



Religion
ifs Vortrag

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Interreligious Competency and Interreligious Learning in Nigeria

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Abstract:

[DE] Dieser Beitrag behandelt als Praxisbericht die besondere Situation der interreligiösen Pluralität in Nigeria, einem Land mit fast 180 Millionen Einwohnern, die überwiegend christlich oder islamisch sind. Die besondere Rolle der jüdischen Minderheit als Brücke für das interreligiöse Gespräch wird hervorgehoben.

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Context of Interreligious Learning and Interreligious Competence

Our times have been greatly influenced by the socio-economic, socio-political and socio-religious changes in the Middle East, North Africa, in Indonesia and in the Western Hemisphere. We are living witnesses in the consequences of these changes particularly in the relationships between Christians and Muslims, Jews and Christians as well as Jews and Muslims. From Egypt to Iraq, Nigeria³ to Indonesia, we read and hear about increased violence against Christians. This has led to outright legal and governmental restrictions of Muslims and Islamic practices across Europe, USA and Canada which are aimed at encouraging mutual dialogue and mutual co-existence among the followers of Abrahamic Faith.

Compared with the generations of the Middle Ages, our generation seem to be fortunate for the fact that interreligious dialogue seem to be a "given" especially from Christian/Catholic perspective. (The first official dialogues were sanctioned with the Declaration

¹Although the Catholic Church has been at the forefront and helm of championing and articulating coherent and consistent positions of Christians on many Nigerian national issues, through its bi-annual Episcopal Conference Communiqués and occasional statements on key national issues, I prefer to speak from the vantage of CAN as more inclusive highest organ for all Christian denominations which makes statements and takes positions on issues of National significance on behalf of the whole Christians in Nigeria.

²For an in-depth historical and appreciative understanding of the Northern Muslim authorities and their role in fostering conflict and violence in Nigeria, see Matthew Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, (Ibadan, Spectrum books, 1993; Matthew Kukah & Toyin Falola, *Religious Militancy and Self Assertion*, Oxford, aldershot, 1996; Matthew Kukah, *The Emergence of Northern Hegemony*).

³Nigeria with an almost equal number of Muslims and Christians has been a focal point (proxy conflicts and wars) and a bearer of severe constraints of the political changes the Middle East, in Iran, access to natural resources from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Libya, the Iraq War.

on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965) at the Second Vatican Council, and clarified by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991). This openness has born fruits and continues to bear fruits among the three Abrahamic Faiths.

The Nigerian Historical Situation

The present day “geographical entity” called Nigeria is as the result of the interest of the British Colonial power⁴ to have a convenient and manageable colonial territory⁵. As a result of this colonial economic and political interest⁶ this vast multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic and multi-national “geographical entity” amalgamated in 1914 into one with the tag name Nigeria. Heterogeneous ethnic nationalities, tribes and kingdoms were amalgamated together. The country is about half Muslim, half Christian, with a minority practicing Judaism and African Traditional Religions. With more than 270 tribal nationalities across the land, Nigerians individually and collectively are very proud of their tribal identities, cultures and languages.

Up and until 1960 of Nigeria’s political independence from Britain, there was no obvious and documented major ethnic and/or religious conflict among this diverse people. With the incessant military interventions (1966-1989) and the unduly tribal politicization (among the dominant tribes Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and Fulani) of the country, there arose tensions, distrust and violent conflicts. During this period there was no religious umbrella that brings together the various religious groups in the country especially among the different Christian confessions.

The Unhappy Marriage Relationship between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria

Most peace and life loving Nigerians, Muslims and Christians alike have characterized the incessant religious violence in our country like couples in unhappy marriage relationships. Willingly or unwillingly couples in unhappy marriage situations find themselves together and consciously or unconsciously they do not know what to do with each other. From occasional sharp and angry speech to frequent denunciation and violent action, the marriage bed is negatively heated up and the family home can no longer contain two apparently intimate lovers whose life destinies are tied together.

Living in the same closely geographical entity, sharing the same socio-economic realities as well as aspiring together for a cohesive good political democratic society, there seem to be invisible forces working against the 1914 amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorate by the former British Empire. The historical indications, ethno-nationalistic indices and religio-cultural facts show that the “amalgamation project” was and is nothing but

⁴It has to be noted that “although British colonialism was not the cause of the primordial/ancient conditions and identities that have generated and continue to generate tensions, conflicts and violence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, but it did make it worse. It made it worse because of the policy of “indirect rule, “divide-and-rule system”, “Nepotism/Favoritism”, which sharpens ethno-religious identities thereby pushing the people to define themselves against the background of their ethnic groups and religious belongings.

⁵It is interesting to note that Nigerians whether past or present have not believed and accepted freely and willingly the historical fact of the “amalgamation of North and South.” While a prominent Northern Nigerian Muslim leader once declared Nigeria “the mistake of 1914” a prominent Southern Nigerian Christian leader called Nigeria “ a mere geographic expression”. In recent times most prominent Nigerian leaders talk about “the Nigerian Project”, an expression that insinuates that it is not working or we give it a chance to work.

⁶The foundational stone of the British colonial system was the use of “identity politics” as a means to have access to political power and economic resources. This “identity politics” increased and heightened the religious differences which were part of the reason for the major civil war and genocide committed against the predominantly Christian Igbo separatist group, the Biafran Republic (1967-1970) in which more than 3 Million Biafran Igbos died through pogroms, blockades, and starvations.

a marriage of convenience.⁷ Besides ethno-nationalistic and religious factors, illiteracy, poverty⁸, unhealthy competition, and disunity fuels violent actions among Nigerians. A present example is Boko Haram which has attracted global attention in recent years.

Although it is not my intention to delve into the wounds (psychological as well as physical) caused by Boko Haram, it suffices to bring to the forefront the memory of vulnerable Nigerian children when they were given papers and pencils to draw/sketch anything they remember, or think or imagine. Most children sketch/draw knives, men with guns, a man descending with airplane holding bombs/rackets. When asked by their teachers, the children innocently responded: the knives and guns are for killing many people, the airplane is for bombing villages. These children witnessed their parents killed with knives, shot with guns and saw the bodies of their parents charred because of the bombings. Like the innocent children, the surviving adults carry the memory of their wounds with them.

Organs of interreligious learning and Dialogue in Nigeria

1. Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)⁹

Christian Association of Nigeria like the foundation of the country itself is child of political expediency. On 27th August 1976 the (then) Federal Military Government, under Gen. Obasanjo invited several Church Leaders of diverse denominations to Dodan Barracks, Lagos informing them of his introducing some governmental policies. After this first historical meeting of the various Christian leaders under the auspices of the Military Head of State, was born the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as the sole umbrella representing all the various Christian denominations. **The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) is the largest Ecumenical Body ever established in Nigeria and in deed Africa.**

In his book, *A Dangerous Awakening: The Politicization of Religion in Nigeria* (IFAN. Ibadan. 1995). Dr. Iheanyi Enwerem, provided a thorough historical analysis and politics of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as well as a chronicle of religious motivated conflicts in Nigeria and the instrumentalisation of the two major faiths in the struggle for political power and natural resource control in this vast and complex country, Nigeria.

2. The Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA)¹⁰

The Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) is a parallel religious organ like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). What CAN is for Christians is what NSCIA is for Muslims in Nigeria. It has fostered unity and brotherhood among Muslims since the advent of Islam in Nigeria. Besides, NSCIA is very much active in the slow but steady application of Shari'ah in Nigeria and in the entire Sub-Saharan Africa. The steady and continued Islamization of Nigeria has a prime position in the overall motive and interests of the domi-

⁷ See an Appendix to this paper for the series of violent religious conflicts with the number of victims in Nigeria's recent past history. The levels of religious and ethnic-nationalistic violence have led to the question of whether religion and ethnicity are curse or blessing. Cfr. *Ethnicity: Blessing or Curse*, Tangaza Occasional Papers/No 8, Paulines Publications Africa, 1999.

⁸The deliberate advancement of religious solutions to socio-economic and political problems have been reasons for the extremist and violent insurgence of the Boko Haram Islamist terrorist group, which continues to kill both Muslims and Christians alike.

⁹Although the Catholic Church has been at the forefront and helm of championing and articulating coherent and consistent positions of Christians on many Nigerian national issues, through its bi-annual Episcopal Conference Communiqués and occasional statements on key national issues, I prefer to speak from the vantage of CAN as more inclusive highest organ for all Christian denominations which makes statements and takes positions on issues of National significance on behalf of the whole Christians in Nigeria.

¹⁰For an in-depth historical and appreciative understanding of the Northern Muslim authorities and their role in fostering conflict and violence in Nigeria, see Matthew Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*, (Ibadan, Spectrum books, 1993; Matthew Kukah & Toyin Falola, *Religious Militancy and Self Assertion*, Oxford, aldershot, 1996; Matthew Kukah, *The Emergence of Northern Hegemony*).



nant Muslim groups from the North of Nigeria.¹¹ Unlike the ever changing leadership position of CAN, the NSCIA has per ipso facto the Sultan of Sokoto (Sokoto Caliphate¹²) as its unquestionable supreme and port-parole.

3. Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBN)

Apart from the two forgoing interreligious organs, it is worthwhile to mention the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria and the Church of God Anglican Communion as important institutions that spearhead the interreligious learning among the two faiths among Nigerians. (For the important roles of the above mentioned institutions, see Nkwume A.C. Ogoko, *Dialogu on Justification: A Model for Ecumenical Dialogue among the Churches in Nigeria*, p.363-436).

Dialogue of Life, of Action and Theological Exchange

Of the three forms of dialogue (Life, Action and Theological Exchange) enunciated by the Vatican Document *Dialogue and Proclamation* (DP 42) what is most needed and most valuable in the Nigerian Interreligious Context are dialogue of Life and Action. This is true because dialogue of theological exchange leads to hardening of religious and doctrinal walls as well as religious/faith differences which in essence do not serve the need for peace, tolerance and mutual co-existence. More so it is historically and theologically evident that doctrinal disagreements have been the major source of separations among Abrahamic religions.¹³ But I have to quickly add that we still need the dialogue of theological exchange because it is through it we can seek and clarify the mutual grounds for dialogue of life and practical cooperation.

With this in mind the Nigerian Muslim-Christian relations have attracted the attention of all peace loving people from all over the globe to support the peace initiatives of peace loving Nigerians themselves. For the purposes of this present paper, I will mention the following examples:

Bi-annual conference on Christian-Muslim Mutual relations (1993 till date) which is a platform of Nigerian Muslim and Christian scholars and this initiative have witnessed the best of minds from both religions.

Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum (IMC-MCDF)¹⁴ has consistently been organizing grassroots initiatives and activities mainly in the most religious conflict affected parts of Nigeria such as:

¹¹The general views/positions of Muslims (whether it is the terrorist group Boko Haram or those in political positions) is complete Islamization of the geographical entity called Nigeria as the statements/declarations of the present Nigerian President Muhammad Buhari and Boko Haram leader corroborates: Alla willing, I will continue to show openly and inside me the total commitment to the Sharia Movement all over Nigeria" Buhari in his 24 August 2001 campaign to be president of Nigeria. The Boko Haram leader or Motto strikes similar view "By Allah, we will not stop fighting until every Nigerian is living under Sharia Law. If you don't abide (by Sharia Law) we will kill you" Statement by the Boko Haram leader in 27 January 2012.

¹²Northern Nigeria which is today divided into several states with three geopolitical zones is largely Muslim. It has the pride to possess the historical center of precolonial Islamic empire known as "the Sokoto Caliphate". The Muslims in the North of Nigeria identify strongly with the Caliphate and particularly focus to the Middle East and the wider Muslim world for socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic solidarity.

¹³Cardinal Arinze, *Progress in Christian-Muslim Relations Worldwide*, "Aquinas Lecture delivered at the Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port-Harcourt, 6th February 1998, p. 7-8.

¹⁴ IMC-MCDF, like CAN saw the light of the day after two bitter religious enemies (a Christian Pastor and a Muslim Imam) were invited by the Governor of the Government of Kaduna state to help in promoting governmental programs facing rejection and resistance from the people. After their meetings with government officials, a liberal Muslim brought the Christian Pastor and the Muslim Imam together. There both established a friendly contact and with subsequent meetings, they discovered a shared mutual perspective on the socio-economic and socio-political problems facing their faith communities. This led to their establishment of an inter-faith consortium, Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum aimed at fostering mutual understanding, respect and peaceful co-existence.



- Kaduna Peace Committee and the adoption of the Kaduna Peace Declaration of August 2002
- Yelwa-Shendam (Jos) Peace Affirmation that was signed 19 February 2005
- Peace Initiative of Pan and Goemai (Jos) 19 July 2006

Another practical peace initiative of IMC-MCDF) was the March 2006 Dillimi-Kwang which saw the rebuilding of the community market as one of the hotbeds for religious violence. This was done with supports from the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Washington DC and Japanese Embassy in Nigeria. Both representatives of these countries together with the Nigerian government witnessed the foundation laying/ground breaking ceremony.

Other peace initiative groups by peace and life loving Nigerians include:

- Library of Congress Nigerian People Forum, USA
- Nigerian Reconciliation Group, UK
- National Democratic Institute (NDI) Abuja/Nigeria
- Strategic Empowerment and Mediation Agency (SEMA) Kaduna/Nigerian
- Academic Associate Peace Work (AAPW) Abuja/Nigeria
- Human Right Monitor (HRM), Kaduna/Nigeria
- Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) Kaduna/Nigerian
- The Kaduna Peace Committee (KPC) Kaduna/Nigerian

Addressing the array of challenges of peace-building and interreligious learning in the Nigerian context involves the promotion, use and acceptance of cultural, gender and social values as well as the positive faith-values that inherently exist in the local communities.¹⁵ This approach is inspired from the perspective that Nigerians like most Africans are very passionate about their faith and cultural values. It is not a wonder to note that there is no Nigerian and by extension in the whole of Africa who does not affiliate to any religion or faith community. As such religious leaders and religion/faith and moral influences still exercise tremendous influence in the lives of both the affluent, urban-dweller, rich western educated Nigerian and the cattle/village rural farmer dweller.

Muslims & Christians Creating Their Future¹⁶

2012 Documentary Film (65 min) <http://traubman.igc.org/vidnigeria.htm>

In this documentary film, 200 brave, courageous and open-minded Muslim and Christian youths articulated in one voice their rejection of acts of violence, mistrust and alienation as well as refusing and rejecting to be enemies. This film documentary was under the aegis of the Leadership Institute in Jos which attracted dignified special guests, opinion-leaders from major religious institutions, government and UNESCO. The Nigerian Muslim and Christian youths unanimously identified the worst and most devastating problems facing them. In their own understanding and interpretation, it is not lack of technology and science or the biological diseases like AIDS and HIV that are taking more human lives in

¹⁵ For an in-depth appreciative understanding of the Religious, cultural and socio-economic context of Christians and by extension Muslims in Nigeria, see Nkwume A.C. Ogoko, *Dialogue on Justification: A Model for Ecumenical Dialogue among the Churches in Nigeria*, LIT, 2007, p. 345-363.

¹⁶This documentary film is a model form of Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue of Muslims, Christians and Jews initiated by Len and Libby Traubman in the USA state of California.

Nigeria. On the contrary the real cause of the deaths of many innocent Nigerians mostly children, young people and women are Disengagement, Human Relationship Deficiency (HRD), Poverty of Relationship (PR), Acute Intentional Devastation of Society, (AIDS), and Human Relationship Deficiency Virus (HRDI). The combination of HRD, AIDS and HRDI are the common cause of bombs and terrorism.

As a panacea to these deadly non-biological man-made diseases, the 200 brave and courageous Nigerian Muslim and Christian youths stated the need for sustainable dialogue, heart to heart communication and citizen collaboration. This becomes more necessary because according to them our generation 'is moving beyond the age of religious denomination to an age of inter-religious cooperation and inter-religious harmony'.

By Way of Conclusion

From the forgoing presentation, we surmise that Nigerians (Muslims and Christians) are talking with each other. There have been many heartened imaginative local, national, regional and international initiatives for mutual understanding, tolerance and peaceful co-existence among Nigerian people, Muslims and Christians alike. With the wind of democracy and the establishment of modern nation states, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria have to learn how to balance religious, cultural, ethnic/tribal identities with the national identity and the duties of citizenship. This involves initiating programs that engage both the priest/pastor and the imam, women and men, youths and the politicians. The importance of education to citizenship, the affirmation of fundamental human values, human dignity and practical cooperation are not to be overemphasized. This is because the question of human and citizen rights are closely related to the issues of religion, state and society.

The various organs and stakeholders in the Nigerian state are striving together in seeking peace, justice as well as the possibility to overcome religious and ethnic/tribal violence and conflicts. With this in mind, the tangible and measurable results of the Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum (IMC-MCDF) gives us hope and motivation never to give up in inter-religious dialogue and inter-religious learning between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria.

Although difficult as it were to determine the practical impact of peace building activities and initiatives, some tangible results in peacemaking and in establishing frameworks for achieving peace include:

- i. Kaduna Peace Declaration
- ii. Yelwa-Shendam Peace Affirmation
- iii. Pan and Goemai Peace Initiative
- iv. Programs and projects that promote peace and good governance
- v. Establishment of peace constituencies
- vi. Bring together elected representatives and the electorate in Kaduna State of Nigeria.
- vii. Establishment of faith institutions the Bureau for Religious Affairs, Kaduna
- viii. Government and Plateau State Inter-religious Council.
- ix. Establishment of Networks Kano Interfaith group
- x. Kaduna Peace Committee of Religious Leaders
- xi. Senatorial Peace Constituencies of Kaduna
- xii. Establishment of peace clubs in schools
- xiii. Peace curriculum for schools and colleges in Nigeria



Interreligious dialogue and interreligious learning have been taking place among Christians and Muslims in Nigeria mostly in those areas where diverse communities are confronted with issues of existential co-existence, practical cooperation as well as tolerance. Power sharing, knowing, understanding and valuing each other are indications of mutual co-existing and tolerating diverse religious and ethnic communities which help to prevent hostilities and bloodshed.

The current socio-cultural, socio-religious and socio-political crisis in Nigerian like in many crisis countries and regions of the world are great historical opportunity for local communities to build and rebuild their societies that allow both a great deal of autonomy and cultural and religious diversity. It would be a mistake, though, to simply relegate religious practice and belief to a minor role in the conversations about how to build a peaceful and prosperous society. More than ever the on-going discourse between the practical dialogue of life and more theoretical theological/religious exchange must continue to take place in order to articulate common goals and to ensure that the rights and obligations of religious communities are protected within the wider pluralistic society of today.

APPENDIX 1

Timeline 2000-2011 of recent human costs of Religious conflict in Nigeria

2000: Thousands of people are killed in northern Nigeria as non-Muslims opposed to the introduction of Sharia, or Islamic law, fight Muslims who demand its implementation in the northern state of Kaduna.

September 2001: Christian-Muslim violence flares after Muslim prayers in the city of Jos, with churches and mosques set on fire. At least 1,000 people are killed, according to a September 2002 report by a panel set up by the regional government.

November 2002: Nigeria abandons the Miss World contest in Abuja, the capital, following the death of at least 216 people due to riots that broke out in Kaduna after a newspaper article suggested the Prophet Mohammad would probably have married one of the Miss World beauty queens if he were alive today.

May 4, 2004: Hundreds of people, mostly Muslim Fulanis, the world's largest nomadic group based in West Africa, are killed by Christian Tarok fighters in the central Nigerian town of Yelwa. Survivors say they buried 630 corpses .

May 12, 2004: Muslim and Christian fighters wage street battles in the northern city of Kano. Christian community leaders say 500-600 people, mostly Christians, were killed in two days of violence.

February 2006: At least 157 people die in a week of rioting by Muslim and Christian mobs. The violence begins in the northeastern city of Maiduguri when a Muslim protest against Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad runs out of control. Revenge attacks follow in the south.

November 2008: Clashes between Muslim and Christian gangs triggered by a disputed local government election kill at least 700 people in Jos, according to the US-based Human Rights Watch.

February 22, 2009: The governor of Bauchi state imposes a night curfew on Bauchi city, a day after clashes in which at least 11 people were killed, 28 are seriously wounded and several houses, churches and mosques set on fire.

July 26, 2009: Boko Haram, an organization that opposes Western education and demands the adoption of Sharia across Nigeria, stages attacks in the northeastern city of Bauchi after the arrest of some of its members. More than 50 people are killed and over 100 arrested.

July 27, 2009: Police in Maiduguri, home of Boko Haram's leader Mohammed Yusuf, say security forces killed 90 sect members on July 27. In neighboring Yobe state, police recover the bodies of 33 sect members after a gun battle near the town of Potiskum on July 29.

July 30, 2009: Boko Haram leader Yusuf is shot dead while in police detention in Maiduguri. Meanwhile, Red Cross and defence officials say more than 700 people were killed during the five-day Boko Haram uprising.

December 2009: At least 40 people are killed in clashes between security forces and members of an Islamic sect armed with machetes in the northern city of Bauchi.

January 2010: Hundreds of people are reported killed after clashes between Muslim and Christian gangs in Jos. Violence abates after the military is sent to the area and a curfew is imposed.

March 7, 2010: Hundreds of people are reported killed after clashes between pastoralists from the surrounding hills and villagers close to the central city of Jos. Arrests follow and security forces vow to hold the state's security officials to account for future outbreaks of violence.



March 17, 2010: At least 13 people killed in attack by Muslim herdsmen on village of Byei, just 30km south of Jos.

July 17, 2010: A church is burned and eight people hacked to death in an attack by Muslims in Mazzah village, located 14km from Jos.

October 1, 2010: The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, the dominant militant group in the region, claim responsibility for dual car bombings during Nigeria's 50th independence anniversary celebrations in the capital that killed at least 12.

December 24, 2010: A series of bombs go off in villages near Jos, the main city, in Plateau state, killing 32 people and leaving 74 others in critical condition.

December 31, 2010: A bomb explodes in an open-air beer garden and market at an army barracks in Abuja, killing at least four and wounding at least 21.

January 2011: Fresh sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims flare up in central Nigeria, killing at least 35. Various places of worship are targeted, while religious rioting and arson attacks continue on the streets in the city of Jos and Tafawa Balewa.

May 30, 2011: A series of blasts hit cities mainly in northern Nigeria, killing at least 12 people. The attacks came less than 24 hours after the inauguration of Goodluck Jonathan as president.

June 8, 2011: Boko Haram orchestrates multiple blasts and targeted attacks by on two police stations and a church in the country's restive northeast. Up to 11 people are killed.

June 16, 2011: Boko Haram claims responsibility for a suicide bombing in the car park of the police headquarters in capital Abuja. At least two people are killed, including the bomber. The attack is reported to have been Nigeria's first suicide bombing attack

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Nigeria

Christian

Muslim

Conflict

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/nigeria-1.htm>

Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum (IMC-MCDF) Nigeria

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