



## Interfaith Dialogue: A Means Resolving Communal Criss in Nigeria

Omar Abdallah Dukuly  
Department of Islamic Studies,  
Federal University of Education, Zaria

### ABSTRACT

*Interfaith dialogue is not a new thing in the world. History tells us that when people are not at war with their neighbours, they have always made an effort to understand one another not only for defence strategy but also for avoidance of war. Such efforts making in consolidating peaceful coexistence and avoidance war include: 1965- the Roman Catholic Church issued a document, instituting major policy changes in the Catholic Church's policy towards non-Christian religions and July 2008- Historic Interfaith dialogue was initiated by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to solve world problems through concord and not conflict. The conference was attended by religious leaders of different faiths like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. It was hosted by Spain in Madrid. This paper thus, looks into the misconception about interfaith dialogue and its snail speed rate in Nigeria and proffers solution to it.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Interfaith dialogue is collaboration among different religions or cultures in a given community. By engaging in inter-religious dialogue, we learn to respect one another as members of one human race. We learn to appreciate both our differences and the common values that bind us to one another. We are able to work together to strive to prevent conflict and to overcome the crises existing in different parts of Nigeria (Pollitt 1996:5). Collaboration among the different religions must be based on the rejection of fanaticism and extremism, which lead to violence. Our religious traditions have the necessary resources to overcome the fragmentations which we observe in the country and foster peaceful coexistence between peoples. Unless we recognize pluralism and respect diversity no peace is possible. Pluralism is an obvious fact of life in Nigeria and in many parts of the world. Mutual understanding is no longer a luxury but an absolute prerequisite for peace in the world (Taylor, 2010.)

Microsoft Encarta (2008) defines communal crises as a dangerous or worrying situation involving different groups of people within

a society in which security of lives and property is very uncertain and difficult especially a time when action must be taken to avoid complete disaster or breakdown of rule of law. Communal crisis in the name of religion has become a common phenomenon in Nigeria. But in reality, most of these crises if not all are ethnically and politically motivated (Ajibola, 2009:17). Having defined key terms, below is the discussion on the need for interfaith dialogue in Nigeria, freedom of religion, Misconceptions about interfaith dialogue, how to initiate an interfaith dialogue group, some remarkable achievements of interfaith movements around the world then conclusion and recommendations.

### The Need for Interfaith Dialogue in Nigeria

Religious differences have often turned into chaos, self-righteousness, and fanaticism, contributing to conflict, atrocities, and war. Instances of crises in Bauchi (2000), Kaduna (2002) and Jos of recent; are some of the cases to mention but a few (Ajibola, 2009:17). In as much as religions have contributed to the peace of the world, they have also led to division, hatred, and war. Ironically, the basic teaching of all religions is

Corresponding author: Omar Abdallah Dukuly

✉ [oadukuly@yahoo.com](mailto:oadukuly@yahoo.com)

Department of Islamic Studies, Federal University of Education, Zaria.

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peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, compassion, love, live for the sake of other(s), treating others the way you want to be treated. Therefore Mussie (2010) suggests that we should not allow religion to be an accomplice to war, to terrorism, or to any other forms of violence, organized or spontaneous, against any member of the human family.

No hooligan should be allowed to hijack a true religion and misinterpret its teachings. Christians and Muslims being the dominant religious groups in Nigeria should come together and play a major role in helping reduce conflict and in addressing the critical needs of Nigerians. They should be a healing force in the country. It is for this reason we need a viable interfaith dialogue in Nigeria in order to promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among Nigerians in all the diversity of their religions, beliefs, cultures and languages. Such a dialogue is particularly needed in areas burdened by inter- or intra- religious conflicts resulting from mistrust, misunderstanding or lack of knowledge of spiritual traditions and their specific cultures and practices (Interfaith-Encounter Association (IEA) 2010).

### Right to Freedom of Religion

Human beings naturally differ in their religious conviction and beliefs as it has been categorically explained in the Qur'an in many places (e.g. Suratu Hud Q11:118) "If thy Lord had so willed He could have made mankind one People: but they will not cease to dispute". That is why every human being, man and woman is entitled to freedom of religion of his or her choice. Even though Muslims have been enjoined to invite non-Muslims to Islam (only through conviction) according to Aliyu (2008), they are not allowed to compel anybody to accept Islam as clearly indicated in Suratul-Baqarah, "There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the right path has become distinct from the wrong paths..." (Q2:256) Commenting on this verse, Muhammad Asad (1980) has this to say: On the strength of the above categorical prohibition of coercion (ikrah) in anything that pertains to faith or religion, all Islamic jurists (fuqaha'), without any exception hold, that forceable conversion is, under all

circumstances, null and void, and that any attempt at coercing a non-Muslim to accept the faith of Islam is a grievous sin; a verdict which disposes of the widespread fallacy that Islam places to the unbelievers the alternative of "conversion or the sword."

Furthermore, to protect this freedom of religion and conviction as argued by Aliyu (2008), Islam not only forbids coercion in the matter of faith but also forbids the use of abusive language against the deities of other religions. This has been enunciated in Qur'an 6:108, which provides thus: Revile not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance. Thus, have We made alluring to each people its own doings. In the end will their Lord and We shall then tell them the truth of all that they did. Asad (1980) once again commented on this verse by saying that, while Muslims are expected to argue against the false beliefs of others, they are not allowed to abuse the objects of those beliefs and to hurt thereby the feeling of their fellow men.

### Misconception about Interfaith Dialogue

In all faith groups, there are people who misinterpret their holy scriptures and do evil acts or initiate their own wrong doctrine, while the majority of the followers of that faith live their faith in a strong and positive way. No wonder there exist different versions in every religion; for examples, Sunnis, Shi'ites, Kharajites etc ... in Islam; Catholics, Jehovah-Witness, Protestants etc ... in Christianity. The issue of interfaith is not an exception. Even though the issue of majority or minority does not matter when it comes to truth and sound ideas; but there are people who misconceive interfaith as a compromise between or among various religious groups by making all the religions one single entity. This is absolutely wrong as far the whole bowl of 'tuwo' of this paper is concerned! The Arizona Interfaith Movement (2010) asserts that interfaith relationships are not ecumenical; that is, we are not trying to come to an agreement on principles of doctrinal practice, but instead there should be mutual respect for each other's beliefs and a desire to collaborate on important issues where we find common ground.

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Corresponding author: Omar Abdallah Dukuly

✉ [oadukuly@yahoo.com](mailto:oadukuly@yahoo.com)

Department of Islamic Studies, Federal University of Education, Zaria.

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Some Muslims may out of context quote Qur'an 109:6 which says "To you your way (of life) and to me mine." This verse is an answer to a non-Muslim who expects a Muslim to go against the teachings of Islam by mixing them with what Islam does not sanction.

When it comes to dialogue with other faiths, the Glorious Qur'an informed Prophet Muhammad (SAW) that Christians are the closest religious religious group to Muslims as stated in this verse:

... And nearest among them in love to the believers wilt thou find those who say: "We are Christians:" because amongst these are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world and they are not arrogant (Q5:82).

To buttress this close relationship between Muslims and Christians, Allah (SWT) asked the Prophet (SAW) to invite the Christians and Jews to dialogue and unity on what is common between them and Muslims in this statement:

Say: "O people of the Book (Jews and Christians)! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not from among ourselves Lords and patrons other than Allah" ... (Qur'an 3: 64)

Interfaith dialogue focuses on such common terms among different religious groups. In the case of Nigeria below are some of the common grounds Muslims and Christians can exploit:

1. Belief in One God who created the universe and has power over all things (Pollitt, H. J., 1996: 69).
2. The life and teachings of Jesus Christ constitute the exemplar model for living one's own life (Qur'an 2: 285/ II Cor. 8: 9).
3. Reason, rational thought, science, and philosophy coexist with faith in God (Qur'an 6: 32/ Genesis 1:28).

4. Human beings have the ability to exercise free will in a responsible, constructive and ethical manner with the assistance of religion (Qur'an 91: 7-8).
5. Human nature in its present condition is neither inherently corrupt nor depraved, but capable of both good and evil, as God intended (Rom, 3:23/ Qur'an 49:13).

It was based on these principles that Christians and Jews lived peacefully with Muslims for many centuries in the Middle East and other Asian and African countries. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) sent weak Muslim refugees to a Christian leader (King Negus) in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in order to protect them from the persecution of the pagans in Makkah (Lemu 1990). Christians entrusted the Muslims to keep to the key of the Church in Jerusalem. When the Jews fled from Spain during the Inquisition, they were welcomed by the Muslims. They settled in the heart of the Islamic Caliphate. They enjoyed positions of power and authority (Alim Software 2000).

The treaty of Huda biyya in 6 A.H/628 C.E was another cooperation sought by the Prophet (SAW) with non-Muslims (this time around with pagans). It was a peace treaty conducted between the Muslims and Makkans after the three major battles of Badr, Uhud and Khandaq. The treaty was another example of the Prophet's preference for peace. Many Muslims thought that the terms of the treaty were unfavourable to them and did not like it, but the Prophet (SAW) accepted the treaty because of being humble and wishing for peace to reign. The terms of the treaty include: They should not address Muhammad (SAW) as the Messenger of Allah but the son of Abdallah Muslims and the Makkans should observe truce for ten years without hostility, anybody that leaves Makkah to come to Madina and accept Islam without the consent of his guardian should be sent back, but if any one that leaves Muslims to join Makkans should be left alone and the Muslims should postpone their Hajj till the following year (Rahim 2001).



### Establishing an Interfaith Movement

As a grassroots social movement of change, we can organize ourselves in this conference to establish an interfaith movement called Federal College of Education Zaria Interfaith Movement with the acronym FCEZ-IM. It can be headed by the Dean, School of Arts & Social Sciences and the conference planning committee members featuring for other posts in the executive body. Or the Dean serves as the Chief Adviser to the movement while the conference planning committee members from the entire members of the Exco. Having conceived and decided on any of these two ideas and elected or selected the officials, the next plan of action should be the formulation of action plan which can be as follows:

1. Tasking all the conferees with a reasonable amount (let's say N5000.00 each) that will enable the movement to pick off. Caution should be taken here not to be discouraged by low turnout for financial and moral contributions at the beginning. With patience, steadfastness and persuasion more people will join later.
2. Having acquired tangible amount of money, awareness should be created by inviting everyone, everywhere, regardless of faith, religion, gender, social status, political view or anything else that matters in the society. The invitation will be done through publications on radios, TVs, news papers, internet services, public gatherings etc ...
3. Partnership should be sought with the existing and vibrant interfaith groups such as: Inter-Faith Mediation Centre/Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum, Waff Road, Kaduna, Nigeria. E-mail: [mcdf2002@yahoo.com](mailto:mcdf2002@yahoo.com), International Association for Religious Freedom (IAFR) etc...
4. Having gotten in touch with the existing interfaith groups we will learn how to organize our activities in terms of projects, sub-committees (e.g. Youth

Wing Interfaith Dialogue, Women's Interfaith Forum etc ...), and events.

### Some Remarkable Achievements of Interfaith Movements around the World

1. **Burning of the Qur'an:** On September 7, 2010, the Arizona Interfaith Movement was one of the first concerned groups that brought to light the plan of publicly burning the Glorious Qur'an by the Rev. Terry Jones in Gainesville, Florida, USA. The movement issued a statement saying that this proposed disgraceful act will do nothing but further divide Americans and all world citizens. The action of the interfaith groups paid off by gathering momentum around the world which made President Obama and his Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton to join in the condemnation and the plan was finally abandoned ([www.interfaitharizona.com](http://www.interfaitharizona.com)).
2. **The Pastor and the Imam's Joint Efforts:** In recent years, Nigeria has been plagued with alarming frequency by violence between its Muslim and Christian communities. One of the worst-hit regions has been Kaduna State. The cofounders an national coordinators of the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum of Kaduna in 1995 are two men with deep roots in the opposing communities, both of whom have turned away from violence and militancy action and instead embraced nonviolence, reconciliation, and the advocacy of peaceful relations between their communities. Once they were bitter rivals, but now they consider themselves brothers. James Wuye and Muhammad Ashafa are living proof that people can change, and that the urge for revenge can be replaced by an urge to foster reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Both began to question the cost of violence and turned to the Bible and the Qur'an, where they found

passages showing commonalities between Islam and Christianity and calling on believers to be peacemakers ([www.interfaithdialogue.com](http://www.interfaithdialogue.com)).

3. **Building a Mosque in France:** In a French town called Fareberswiller, near the Franco-German border, a potential dispute over a new mosque was peacefully settled. The plan was to erect France's third largest Islamic place of worship, after those in Paris and Marseilles. The Algerian Imam at Fareberswiller, Mohammed Fakhridine, persuaded the industrial giant Houillereux du Bassin de Lorraine to sell part of their land to the Muslims for a single franc (US\$,20). Fakhridine rallied the community around him by emphasizing that funding for the project should come from worshipers in the region. He managed to raise \$750,000 from the area's 6,000 Muslims. Because of his moderation he even obtained the support of Catholic Bishop Gaston Goldschmidt of Metz. The mosque minaret, which at 80 feet high would dwarf the bell tower of a nearby Catholic Church, would have no amplified calls to prayer because Fakhridine did not want to draw out the hurly peals of bells from its Catholic neighbor. 'For us,' Fakhridine said, 'this building is a legacy to the region, just like a church or a synagogue. People are observing us, and in a sense, we are representing Islam in France (Microsoft Encarta, 2008)

## CONCLUSION

The need for interfaith dialogue is felt due to the fact that religious differences are usually blamed for most chaos, self-righteousness, and fanaticism, conflict, atrocities, and war in Nigeria. When seeking for political power or support in any social contest, Nigerians turn to religion in order to gain sympathy and backing. Sincere Christians and Muslims are working hard to salvage religions from the hands

of fanatics and myopic thinkers. Such objective can only be achieved through dialogue.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Both Muslims and Christians should read their Divine Books thoroughly and put their teachings in practice.
2. Nigerian Government should include interfaith dialogue as one of the contents of Moral Philosophy in general studies at the tertiary institutions and make it a core course for religious studies' students.
3. Government should establish interfaith dialogue centre in every state.
4. The centers should initiate programs and projects that require and encourage the involvement of Christians and Muslims (including dialogues, workshops, seminars etc).
5. To support and build the capacity of local partners who are involved in peacemaking.
6. Dialogues between Muslims and Christians should focus on things that unite.

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