

**INTERFAITH RELATIONS AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:
HOW FEASIBLE? WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES? HOW DO WE
SURMOUNT THEM? BBA Workshop with FBOs and NGOs from
Plateau State. By Josiah Idowu-Fearon, Kaduna.22nd24th January 2009**

INTRODUCTION

In a recent letter written to some major world Christian leaders by 138 Muslim leaders and scholars (including the Sultan of Sokoto), the authors noted that, since together we (Christians and Muslims) make up more than half of the world's population, there will be no peace in the world unless Muslims and Christians find a way to live at peace with one another. These authors surely echo the feelings of many Nigerians who make up almost 85% of the country's entire human population when they said, 'our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake' (A common Word, 2007). Friends, though tensions, conflicts, and even wars in which Muslims and Christians have stood against each other in the northern parts of our country are not primarily religious in character, they possess an undeniable religious dimension. If we can achieve religious peace between these two religious communities, peace and development in the entire country of Nigeria will clearly be easier to attain.

A brief historical background to Nigeria:

The modern State of Nigeria was brought to being by God the Almighty in 1914. This happened through the British Government after the northern and southern protectorates were brought together and a central government established in Lagos. It is helpful for us to remind ourselves that when the British did this – there were three distinctive ways of relating to this God, the almighty: African Traditional Religions, Islam and Christianity in that order. Before the time of independence in 1960, the census figures of 1958 for the Northern Region were: Islam, 11,322,000, African Traditional Religions, (Animists) 4,279,000, and Christianity, 547,000 adherents. (Willinks Report, 1958:64).

Why do we need to remind ourselves of this important beginning? It is to make an important point we often try to erase from our political reality in this country and that is: that Nigeria was born into a pluralistic world and till date we remain a pluralistic country. This pluralism means that the Nigerian has multiple identities. What that

translates to for example is that I am a Nigerian, of the Nupe tribe and a Christian of the Anglican Communion. My colleague, Mahdi Shehu is also Nigerian, Hausa from Katsina and Muslim who belongs to the Sunni community. This maze of the Nigerian multiple identities can be enriching and rewarding if well managed and could be destructive if not well handled.

By pluralism, I mean a situation where people of different religions and faiths live together and interact at all levels without fear or prejudice. (El-Assad, 1989).

Christianity and Pluralism.

From a Christian perspective, the evangelical message, as presented by Jesus Christ and made precise by the New Testament is addressed to “*all men of good will*” no matter their ethnic, cultural, political or religious adherence. The Kingdom of God is close at hand, it says there, and there is no discrimination: moreover, the small and the humble have a privileged place. Others are often designated by the term “*neighbour*”; since God in Christianity is revealed as the Father of all:

He who causes His sun to rise on bad men as well
as good (*Mtt 5:45*).

It is understandable that brotherhood is affirmed for all in Christianity. In fact, for Jesus Christ Himself, all human beings are dear to Him:

*Looking around at those sitting in a circle about Him,
He said, “Here are my mother, and my brother. Anyone
Who does the will of God, that person is my brother and
sister and mother (Mk 3, 32-35).*

We understand therefore that Christianity goes beyond the old split between Jews and Gentiles, between Greeks and Barbarians, between Roman citizens and non-citizens, to affirm with Paul that:

*There are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek,
slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one
in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28-29).*

Jesus Christ reminds Christians through many parables that one must allow the good grain and the weed to grow together, that the harvest of the kingdom depends on the different qualities of earth and kinds of water, as well as successive seasons, and that nobody would be able to say *that it is here or there* that is why He said to His apostles:

*It is not for you to know times or dates that
The Father had decided by His own authority (Acts 1:7)*

For Him, the time of men seems to be also the time of God's patience. St Peter says it in his first preaching's:

*So that the Lord may send the time of comforts
(Acts 3:20)*

The 'time of comfort', of waiting, of hope: the ultimate foundation of a common respect of the diversity of spiritual communities and of a harmonious Religious Pluralism, doesn't it reside in that same patience of God who respects times and seasons and thus prepares slowly the coming kingdom or the adherence to His law? His providence takes care of the just and the sinner and His goodness reaches to all mankind no matter their religion, because He hopes that they will all turn towards His will and one day recognize His Lordship. That is why Jesus Christ tells Christians that "there will be more rejoicing in Heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine virtuous men who have no need of repentance" (Lk 15:1-7).

Islam and Pluralism

Religious pluralism has been a facet of Islamic life since early Islam. The Holy Qur'an is clear on the subject and it leaves no room for doubt. First and foremost there is no compulsion in religion. This is what Allah says in the Qur'an: *Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error*" (Q2:256). It is so clear and categorical. The Holy Qur'an also proclaims: *say, the truth is from your Lord: let him who will believe, and let him who will, reject (it)*" (Q18:29). (El-Assad, 1989).

Finally, it is said that:

"Those who believe (in the Qur'an), and those who follow the Jewish (Scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians, any who believe in

God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, - shall have their reward with their Lord: on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve” (Q, 2:62 and Q, 5:69 in a slightly different version).

Many a Muslim commentator, old and modern, drew from these two verses the anticipated affirmation of a possible salvation for non-Muslims, especially the Jews, the Christians and the Sabians, who are sincere in their faith and practice. This supposes that they ought to be respected in their personal, family and community life. Hence the justification of the status of protection (dhimma), a historical start of religious pluralism in Islam.

On the other hand doesn't the Qur'an often say: *let him who will believe, let who will, reject (faith)* (Q, 18:29). To the Prophet it is reminded that:

*If it had been thy Lord's will, they would
All have believed, all who are on earth'.
Will you then compel mankind against
their will, to believe* (Q,10:99-100)

These significant verses refer to that reality: men are free in their choices, the mission of the prophets comes up against the mystery of human freedom and, in the last analysis, all are referred to that one great mystery of the free will of God.

IMPLICATIONS OF PLURALISM: In the words of Dr. Imbillah, it is theologically sound to suggest that God-given freedom allows free human beings to choose the religious path they wish to tread though they will be held responsible for the choices made. The task before Muslims and Christians in Nigeria therefore is how to constructively relate and manage and live with their religious diversity.

Unfortunately, here in the northern parts of Nigeria, what has been inherited is that relationship with peoples of other faiths should be discouraged: 'what has belief got to do with unbelief'? Even worse is the teaching that those outside your religious community are not to be converted but that we should leave them alone because that would mean one religion is better than the other. The outcome of such theological positions has created camps within the Christian faith and even Islam in Nigeria.

These two approaches: (convert them by all means and leave them alone) would not fit the existential reality we face in Nigeria today.

What happens when you call on an individual and that person refuses to convert? What would you do with her or him in order to keep your friendship? For those who are against converting people from one community to the other, the question to be answered here is; whose responsibility is it to convert someone from one faith to the other? (Acts. 10 :1-48). The experience we have and continue to have in Nigeria is that significant number of people from both faiths is converted from one faith to the other , just as a significant number choose to remain within their religious community.

When therefore we talk about the discipline of interfaith relations, what is advocated is that we talk **with**, and not just talk **about** people of other faiths, that we do so because both of our faiths teach us to love God and our neighbour though there are differences in our understanding of some of the concepts.

In Nigeria especially this north-central and parts of the north-west, families live together in the same households with intrafaith and interfaith differences. They eat, work, celebrate their diverse religious festivals, share joys of birth and the sadness of death and work together for the development of their community. This is what African spirituality is all about: 'live and let live with our religious diversities in harmony'.

Interfaith relations in Nigeria therefore is nothing new; it is and has continued to be about how to curb the growing intolerant religious spirit that blows around the world and unfortunately, Nigeria is not spared. Today, the challenge before us is to find a way of rebuilding our religiously tolerant society and insulate it from being polluted and overtaken by the wave of religious intolerance that has continued to see us living by the law of the jungle which is 'eat or be eaten' (Mbillah, 2008)

Is Interfaith Relationship feasible?

Interfaith relations mean faith meeting faith and therefore, people of one faith meeting others of another faith. In practice, it is not, and should not be a meeting aimed at compromising or watering down the beliefs of any one faith with the hope that we can strike a mean and say we are all the same. Both the Bible and Qur'an do not teach that in spite of very many areas of similarities. Our position within the BBA is that no faith should attempt to explain away any of its cardinal doctrines for the sake of peace and harmony. Faith quest for peace and harmony can only be possible when religious people are able to

accept and live with their major differences in their belief systems in harmony. Remember the conversation between Sir Ahmadu Bello and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe: says Azikiwe, 'Let us forget our differences' to which the Sardauna replied: 'No, let us understand our differences, by understanding our differences, we can build unity' (Gambari, 1992). Friends this conversation gives us a lead to how Nigerians in general and the Muslim and Christian communities in the northern states in particular can live together for even development. The undisputed objectives of interfaith relations are peace, harmony, development and sharing our common humanness (*Ubuntu* in S.A), our position within BBA is that these are noble objectives that have to be vigorously pursued in the northern parts of the country in particular.

What are the obstacles to Interfaith relations?

All I want to do here is to mention some of the obstacles bedeviling our quest for peaceful relations in the central and western zones of the northern parts of this country:

- (a) The area of religious freedoms and rights as ones exclusive religious rights could easily turn out to be the violation of another's religious rights (Shari'a, places of worship, access roads during *ibadat* on Fridays and Sundays etc).
- (b) The multiple identities of the Nigerian Muslim or Christian: how do these identities relate to one's faith without giving room for divided loyalties leading to segmentation of our societies?
- (c) The realm of politics where political appointees are made on the basis of one's religious affiliation, this could lead to religious tribalism which could easily lead to Muslims voting for a Muslim candidate while the Christians vote for a Christian candidate.
- (d) Both Islam and Christianity are international, In Islam we talk about the Muslim *umma* and the Christians talk about the Body of Christ. There have been instances where a religious crisis that affects the Muslim *umma* has brought about a religious crisis in Nigeria. Where this universal sense of belonging leads to a negative impact on our country is unfortunate and needs to be looked into and resolved. The position of BBA is that our common humanity as Nigerians, Muslims and Christians should be harnessed to bring about peace and development and not antagonism and destruction of lives and property.

(e) My last obstacle is that of mission and evangelism in Christianity and *dawah* in Islam. This concept is an imperative for both faith traditions. The difficulty here is on how to be faithful to our religious demands devoid of polemics, stereotypes and derogatory remarks about the other.

How do we reduce tensions re-these obstacles?

To assist us in our thinking, permit me to suggest the following:

1. Teaching our seminary students and students being trained as Imams should include the study the religion of their neighbour.
2. Imams and pastors need to be trained in recognized institutions and their training should include chaplaincy work in our various institutions(prisons, hospitals and schools).
3. There is a need to work on the possibility of attaining a zero tolerance for religious crises in the northern parts of the country.
4. Religious institutions need to join hands with each state government in fighting corruption by creating jobs for the teaming young girls and boys who have education without jobs.
5. We also propose some deliberate attempts by both communities to move from regular meetings to doing things together like: fighting HIV, illiteracy, environmental protection and active theological debates.
6. It is also suggested that at LGA and state levels, there should be a deliberate effort at encouraging both the Muslim and Christian adherents to study the religion of their neighbour.

References:

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- 2) Nassir El-Din-El-Assad, Address delivered on behalf of H.E. Crown Prince Al-Hassan on 11th September, 1989 Amman, Jordan.
- 3) Mbillah, Johnson A. (2008) *Interfaith Relations in Africa*.
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Conclusion

Muslims and Christians can therefore gather together and consider the patience of God as being the very root of all Religious Pluralism, to be organized and respected according to a variety of cultures, in our case the nation, and moments of history. Will we also learn how to be patient?

Religious feeling has always manifested itself, whether it be by living according to one's conscience, or worshipping according to one's faith, and has been perceived as an inalienable right, linked to the very dignity of man and to his personality, and the State has a duty to respect and protect it. This is what is meant by religious freedom for the individual. It is in our opinion that a main role of NIREC, BBA and several other FBOs is to assist the Federal government at every level of governance to achieve this. Admittedly the recognition of this right is not achieved in one day. Many centuries have had to pass, and much blood has had to be shed, in order to get this right protected. Indeed, the battles that had to be fought have so marked human civilization and its evolution in time, that it would not be exaggerating to say that the history of religious freedom is the history of the human race (Marinos, 1972).

Friends, religious pluralism, has led to the creation of a variety of religious communities and, with regard to Christianity, a variety of churches. Every one of these communities and churches has laid claim to absolute freedom, and the State (Federal government) is obliged to take up a position on this difficult issue, the Federal government has had to face not only the claim of each religious community for ever more freedom for the manifestation of its religious convictions and worship, but also each one's claim to state protection whenever another religious community has tried to influence its own legitimate order by the exercise of proselytism, to the detriment of its flock. The problem is aggravated whenever the State recognizes and protects one particular religion and proclaims it to be the official religion. If it does not grant the same right both to the official religion and to the followers of the other religions, the latter will protest and upset the peaceful existence of society as a whole, but should the State give way and recognize equal rights for all, the followers of the

official religion – who always make up the majority – will therefore consider the religious character of their community to be in danger on account of the proselytism exercised by the other religions. Let us at this level accept the fact that the tendency to proselytize has always been, and will continue to be powerful and the main cause of much disruption.

Alas for the spirit of proselytism which the Jews took from the Egyptians and transmitted like a popular epidemic to Christians and Muslims(Montesquieu, letters Persanes lxxxv Usbek to Mirza).

The fact also needs to be faced that some groups within the three main religions in Nigeria profess teachings that are dangerous to the legitimate order, upright morals, social serenity etc. thereby putting the State in an awkward position and forcing it to take measures against such religious groups, forbidding the application of these teachings. So, social tension rises. The religious community subject to these sanctions makes heroes out of its worshippers, comparing them to martyrs. It raises the level of its resistance to such a level that painful social problems arise.

One is therefore led to conclude that the appearance of many religions within a single society organized as a state (religious pluralism) creates two kinds of problems

- a. Difficult relations between the religious communities, and
- b. Strained relations between religious communities and the State.

What therefore is the role of NIREC in this situation?

NIREC and the question of national unity

My colleague, Shehu Mahdi and I have always sang this song:
Nigeria is the only country we have as Muslims and Christians.

Nigeria belongs to both religious communities. There will always be Muslims and there will always be Christians in this country called Nigeria.

It is in our own interest therefore to embrace this reality and survive together lest we become extinct as Nigerians. In the light of this, permit me in closing to itemize what roles NIREC could play in promoting national unity for your consideration: I humbly propose to this body to lead Nigerians – Muslims & Christians to rediscover their national bond and its cultural basis to find a new and concrete approach to the complexities of religion and state in a pluralist society which is what Nigeria is and finally, initiate a commitment to human rights, those of individuals as well as communities.

1. The question of national unity:

Since the days of struggle against the Ottomans, common nationality, *al-uruba* (Arabness or Arabity), has been in the heart of major political movements in the Arab world. Today in the Arab world, greater attention is being given to the cultural content of a common identity and the urge to rehabilitate the idea of nationhood.

Is there a lesson for us from this Arab experience?

Cultural Nigerian-ness should accommodate differences and be aware that the greatest moments in any history benefited from pluralism. While the dissociation between Arabity, in its cultural sense and Islam, is not possible, yet, the distinction between religion and nationalist ideology is necessary.

Nigerian Muslims and Christians face a common situation of acculturation. Tradition is the locus of identity. It is not, however, mere past but continuity of a vital principle responding to historical changes. The challenges of modernity are faced. Authenticity cannot be the prerogative of Muslims and modernity the monopoly of Christians. The enemies of nationhood have become numerous. There are many in our country who portray the form of government we have as unfit for the people. Whether good or bad, we live in a country with sovereignty, integrity and a personality from the standpoint of international law. We have got to deal with this situation. It is my proposal that we preach the sermon of positive appreciation of nationhood.

2. The question of religion and State in a pluralist society.

The notion still current, that the Islamic community sees not the slight de facto distinction between temporal and spiritual authority cannot withstand careful scrutiny, as we study history or analyze the present power structures in the Muslim world. We cannot, equally attribute to Christianity the assertion that religion is an entirely private affair, relating to the individual and God alone. Islam and Christianity, in two different ways, bear witness to the fact that the truths of revelation relate to the life of society and to the responsibilities of government. From both standpoints the whole realm of the state cannot be immunized from the significance of religion.

Today in Nigeria those who call for the enforcement of hudud shariah are portrayed as advocates of an anachronistic and unjust theocracy while those who stress equality between people, individual freedom and rationality are labelled as militant secularists. We need a common search for a 'model society' a renewed approach to problems.

May we propose to this body the dynamics of dialogue in a spirit of genuine concern for national unity on the relationship between religion and politics which will not be based on a western invention imposed from outside but one based on the various African experiences and cultures. Through dialogue, the respective autonomy of state and religion could be suggested without calling for privatization of the latter or separation between religion and society (Groupe de Recherches (1986).

3. The need for commitment to human rights.

National co-existence based on the principle of co-citizenship is not founded on race or even at a religion but on the simple common condition of man, the image of God or His vicar (*khalifa*). The idea of human rights is not the prerogative of a particular humanist civilization. However, a modern understanding of democracy strives to go beyond the system of majority-minority in a homogeneous polity but in recognition of differences in a number of societies, for adjustments that protect national unity.

In Nigeria today fanatics of all sides and perhaps some of the less fanatic merge religion with ideology.

“We are confronted with the struggle between the one and Only God and all kinds of manipulative idols and images” (Metropolitan Khodr, May, 1986:39)

Discernment is, therefore our common responsibility in a country where fears tend to accelerate a process that created them. It is our common call, more than ever before, to bear witness, in patience but also with courage, to the liberating power of our faith in God, as we seek better future for all Nigerians irrespective of faith, tribe or ethnic group.