



## CONTEMPORARY MULTI RELIGIOUS AND PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE OF ISLAM IN NIGERIA'S STATE

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### Abstract

*According to Karl Marx; Religion is the opium of the masses, the sop of the oppressed while Sigmund Freud defined it as a childhood fear or neuroses. The foregoing definition indicates that religion is a product of fear and insecurity. Religion serves as a unifying factor among adherents who share a belief system but it should be noted that it also becomes a divisive factor among those who share different belief systems. Various religions exist in the world and a few of them are consistently at loggerheads with each other because each claims a monopoly of a supreme being or all powerful deities who direct and guide the affairs of the society. The constant clashes between various religions in a multicultural society tend to lead to the violation of universal human rights, intolerance and unforgiveness since such societies are marked by mistrust, intolerance and fear. The most notorious religions exhibiting intolerance the world over are Islam and Christianity because of their rabid belief in the supremacy of their deity. These two religions have been at loggerheads for a long time. Although they both claim to be religions of peace and love respectively but have practiced hatred and warfare consistently. This hypocritical mien creates a cause for concern given the stark difference between the theory and practice of their religion. This paper focuses on the aptitude of peace as presented and practiced in Islamic adherents in a multicultural state like Nigeria. Islam; although indicating peace etymologically has precipitated the exhibition of disruptive, violent, religio-phobic, religio-centric and terrorist behaviours among adherents in the Nigerian state. Muslims have been known to have killed Christians and destroyed their properties indiscriminately during religious conflict in many cases. The Christians also did not waste time before revenging. This paper critically pinpoints how Islamic principles can be utilized to enforce and perpetuate peaceful coexistence as translated into human civic responsibility, democratic demeanor, responsible citizenship, cultured dialogue and tolerance among the peoples in the multicultural society of Nigeria.*

### INTRODUCTION

Geertz (1973) defines religion as a collection of cultural systems, belief systems, and worldviews that establishes symbols that relate humanity to spirituality and, sometimes, to moral values. Many religions have narratives, symbols, traditions and sacred histories that are intended to give meaning to life or to explain the origin of life or the universe. They tend to derive morality, ethics, religious laws or a preferred lifestyle from their ideas about the cosmos and human nature (Harvey, 2000).

The word *religion* is sometimes used interchangeably with *faith* or *belief system*, but religion differs from private belief in that it has a public aspect (Asad, 1982). Some religions have organized behaviors, clergy, a definition of what constitutes adherence or membership, congregations of laity, regular meetings or services for the purposes of veneration of a deity or for prayer, holy places (either natural or architectural), and/or scriptures. The practice of a religion may also include sermons, commemoration of the activities of a god or gods, sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trance, initiations, funerary services, matrimonial services, meditation, music, art, dance, public service, or other aspects of human culture (Vergote, 1997).

The development of religion has taken different forms in different cultures. Some religions place an emphasis on belief, while others emphasize practice. Some religions focus on the subjective experience of the religious individual, while others consider the activities of the religious community to be most important. Some religions claim to be universal, believing their laws and cosmology to be binding for everyone, while others are



intended to be practiced only by a closely defined or localized group. Monaghan (2000) asserted that, "it seems apparent that one thing religion or belief helps us do is deal with problems of human life that are significant, persistent, and intolerable. One important way in which religious beliefs accomplish this is by providing a set of ideas about how and why the world is put together that allows people to accommodate anxieties and deal with misfortune."

Religion is dichotomised into dual yet intertwining phases. The first is its nature as a belief system (Grosby, 1994). There is in nearly every human group, belief in a supernatural being such as a High God called various names in Nigeria for example Obase (Woden) and (Yakurr), Chukwu (Igbo), Olorun (Yoruba) and Oghene (Urhobo). There is also a general belief in other spirits' and supernatural beings for fertility of women and crops, defence, thunder, etc. The second aspect of religion concerns the organization or the body of believers with an identity and a hierarchy of office holders under formulated rules, regulations and practices, and using such symbols as the Qur'an, Bible, Church, Mosque, Ancestral Shrine, etc. It is usual to find that human and material resources are mobilized to maintain the exclusivity of membership and participation at places of worship. While traditional religion may be locally specific, for example, as limited to an ancestral descent group, village or town, foreign religions such as Islam and Christianity are universalistic (Grosby, 1994).

### **Nigeria: A Multi-Religion Society**

Africa in general and Nigeria in particular are very religious in their nature and this demeanour has seriously influenced their politics and way of life (Iskenderov, 1972, Baker, 1994, Joseph, 1998, Smith, 2001). Of interest however in this paper is the Nigerian multicultural state.

Nigeria is a heterogeneous state. This heterogeneous nature extends to the belief systems of the people (Ake, 1990). In spite of the multiplicity in religion, there are two dominant religious groups. Christianity is one of these religions and in it are a broad range of churches spanning the gamut from the mainstream Roman Catholic and Anglican churches to a myriad of smaller Protestant organizations. These latter include many Pentecostal denominations that tend to be quite aggressive in their proselytizing. Islam is the other religion. The two Islamic sects are Sunni and the Shiites (Ikenga-Metuh, 1994, Egwu, 2001).

Traditional worshippers also exist. These are people who are adherents of ancestral religion and worship of deities and gods. These include the worshippers of gods like Ogun, Sango, Ifa, Orunmila, Obatala, Eshu, Obaluaye, Aganju etc and goddesses like Osun Osogbo, Oya, Oba, Yemoja etc. It should be noted however that there is a high level of syncretism in Nigeria. In such cases, Christians and Muslims identify and participate in one form of traditional worship or the other. Northern Nigeria is widely believed to be made up predominantly of Muslims while the southern part of Nigeria is believed to be mostly Christian. The truth however, is that there exists in the all parts of Nigeria a potpourri of religious entities (Ikenga-Metuh, 1994, Egwu, 2001).

Also existing in Nigeria are other minority religious and spiritual groups like Guru Maharaji, Sufism, The Bahai Faith, Hinduism, Judaism, and Chrislam (a syncretic faith melding elements of Christianity and Islam). Further, Nigeria has become an African hub for the Grail Movement and the Hare Krishna (McLaughlin, 2006, Ebonugwo, 2004).

This paper focuses predominantly on the Islamic religion.

### **Islam: A concept**

Islam is the monotheistic religion articulated by the Qur'an, a text considered by its adherents to be the verbatim word of God (*Allāh*), and by the teachings and normative



example (called the *Sunnah* and composed of *Hadith*) of Muhammad, considered by them to be the last prophet of God. An adherent of Islam is called a *Muslim* (Esposito, 1998).

Muslims believe that God is one and incomparable and the purpose of existence is to love and serve God. Muslims also believe that Islam is the complete and universal version of a primordial faith that was revealed at many times and places before, including through Abraham, Moses and Jesus, whom they consider prophets. They maintain that previous messages and revelations have been partially changed or corrupted over time, but consider the Qur'an to be both the unaltered and the final revelation of God (Accad, 2003, Bennett, 2010). Religious concepts and practices include the five pillars of Islam, which are basic concepts and obligatory acts of worship, and following Islamic law, which touches on virtually every aspect of life and society, providing guidance on multifarious topics from banking and welfare, to warfare and the environment (Esposito, 2002a).

According to Cavendish (2010), the majority of Muslims are Sunni, being 75–90% of all Muslims. The second largest sect, Shia, makes up 10–20%. The largest Muslim country is Indonesia home to 12.7% of the world's Muslims followed by Pakistan (11.0%), India (10.9%), and Bangladesh (9.2%). Sizable communities are also found in China, Russia, and parts of Europe. With over 1.5 billion followers or over 22% of earth's population (Miller, 2009). Islam is the second-largest and one of the fastest-growing religions in the world (Lippman, 2008, Miller, 2009).

The core beliefs of Islam are that there is only one God – unitary and beyond comprehension – and that Muhammad is the prophet of God, the last in a series of prophets beginning with Adam (Esposito, 2002b). The Qur'an is upheld as the eternal, literal word of God, and revelations to earlier prophets, as seen in the Jewish Torah and Christian Gospels, are believed to have become distorted by human intervention. Muslims believe that the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel, and belief in angels as God's servants is part of the Islamic tradition. Belief in the Day of Judgment, when all people will undergo bodily resurrection and be judged by God, is another core tenet. While Sunni and Shi'a Muslims adhere to these basic beliefs, Shi'a also believe in the Imamate, the line of infallible spiritual and political leaders who succeeded Muhammad, beginning with his cousin and son-in-law, Ali (Madelung, 1996).

Islam's most fundamental concept is a rigorous monotheism, called *tawhīd*. God is described in chapter 112 of the Qur'an as: "Say: He is God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him." (112:1-4) Muslims repudiate the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and divinity of Jesus, comparing it to polytheism, but accept Jesus as a prophet. In Islam, God is beyond all comprehension and Muslims are not expected to visualize God. God is described and referred to by certain names or attributes, the most common being *Al-Rahmān*, meaning "The Compassionate" and *Al-Rahīm*, meaning "The Merciful" (Esposito, 2004, Griffith, 2006).

Muslims believe that creation of everything in the universe is brought into being by God's sheer command "Be' and so it is." and that the purpose of existence is to love and serve God. He is viewed as a personal God who responds whenever a person in need or distress calls Him. There are no intermediaries, such as clergy, to contact God who states "We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein" (Bentley, 1999).

### **Islam in Nigeria**

There are a lot of Muslims in Nigeria but they are also divided into sects. The majority traditional Islamic sects, all of which are followers of Sunni Islam, include the



Qadriyya, the Tijaniyya, the Tariqa, the Malikiya, the Ahmadiya, and the Islamiya. Another group is the Da'awa (some use the term to designate a separate sect, some use it as a synonym for hisba, the group that enforces shari'a provisions while still others use it to denote the preaching arm of the hisba). The newer and more fundamentalist sects include the Shiites, Izala and the Ahmadiya. The Izala in particular tend to attract educated young men and women (Ikenga-Metuh, 1994, Egwu, 2001).

### **Religious intolerance in Nigeria**

Nigeria has been the arena of religious violence over the years (Obasanjo & Mabogunje, 1992, Edewor, 2011). However, the recent dramatic surge in xenophobic expressions, the hardening of religious positions and the proliferation of religious terrorist groups that have unleashed varying degrees of violence and terror on the polity (Otite, 1999, Edewor, 2011). In spite of concerted efforts being made to curtail violent conflict in Nigeria, the problem has been on the increase, especially since the return of democracy in May 1999 (Otite & Albert, 1999, Edewor, 2011).

Ikenga-Metuh (1994), identifies three broad types of religious violence in Nigeria viz:

- i. Intra-religious disturbances which occur between different denominations or sects.
- ii. Inter-religious conflicts prevalent between adherents of different religious beliefs, but capable of assuming socio-ethnic dimensions; and
- iii. Inter-religious conflicts which, though, have socio-economic origin, end up in the form of religious conflict.

He noted that "most inter-religious disturbances in Nigeria usually develop into inter-ethnic conflicts even where they began as a purely religious disagreement. Also, some socio-ethnic conflicts are deflected and fought out under inter-religious banner". This is not surprising because, there is a very strong correlation between ethnic and religious boundaries in Nigeria's plural setting. Hence, the tendency for the boundary between the two forms of identity to collapse during moments of conflicts and violence has been captured in the phrase, "ethno-religious" violence (Barber, 1988, Chazan, 1992, Lane & Errson, 1996, Toft, 2003).

These worrisome developments threaten harmonious co-existence and jeopardize the unity of the Nigeria nation- state and its fledging democratic experiment far more than any other challenges of democratic consolidation. From data gathered, religious conflict has been devastating and persistent in all geopolitical zones of Nigeria (The Nation, 2010).

Other than the religious conflicts, a more worrying development to many Nigerians has been the emergence of religious terrorist groups like the Boko Haram (Western education is a taboo) and its break away cell the Al Sunna Wal Jamma (Arabic for "followers of Mohammed's teachings") Islamic movement of Muslim citizens and university students respectively fighting to create a Taliban-style Muslim state in Nigeria. They are usually offshoots of Muslim sects that have arisen in response to the calls for faith-based partners issued by Islamic governments and religious groups from Libya, Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries.

### **Islam, Fanaticism, Law and Nigeria**

Some 11 northern states in Nigeria, beginning with Zamfara on October 27, 1999, and including Sokoto, Kano, and Niger, passed into law the criminal law sections of the Islamic shari'a code of conduct. The states concerned advanced with varying speed toward application. Zamfara and Katsina, for example, are now applying the code. Included as part of the shari'a criminal code are the penalties for specific violations, for example, flogging for imbibing alcohol, removal of hands and then feet for recidivist thieves, and stoning in cases of proven adultery (the standard of proof for the last type of behavior is very high). Many



northern politicians supported the so-called shari'a movement through personal conviction, political opportunism, political realism, or a sense that they should represent the wishes of those who elected them (The Guardian, 1999).

This poses a constitutional problem because the Nigerian constitution guarantees a secular state, guarantees freedom of religion, and vests in states concurrent power to establish their own court systems. At both constitutional and practical levels, these guarantees are incompatible in light of the fact that Islam rejects separation of political from religious authority and proposes a unified theocratic system of governance (Ilesanmi, 2001, Owobi, 2002).

The former Governor of Zamfara State, Ahmed Sani introduced and applied the criminal provisions of the shari'a code and realized considerable political advantage from his support for shari'a. The local population strongly supported the application of shari'a and the governor who made it possible. By contrast, the former Kaduna State Governor E.H. Ahmed Mohammed Makarfi deliberately and successfully sought to restrict the application of shari'a civil and criminal provisions to Muslim populations of the state. In Kano, the elected state leadership appeared split over the advisability of applying shari'a provisions (The Guardian, 1999). This status quo still holds presently in these states.

Underlying these different public political agendas are significant variations in the character of local Muslim populations. Although most Muslims in the northern part of Nigeria follow orthodox Sunni Islam and the Maliki School of shari'a jurisprudence, Shiite Islam, in its Iranian variant, has attracted some adepts. These include the Shiite leader, Sheikh El Zakzaky, who initially opposed applying shari'a in Kano because he argued that the underlying socioeconomic conditions necessary for its proper application were not present. Both Zakzaky and another Shiite leader, Abubakar Mujahid, are champions of a thorough Islamic revolution to convert society to Islam (The Guardian, 1999).

The Sunni group comprises several sects. In Katsina city, for instance, five are represented: Qadriyya, Tijani, Tarika, Shia, and Izala. Some of these have political programs that focus heavily on shari'a at the moment. The Izala attract bright, young, educated individuals who are strongly committed to Islam and to the application of the shari'a criminal code. As Sharia sect members follow Shiite teachings, local indigenous political leaders view them as radical and believe they are committed to the overthrow of existing government. Other sects; the Qadriyya, Tijani, and Ahamadiyya, for instance seem less committed on the political front and more centered on the practice of Islam as a nonmilitant doctrine (Egwu, 2001). The Shiites and sometimes the Izala are said to oppose applying shari'a in Nigeria until such time as religious leaders have taken over political leadership of the country. Whereas the hisba includes representatives of all sects, in Kano it tends to be dominated by Izalas and Da'awa. Some liberal Muslims are generally opposed to a nonsecular form of government and the implementation of shari'a.

Despite these differences, Muslims in northern Nigeria can act together in a disciplined manner when they consider it politically necessary. But groups and leaders in each state also pursue their own agendas, including relationships with Christians. In some traditional chieftaincies (e.g., Katsina and Gumel), relationships between Muslim political and religious leaders and Christians appear better than in others (Ballad, 1972). Some Muslim and Christian leaders have sought to engage in peaceful dialogue, and there would appear to be real opportunities in this area that should be exploited (Tell, 2010).

The northern part of Nigeria counts a large number of Christian denominations. Christians span the full spectrum, from militant born-again proselytizers to merely born-into-



Christianity liquor sellers. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) members may not have represented either extreme, but they expressed clear determination to continue their religious missions, even if martyrdom might be the price of doing so (Tell, 2010).

Following the adoption of the shari'a criminal code by Zamfara State in October 1999, northern Muslim political and religious leaders established the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria (SCSN), an organization designed to promote adoption of shari'a in other Nigerian states. Christian groups in the southern half of the country and in the Middle Belt reacted sharply to what they perceived as a Muslim, northern effort to lay the foundations for an Islamic, theocratic state (Tell, 2010).

Boko Haram (literally, Western or non-Islamic education is a sin, from Boko and Haram) (Coulman, 1999, Austin, 1999, BBC News, 2009) is a Nigerian militant Islamist group that seeks the imposition of Shariah law throughout all 36 states of Nigeria. The group was founded in 2002 in Maiduguri by the late Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf but is now being led by Mallam Sanni Umaru . In 2004 it moved to Kanamma, Yobe State, where it set up a base called "Afghanistan", used to attack nearby police outposts, killing police officers. Yusuf is hostile to democracy and the secular education system, vowing that "this war that is yet to start would continue for long" if the political and educational system was not changed (Al Jazeera, 2009). In Bauchi the group was reported as refusing to mix with local people. The group includes members who come from neighbouring Chad and speak only Arabic (The News, 2009).

Boko Haram opposes not only Western education, but Western culture and modern science as well. In a 2009, BBC interview, Yusuf the late leader of the group stated that the belief that the world is a sphere is contrary to Islam and should be rejected, along with Darwinism and the theory that rain comes from water evaporated by the sun.

In light of the foregoing it should be noted that the leader of any religious group plays a vital role in determining if the group will engage in violent activities and thereby constitute a threat to other entities in the society. Many religious leaders have often used religion as a platform to actualize their personal hidden agendas which is often a threat to peaceful coexistence. Under the guise of religious freedom, these adherents foment trouble. Some religious adherents attack government personnel and claim they were instructed by God from the Quran just as Boko Haram is presently doing in Nigeria while others use outdated religious laws which are repugnant as a weapon for victimizing people who are not adherents as shown by the introduction of the Sharia law in northern states which when applied to non Muslims directly violates their rights because they are not subject to the authority of such laws by their differing belief system.

In some other cases, Islamic political leaders have been known to collude with some religious leaders to foment trouble and perpetrate violent acts against citizens of other religious inclination in order to gain political advantage as indicated by the activities of some Governors in the Northern part of Nigeria (The Guardian, 2009). Some of these political leaders whip up religious sentiments during electioneering and use it to cause a commotion.

### **The Quran: Prescription for Peaceful Coexistence in a multi-religious context.**

Islam is supposed to mean peace but in practice a lot of evil and strife has been attached to it by people from various persuasion of life, more especially those in the western world. A critical look shows this to be true as indicated by the activities of Osama Bin Laden and other terrorist groups and the violent upheavals in some Islamic countries in Africa. The picture of Islam presented in worldwide events and local political situations are believed by



some to stereotype and raise prejudices against Islam. This is however not the case because facts do not lie. The origin of Islam itself is one filled with bloodshed as indicated by the Jihad (The forceful conversion or annihilation of people of other religious persuasion).

The Jihad spread to other nations and in Nigeria, the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio led to the Islamisation of the north while the invitation of Afonja to the north led to the Islamisation of Kwara and Kogi States in southern Nigeria. This mien of consistent warfare as exhibited by Mohammed and other succeeding Islamic leaders in all parts of the world serves as a standard for many other Muslims to emulate. The fact that Muslims are labeled as violent serves as a self fulfilling prophecy to make them violent. The tendency by Muslims to call people who are non-Muslims Kaffiri (unbelieving dogs) is another crucial factor that discourages peaceful coexistence with other religious entities in Nigeria and the world over.

In order to reduce this negative demeanor of violence and intolerance among Muslims a certain mindset should be adopted and certain actions need to be carried out. Muslims must engage in consistent dialogue with their neighbours from other religious persuasion. Islamic religious leaders should encourage interfaith dialogue with representatives of other religions. They must encourage their followers to put themselves in the shoes of these other religious entities so that they can better understand them and tolerate them thereby.

One important constituent of faith in Islam is that a Muslim should also have faith in all the earlier prophets and holy books and scriptures revealed to them along with having faith in the holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Islam's divine book, the holy Quran has forbidden Muslims to speak ill of other religions and their gods and deities. In this way the Quran advocates a multicultural society where the followers of all religions live together and believe in peaceful coexistence. Muslims must follow this injunction of the Quran to the letter for peace to reign.

In Islamic belief system, God sent Adam and Eve down to the earth and spread the human beings through them. He created human beings in different colour, height and physique. He also created different ethnic and linguistic communities among them because God wanted to save this vast world from uniformity and monotony. A hadith says, 'God is beautiful and appreciates beauty'. And beauty lies not in uniformity but in variety. He, therefore, created millions of species of animals and plants (Fatir: 27-28). Therefore, to save the world from uniformity, God caused communities and ethnicities to differentiate one another. By doing so, God also wanted to test men in various ways. (Al Hujurat: 13). In other words, after creating linguistic and ethnic communities and nations among human beings, God says that only pious and the righteous among them would achieve higher status in His eyes and not his lineage, social and financial status. And pious and righteous is one who does justice to other human beings on earth, raises his voice against injustice and oppression and abstains from evil deeds. Tribes and nations are only an identity.

Despite this multiculturalism and variety, the Quran strives to build a peaceful pluralist society by binding the entire humanity together on the following lines:

- 1) Recognising all the prophets and holy scriptures and respecting all religions

The uniqueness of the character of the Quran lies in the fact that on the one hand it is a model code of conduct for the followers of Islam and on the other, its purpose is to strengthen the bond of humanity by promoting love, harmony and unity among all the religious communities (ummahs). It does not try to prove its superiority by denying the authenticity or existence of other divine books, but rather it holds testimony to them because all the prophets were messengers of God receiving divine revelations from Him. Henceforth, all the prophets from Adam (AS) to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) brought the same religion and the message they brought was the same: Oneness of God and negation of shirk.



Therefore, the Quran says that the message it brought is not different from what the previous divine books brought but in fact it is their reiteration, justification and culmination. God says about the Quran: "And what We have inspired in you (O Muhammad SAW), of the Book (the Quran), it is the (very) truth [that you (Muhammad SAW) and your followers must act on its instructions], confirming that which was (revealed) before it. Verily! Allah is indeed All Aware, and All Seer of His slaves." (Fatir: 31)

Similarly some other prophets' names also feature in the Quran on different occasions. All these prophets taught people to keep away from sins, have faith in the oneness of God and abstain from shirk and kufr. Hence the Quran makes it clear that its teachings are not anything new and the religion it has brought is not new; rather it is the high point and culmination of all the religions that existed earlier. That's why the Quran instructs Muslims to have faith in all the prophets including Moses and Jesus, have faith in the holy Zaboor (Psalms), Tourat (Torah) and Injeel (Gospel) and not to badmouth about them because it has a negative impact on the Quran's efforts to unite all the ummahs". "And insult not those whom they (disbelievers) worship besides Allah, lest they insult Allah wrongfully without knowledge." (Al An'am:108).

The Quran says that every religious community in the world is the ummah of one or the other prophet as God has completed his responsibility by sending forth his message to all the human beings through his 124, 000 prophets: "And for every Ummah (a community or a nation), there is a Messenger" (Yunus: 47). It is, therefore, necessary for the establishment of unity and harmony among different nations of the world that the ummah of one prophet should respect the ummah of another one. The Quran itself sets an example by praising the previous prophets. It mentions Hadhrat Musa (AS) (Moses) and Hadhrat Isa (AS) (Jesus) rather in detail and devotes a full chapter on Mother Mary (Hazrat Maryam AS).

The Quran mentions Jesus and his Gospel and the great human qualities of his followers (Christians) in very good words. It says: "(Remember) when Allah will say (on the Day of Resurrection)."O 'Isa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary)! Remember My Favour to you and to your mother when I supported you with Ruh-ul-Qudus [Jibrael (Gabriel)] so that you spoke to the people in the cradle and in maturity; and when I taught you writing, Al-Hikmah (the power of understanding), the Taurat (Torah) and the Injeel (Gospel); and when you made out of the clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, by My Permission, and you breathed into it, and it became a bird by My Permission, and you healed those born blind, and the lepers by My Permission, and when you brought forth the dead by My Permission; and when I restrained the Children of Israel from you (when they resolved to kill you) since you came unto them with clear proofs, and the disbelievers among them said: 'This is nothing but evident magic.' "(Al Maidah: 110)

In the lines above, the Quran very generously mentions the miracles Jesus worked with God's permission. He, with God's permission, caused the dead to come to life, gave the blind their sight back and cured the lepers. He even made the image of a bird and breathed life into it to prove God's powers as the giver and taker of life. But the non-believers refused to have faith. However, the same human traits; kindness and soft-heartedness are found in the followers of Jesus even today. They are known for their charity work across the world. Treating the sick, curing lepers and helping the needy, the poor and the distressed has been their mission. So, the Quran appreciates their kindness and soft-heartedness in clear words. "Then, We sent after them, Our Messengers, and We sent 'Isa (Jesus) - son of Maryam (Mary), and gave him the Injeel (Gospel). And We ordained in the hearts of those who followed him, compassion and mercy." (Al Hadid:27)

Similarly, in turn, the Quran expects other religious communities too to recognise and respect Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Quran and Muslims as clear signs of Prophet





Muhammad (PBUH) and his followers are given in Torah and Gospel: "Muhammad (SAW) is the Messenger of Allah, and those who are with him are severe against disbelievers, and merciful among themselves. You see them bowing and falling down prostrate (in prayer), seeking Bounty from Allah and (His) Good Pleasure. The mark of them (i.e. of their Faith) is on their faces (foreheads) from the traces of (their) prostration (during prayers). This is their description in the Taurat (Torah) and Injeel." (Al Fath: 29)

It should be noted however that the same courtesy meant to be paid to Judaism and Christianity as instructed by the Quran must also be extended to the Traditional religions of Nigeria so that mutual respect and peace will be guaranteed.

## 2) Common practices in all the divine religions

The Quran points out that many religious practices and rites like namaz (prayer), roza (fasting), zakat (religious tax), hajj (pilgrimage) and qurbani (animal sacrifice) are common among the ummah of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) among others. As Islam respects and justifies all the previous prophets and their divine scriptures, it has also incorporated practices and rites observed by the followers of other divine religions. These practices and rites can serve as a link among all such religious communities. Several verses in the Quran can be quoted in this regard.

### Namaz (Praying) and Zakat (Alms)

*"And mention in the Book (the Quran) Isma'il (Ishmael). Verily! He was true to what he promised, and he was a Messenger, (and) a Prophet. And he used to enjoin on his family and his people As-Salat (the prayers) and the Zakat, and his Lord was pleased with him." (Maryam: 54-55)*

In this case prayer sessions by the various religions should be conducted in such a way as not to be a nuisance to others. Regarding Islam for instance, the use of loudspeakers early in the morning for the call to prayers should be discouraged as it disturbs the neighbours' sleep. To use speakers, Mosques must be built to be soundproof to avoid noise pollution. The same standard should be set for the Christians and other religious groups. Religious groups must also desist from preaching to condemn and praying against one another to guarantee harmony.

*"Indeed Allah took the covenant from the Children of Israel (Jews), and We appointed twelve leaders among them. And Allah said: 'I am with you if you perform As-Salat (Iqamat-as-Salat) and give Zakat and believe in My Messengers; honour and assist them, and lend to Allah a good loan.' (Al Maidah: 12).*

Inter-religious philanthropism should be encouraged and instituted such that members of one religion can benefit members of other religions. T B Joshua the leader of the Synagogue Church of All Nations and his Emmanuel TV partners seem to be seriously involved in this cross religious alms giving (Manasa, 2010). Muslims and others religious adherents might borrow a leaf from this commendable act to ensure peace.

### Animal sacrifice (qurbani)

*"And for every nation We have appointed religious ceremonies, that they may mention the Name of Allah over the beast of cattle that He has given them for food." (Al Haj: 34)*

Concerning this particular issue, Muslims should celebrate Ramadan with the focus of befriending people of other religious persuasion. It should be an opportunity for them to invite both their Muslim and non-Muslim neighbours for a friendly parley and physical enjoyment of good food in a relaxed atmosphere.

### Pilgrimage (Haj)



*“Our Lord! And make us submissive unto You and of our offspring a nation submissive unto You, and show us our Manasik (all the ceremonies of pilgrimage - Hajj and 'Umrah, etc.), and accept our repentance. Truly, You are the One Who accepts repentance, the Most Merciful.” (Al Baqra: 128)*

Concerning this particular issue, Muslims should go on pilgrimage in order to learn humility and love for others. It should be an opportunity for Muslims to develop a worldview of tolerance for others in the society..

### Roza (fasting)

*“O you who believe! Observing As-Saum (the fasting) is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may become Al-Muttaqun (the pious - see V.2:2).” (Al Baqra: 183)*

Concerning fasting, Muslims should engage in this activity with the focus of mortifying their flesh and killing pride. It should be an opportunity for them to do good to both their Muslim and non-Muslim neighbours.

### 3) One ummah, different ways of worship

As all the prophets preached the same religion of tauheed (oneness of God), the ummahs of all the prophets were in principle, considered one ummah collectively. Because the prophets were human beings and lived a physical age, they had to die one day. That's why God sent one prophet after the other to continue the mission of spreading his message. However, God gave every ummah a different way of worship. But men also created differences to give their religions a new shape altogether. The Quran says:

*“Mankind were but one community (i.e. on one religion - Islamic Monotheism), then they differed (later)” (Yunus: 19)*

It says on another occasion:

*“Truly! This, your Ummah [Shariah or religion (Islamic Monotheism)] is one religion, and I am your Lord, therefore worship Me (Alone). [Tafsir Ibn Kathir] But they have broken up and differed as regards their religion among themselves.” (Al Anbya:93)*

Even the Jews, Christians and other Ahl-e-Kitab are Muslims

The religion revealed to Abraham was called the Abrahamic religion and all the divine religions including Islam were called religions of Abraham and their followers were called Muslims. In this sense, according to the Quran, even the Jews and the Christians are Muslims as their prophets, Moses and Christ preached the same religion as Abraham. So, the Quran clearly says:

*“O you who believe! Bow down, and prostrate yourselves, and worship your Lord and do good that you may be successful. And strive hard in Allah's Cause as you ought to strive (with sincerity and with all your efforts that His Name should be superior). He has chosen you (to convey His Message of Islamic Monotheism to mankind by inviting them to His religion, Islam), and has not laid upon you in religion any hardship, it is the religion of your father Ibrahim (Abraham) (Islamic Monotheism). It is He (Allah) Who has named you Muslims both before and in this (the Quran)” (Al Haj-77-78).*

At this juncture it is pertinent to remind Muslims in Nigeria that they must give special attention to Traditional religion which might not be an ummah represented in the Quran.

Righteous people of all the ummah are heaven-bound

Today, widespread poverty has motivated people in Nigeria to be more religious as a result there is an increase in myopism via in-group mentality and as a result greater bloodshed and violence in the name of religion because the true spirit of religion is missing. The followers of one religion believe that only they are on the right path and all the other



religions are false and so deserve to go to hell. But contrary to this belief, the holy Quran says that the follower of any Abrahamic religion is righteous in the eyes of God if he obeys the teachings of his prophet, has faith in the unity of God, has faith in the Day of Judgment and abstains from sins. On the one hand, the Quran chides those who believe only in the truth of their own religion and on the other it gives glad tidings to all the righteous persons of every ummah:

*“And verily! This religion (of Islamic Monotheism) is one religion, and I am your Lord, so keep your duty to Me. But they (men) have broken their religion among them into sects, each group rejoicing in its belief.”(Al Moominun:52-53)*

*“Verily! Those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians, and Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and do righteous good deeds shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.”(Al Baqra:62)*

The Quran reiterates its stand on another occasion:

*Surely, those who believe (in the Oneness of Allah, in His Messenger Muhammad SAW and all that was revealed to him from Allah), those who are the Jews and the Sabians and the Christians, - whosoever believed in Allah and the Last Day, and worked righteousness, on them shall be in no fear, nor shall they grieve.” (Al Maidah: 69)*

Traditional religions must also be given the benefit of doubt by Muslims, so that there will be peace.

#### 4) There is no compulsion in faith (deen)

One more point on which the Quran lays great stress is that there is no compulsion in matters related to faith. There are many religions in the world whose followers propagate their respective faiths. Islam too asks its followers to spread its message. The Quran has declared Muslims the best ummah because they advise people to do good deeds and abstain from evil ones. There was also a group in the ummah of Moses who would call people towards piety.

But as God Himself says that it is in his scheme of things that he has caused many religions and nations to exist because he wanted to test the devotion of his devotees in different ways. If he had wished, all the human beings would follow one religion. Nobody would deny the existence of God and people would not worship anything and anyone but God. But he has created good and evil, knowledge and ignorance, oppression and justice and light and darkness in order to put the devotees to test of their character. God only expects men to fulfil their responsibilities and duties sincerely and honestly and leave the result and the worry of the guidance of people to Him because giving guidance to people is the prerogative of God alone. Thus the Quran says:

*“And had Allah willed, He could have made you (all) one nation, but He sends astray whom He wills and guides whom He wills. But you shall certainly be called to account for what you used to do.” (Al Nahl:93)*

Concerning this particular issue, Muslims should divest themselves of the belief that they are better than others but that they are rather a part in a whole. They must be able to disagree to agree. Beliefs might be different but it is action that speaks louder than words. There are some adherents of Traditional religion who are more righteous than Muslims and Christians.

#### Do not be a religious policeman: the Quran

*The Quran preaches that Muslims should convey the message of God to the non-believers, the misguided and to those who commit shirk and kufr in a peaceful manner and tactfully because bringing people to the right path is only in the hands of God and so the use of force in this regard may not yield any results rather it may cause acrimony, confrontation and bloodshed which is a big hurdle in the way of the Quran's proposed*



pluralistic society. Therefore, the Quran prohibits people to become religious policemen: "It is not for any person to believe, except by the Leave of Allah, and He will put the wrath on those who are heedless."(Yunsu: 100)

Another verse says:

*"So if they dispute with you, Muhammad, say: "I have submitted myself to Allah (in Islam), and (so have) those who follow me." And say to those who were given the Scripture (Jews and Christians and other ahl-e-Kitab) and to those who are illiterates (Arab pagans): "Do you (also) submit yourselves (to Allah in Islam)?" If they do, they are rightly guided; but if they turn away, your duty is only to convey the Message; and Allah is All-Seer of (His) slaves."(Al Imran: 20)*

On yet another occasion the Quran warns religious fanatics against acting as religious policemen:

*"Had Allah willed, they would not have taken others besides Him in worship. And We have not made you a watcher over them nor are you set over them to dispose of their affairs."(Al An'am:107)*

In the same surah, earlier it has said:

*"But your people (O Muhammad SAW) have denied it (the Quran) though it is the truth. Say: "I am not responsible for your affairs."(Al An'am:66)*

It becomes obvious from the study of the verses quoted above that the Quran is against the use of force in matters of faith. Islam preaches patience, tact and perseverance in the propagation of faith. But unfortunately, the attitude of a section of Muslims today is quite the opposite as they believe in converting people into Muslims by use of force or they consider it a service to their faith to slaughter members of other sects of Islam which is, in fact, completely contrary to the teachings of Islam and in violation of the teachings of the Quran. The Quran says about the Muslim groups believing in violence:

*"And when it is said to them: "Make not mischief on the earth," they say: "We are only peacemakers." Verily! They are the ones who make mischief, but they perceive not."(Al Baqra:11-12)*

*"Eat and drink of that which Allah has provided and do not act corruptly, making mischief on the earth."(Al Baqra: 60)*

On the one hand, such militant groups have mushroomed among Muslims who have been committing un-Islamic acts like slaughtering of non-Muslims, suicide bombings and forcefully converting people to Islam in the name of propagation of Islam and establishing the rule of Allah and, on the other hand, due to sectarian differences, they have been killing their own Muslim brethren after declaring them kafirs though the latter have faith in Islam and declare themselves Muslim. This is very much so in the Nigerian state as evidenced by the Boko Haram scourge and religious clashes on a consistent basis. The Quran predicts horrible punishment for them in the hereafter:

*"And those who dispute concerning Allah (His Religion of Islamic Monotheism, with which Muhammad (SAW) has been sent), after it has been accepted (by the people), of no use is their dispute before their Lord, and on them is wrath, and for them will be a severe torment."(Al Shuraa: 16)*

On the basis of the foregoing, it is crystal clear that the Quran which is the instruction manual of Islam stresses the need to establish a civilised society based on the principle of peaceful coexistence where people will respect each other's religion, respect each other's prophets and propagate and preach their faith not with the use of force and violence but with love, patience, restraint and understanding as the Quran says in one of the most often-quoted verses, 'Lakum deenakum waleya deen' (To you your faith, to me mine).



## **Practical Recommendations**

It is heartrending that religious violence in Nigeria is usually kick started by Muslims; believers in Islam or people of peace. The sanctimonious dishonesty evident in this chimera in which a people of peace are so violent and conflict prone is quite disheartening. The same also goes for Christians who are followers of the religion of love. They seem to be so prone to hatred and are always motivated to condemn non adherents. Members of other religions are also willing to condemn other religions. This potpourri of suspicion and hatred creates chaos in the society. As such it is necessary that certain mechanisms must be put in place and certain action taken to ensure peaceful coexistence among multiple religious entities in a secular society like Nigeria.

It is recommended that the federal government must put in place mechanisms to regulate the behaviours of all Islamic and Christian religious entities, scholars, preachers and their adherents to minimize the frequent clashes that occur between them. The federal government must remind religious leaders of the secular nature of the Nigerian context and go further to forestall acrimonious proselytizing and inflammatory verbosity against other religion by religious preachers so as to dampen religious fanaticism and fundamentalism which are all ingredients of intolerance and violence.

The multi-religiosity of Nigeria and its constitutional stand as a secular state makes it impartial to rigidity in religiosity, When religion becomes a threat to societal security, the government must do its best to make it a non issue by muzzling it through a gag order according to the law and by weeding out trouble mongering religious entities from within its structure.

A religious body made up of all the representatives of religious groups in Nigeria should be created to encourage dialogue and cooperation. This body; a sort of All Believers' Convention must be created by the constitution to amicably iron out likely conflict between members of all religions just the same way The Christian Association of Nigeria and Muslim Association of Nigeria does for Christian and Muslim denominations respectively.

Islamic religious leaders must refuse the advances of foreign Islamic countries or terrorist groups who either want to fund them or introduce them to violent ideologies in order to foment trouble. When they do this they will be able to focus on the unadulterated teachings and instruction of the Quran and will ensure peace by living thereby.

Muslims must discover higher standards of social values by developing the universal spirit and co-operation towards others as indicated in the Quran. If the true understanding of Islam is effectively spread, a broadminded and tolerant Muslim society can be charted out as a microcosm within a macrocosm. The lives of Muslims must represent the true essence of Islam that can connect with the rest of world in a way that promote peace for all.



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