood, spirit, attitude of love and respect reward adherents of other faiths no doubt has the potential to enhance peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

The polarization that is growing between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria has been fuelled by wars, persecution, injustices and individuals and groups that stir up religious divisions to achieve political or material gain. Dialogue between Muslims and Christians is needed now more than ever before to address the issues causing this growing division. The fact that Muslims and Christians make up over 50% of Nigeria's population make dialogue and peaceful co-existence imperative (www.Scarboromissions.com) Since interfaith dialogue increases mutual understanding and good relations, if it is allowed and organized persistently in Nigeria, the much needed peaceful co-existence between adherents of different religions will be achieved. If interfaith or interreligious dialogue will not be considered as something that only takes place on an official or academic level but seen as part of daily life during which different religious groups interact with one another, peaceful co-existence shall be possible.

Interfaith dialogue will no doubt enhance peaceful co-existence in Nigeria if it is not considered as "optional extra." There are people, within every community of faith, who, for various reasons, deliberately reject new relationships and choose to remain isolated. This attitude can only lead to a closed particularity that feed on itself and in the process impoverishes the community. Persistent interfaith dialogue where adherents of different



religions will rub mind and cross-fertilize ideas will remove every misconception and make peaceful co-existence a reality

Interfaith dialogue will promote peaceful co-existence if the participants condemn violence and terrorism as being against the spirit of all true religion. The participants should therefore pledge to remove their causes. The erroneous belief by some adherents of certain religions that God's blessing will be upon those that kill in the name of religion should be totally condemned during interfaith dialogue. Good aspects of all the religions should be emphasized. When adherents of every religion that participate in interfaith dialogue stress and talk more on aspect of their religions that can bring unity and not anarchy the much expected peace that Nigerians desire shall reign among every tribe, ethnic and religion.

Interfaith dialogue will greatly enhance peaceful co-existence in Nigeria when the participants respect the integrity of all religions and ensure that they have the freedom to follow their own beliefs and practices. Since no religion shall be considered as superior to others during interfaith dialogue rather, every religion is treated equally with respect, peaceful co-existence in Nigeria shall be made possible and progress in every sphere of life achievable.

We strongly believe that different religions are enriched by identifying agendas in which they can collaborate, such as making peace, protecting the environment, eradicating poverty and ensuring the human dignity of all. With this belief interfaith affirm that it is important for us all to listen to and learn from other religions so that we can value plurality as a factor that enriches our communities. Whenever religious plurality is valued, our communities will not only be enriched, but peaceful co-existence among various tribes, ethnics and religions shall be promoted.

Peaceful co-existence shall be made possible through interfaith dialogue because the participants endeavor to live out and explain the truth of their own religion in a manner that is intelligible and friendly to people of other faiths.

Importance of Interfaith Dialogue

Religions play a vital role in forming our attitudes and thoughts, ideals and values of living. Hence, being the finite, human expressions of the one divine mystery, have to fulfill the task of bringing people together as believers of this mystery in love and justice (Thomas, 1993). Interfaith dialogue is therefore necessary in view of its numerous benefits to humanity.



Interfaith dialogue removes religious fundamentalism and fanaticism which often leads to religious communalism, arson, looting, killing and damage of properties. The selfish attitude of people coupled with destructive personal interest promote religious fundamentalism and fanaticism which divide and create communal disharmony to fulfill their selfish desire. Interfaith dialogue provides space for people of different religions to come together and discuss about their religions, clarify doubts and promote interreligious understanding it also creates interreligious relations, which removes frictions among religions and religious communities.

Interfaith dialogue helps us understand our religion better in the context of pluralism (Thomas, 1993). It enables us to have our doubts clarified with regard to other religions. It provides opportunity for us to re-read our scriptures, doctrines and dogmas in the context of pluralism. Interfaith dialogue creates a healthy atmosphere where doctrines and dogmas are interpreted in the presence of other faiths.

Through dialogue, the adherents of each religion develops openness and broad mindedness. They begin to respect other faiths. It educates its adherents theologically and ultimately enables them to create new insights about other faiths. It helps the adherents to respect other faiths and enables them see the meaning and truth revealed in other faiths (shodyganpa.mflibnet.ac.in.bistram).

Interfaith dialogue helps each religion to grow and develop mutually. Each religion through dialogue helps other religion for its enrichment. Interfaith dialogue provides space for the religions to contribute and complement each other. The opportunity created in dialogue enables religions to clarify their doubts, misconceptions and misunderstanding about other faiths and further contributes towards other religions' development and growth.

Dialogue provides scope for the misconceptions and misunderstandings to be removed. The tension created between religions through these misunderstanding is also removed by dialogue. According to Thomas (1993), theories that say there will be clashes between civilizations, cultures and religions become meaningless when we experience the possibility of unity and fellowship between religions through interfaith dialogue. The clouds of suspicion and apprehension are getting dispelled and fresh breeze of open-minded reception to other faiths flow.

Through dialogue, were able to see the truth in other faiths and some time we have opportunity to criticize others in a healthy situation. Interreligious dialogue and common praxis surely – widen and deepend our own religious experience complement it, and sharpen



our framework. There can be elements in religions, which are opposed to genuine human dignity and growth, but it is only through interfaith dialogue that such matters can be clarified, through its hindrances are overcome and progress achieved (shodhganpa.in/flibnet.confrastingac.in.bistraem). Despite the various advantages and significance of interfaith dialogue; there are challenges confronting this phenomenon. These challenges shall be discussed below:

Challenges of Inter-faith dialogue

One of the notable challenges confronting interfaith dialogue is the attitude that minimizes difference, to the point of viewing all religions as basically the same. Portraying different religions as the same prevents us from seriously learning from one another. It also manifests a cultural arrogance, for in claiming that we are all basically the same, one makes one's own subjective understanding of one's own faith tradition or heritage the sole criterion for a positive value judgment of others. (<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu.com>). Such an approach not only reflects the limitations of only being able to appreciate and respect those who are very much like oneself, but also minimizes the value of the diversity of human society and its various forms of spiritual expression.

Another challenge of interfaith dialogue emanates from a popular theory that states that each religion or culture is a completely self-contained system that expresses itself in a particular language and pattern of symbols that can only be understood in relation to other words and symbols that constitute the complete system. This leads to the claim that interfaith dialogue is impossible because the participants are never talking the same language or mean the same things (<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu.com>).

There is an element of truth in the argument that much is lost in translation whether verbal or cultural, and that one needs to be wary of simplistic attempts in this regard. Nevertheless, the participants of interreligious dialogue must experience this vital issue and it is needed in dialogue. Credence must however be given to the fact that even if the language, terminology and experience of those who engage in dialogue are not perfectly the same, this does not mean that adherents of various religions cannot learn from one another. Those who involve in interfaith dialogue can testify to profound enrichment gained from dialogue with people of other faith traditions; there is therefore the need for persistent interfaith dialogue if we are to overcome our various challenges.



One of the biggest challenges for contemporary society as a whole is the violent abuse of religion that threatens peaceful co-existence everywhere. Economic and political marginalization coupled with the manifest psychology of those who feel that they lack the respect and value they crave for lead to religious conflicts and violence. It must therefore be observed that reaching out to the other in an Abrahamic spirit of hospitality can play a critically valuable role in giving communities and their members a sense that they are welcome and respected by other communities. This will help combat feelings of alienation and lack of respect that fuel violent reactions.

CONCLUSION

Without any iota of doubt, interfaith understanding increases empathetic learning, it is compounded by the common concern and encouragement of the values of peace, humanity and compassion. Our religious traditions have the necessary resources to overcome the fragmentations that we experience in Nigeria. Though we are aware that many tragic conflicts around the world are the result of convenient but often unjust association, political and economic interests, nevertheless, it is a fact that cannot be disputed that the problems in the world and Nigeria in particular are so great that we cannot solve them alone. There is therefore an urgent need for interfaith collaboration. This collaboration does not imply giving up one's own religious identify but rather it is a journey of discovery. It is a collaboration among the different religions which must be based on the rejection of fanaticism and extremism which lead to violence.

In view of the above submission, this paper therefore recommends that religious leaders should strive to promote the spirit of dialogue within their respective communities. Nigerians should not allow religion to be used to incite hatred and violence. We should not allow religion to be used to justify discrimination.. Every Nigerian should also respect the role of religion in the society at national and international levels. Above all interfaith dialogue should be encouraged and persistently allowed to thrive among different religions.

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