

Interreligious Relations and Dialogue in Nigeria: Lessons from African Indigenous Religion

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Abstract

Interreligious relations in contemporary Nigerian Society have been largely characterized with intolerance, antagonism, hatred and suspicion, especially among adherents of Islam and Christianity. Many fanatical Muslims and Christians have continued to exhibit intolerant attitudes toward adherents of other faith traditions, thereby making interfaith relations and dialogue difficult in Nigeria. Therefore, this study examined interreligious relations and dialogue in Nigeria in the light of African indigenous belief system with a view to advocate African indigenous religious model for interreligious relations and dialogue in the country. Data were obtained through observations, news media, text-books and journal articles, and subjected to historical, contextual, content, and constructive methods of analysis. This paper revealed that the extreme and unreasoned approaches to religious beliefs and practices by fanatical Muslims and Christians have serious negative implications for interreligious relations and dialogue in Nigeria. This attitudinal approach to religious beliefs has continued to polarize Nigerian citizens along two main opposing camps, creating the cliché of ‘we versus them’ with hatred and violent tendencies toward each other. This essay submitted that Muslims and Christians need to emulate African indigenous religion in terms of its virtues of respect, tolerance, acceptance and accommodation of all religious traditions in order to extend the frontiers of interfaith relations and dialogue in Nigeria.

Keywords: Interreligious Relations, Dialogue, Islam, Christianity, African Indigenous Religion

Introduction

Monotheistic religious traditions such as Christianity and Islam offer particular and often conflicting perspectives on the nature of the ultimate reality, the human predicament, the path or paths to a resolution, and an eschatological vision of the idealized state. As such, many human societies have continued to experience the upsurge of hostile relationships among the different religious traditions in the contemporary world. The Nigerian society has continued to experience its own share of hostile relationships among the major religious traditions in the country. Nigeria is a multi-faith society with three main

religions (African Indigenous Religion, Islam, and Christianity) and a number of other smaller faith traditions competing for recognition in the country’s socio-religious space. It is imperative to state that interreligious relations in contemporary Nigerian Society have been largely characterized with intolerance, antagonism, hatred and suspicion, especially among adherents of Islam and Christianity (Lee 64; Atoi 131; Atoi 129; Atoi and Babale 231). Many adherents of the two aforementioned religions have historically embraced the doctrine of salvation that exclude the followers of other faith traditions in

Nigeria from the eschatological and soteriological goals of religious beliefs and practices. The mindset and attitude of Muslims and Christians regarding the eschatological and soteriological goals of religion has historically led to a strong emphasis on the need to convert others to their own religion, which they believe is the only way that guarantee salvation for believers. Many fanatical Muslims and Christians have continued to exhibit intolerant attitude toward adherents of other faith traditions or co-religionists who they felt have violated the ordinances of religious founders or rules laid down by ecclesiastical authorities (Atoi 2-3; Atoi and Ogunrinade 27).

It is obvious that Muslims and Christians have in common the mission to convert other people to their religions because of their eschatological orientations. According to Mamdani, 'Islam and Christianity have in common a deeply messianic orientation, a sense of mission to civilize the world. Each is convinced that it possesses the sole truth, that the world beyond is a sea of ignorance that needs to be redeemed' (Cited in Atoi and Babale 232). Akande and Olawale contend that events in Nigeria have proven that many adherents of Islam and Christianity are very intolerant of other religious traditions as shown in the various cases of inter and intra-religious conflicts, which have for decades affected the country's developments negatively (2). Unlike Islam and Christianity, African Indigenous Religion has the culture of acceptance, accommodation, and tolerance. The adherents of African Indigenous Religion to a large extent have been tolerant and accommodating of other religious traditions. It was the culture of tolerance and inclusiveness inherent in African Indigenous Religious tradition that enabled many Nigerians to convert to Islam and Christianity (Atoi and

Ogunrinade 27). It is pertinent to note that for interreligious dialogue to be fruitful, parties involved in it must be willing to accommodate and tolerate the belief systems and practices of each other's religions. Therefore, this study examines interreligious relations and dialogue in the light of African indigenous belief system with a view to advocate indigenous religious model for interreligious relations and dialogue in the Nigerian society.

In order to achieve the objective of this research, data were obtained through observation, news media, textbooks, and journal articles. Data generated from the aforementioned sources were analyzed with the aid of historical, contextual, content, and constructive methods. The remaining parts of this essay is divided into the following sub-headings: Conceptualizing interreligious relations and dialogue; Understanding African Indigenous Religion; Nature and challenges of interreligious relations and dialogue in Nigeria; African Indigenous Religion as model for interreligious relations and dialogue in Nigeria, and the conclusion.

Conceptualizing Interreligious Relations and Dialogue

Ottuh, Ottuh and Aitufe maintain that interreligious relations imply possible and practicable cordial relationship that exists between religious traditions in a society. The instrument of interreligious relations is interfaith dialogue aimed at cordiality, togetherness, tolerance and acceptance that will be the true sign of a new era in the religious history of humanity (46). According to Andrabi, interfaith or interreligious is relating to or involving different religions or members of different religions being together. Dialogue is a discussion between people in which opinions are exchanged (264). Adam and Tayviah contend that

dialogue is a formal discussion between two groups or individuals, especially when they are trying to solve a problem or end a disagreement. It is an exchange of ideas, opinions or views on societal issues with a view to reaching a harmonious agreement or settlement. Citing Cornille, Adam and Tayviah observe that dialogue is becoming more and more common in the description or prescription of the appropriate relationship between religions. It is pertinent to note that cooperating with each other in social assignments and exchanging opinions on collective religious concerns has become a more conciliatory and constructive approach between religions rather than competing for territory, converts, or claims among them (51). Adam and Tayviah further explicate that dialogue is a broad concept encompassing engagements between religious traditions, ranging from everyday interactions between neighbors to organized discussions and debates between experts in the field, as well as formal or informal exchanges between spiritual leaders and institutions to interreligious activism on social issues. Dialogue between religious traditions goes beyond talks or conversations to include interaction and relationships as well (51-52).

Interreligious dialogue, also known as, interfaith dialogue is about people of different faith traditions coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. It has to do with the cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, at both the individual and institutional level. Interfaith dialogue is not just words or talks, it includes human interaction and relationships. It can take place between individuals and communities and on many levels (Ahmed-Hameed 87; Andrabi 264). Melnik says that

interreligious dialogue is generally referred to as the institution of positive and constructive relations between adherents of diverse religious traditions (48). Cornille asserts that interreligious dialogue is any level of constructive and practical engagement between different religious traditions (cited in Adam and Tayviah). According to Adam and Tayviah, interfaith dialogue is the bringing together of many voices, stories, perspectives and experiences of religious people in order to learn about and understand each other. It provides a conducive environment as well as an opportunity for telling stories, listening to others and building understanding on various religious matters (52). Interreligious dialogue serves as a vital tool in building bridges of understanding and trust among religious traditions. It encourages open and respectful discussions among people of different faith traditions, promoting empathy, mutual learning, and peaceful coexistence (Nwachukwu 24).

Interreligious dialogue should enhance our sensitivity to the feelings of all professing religious people in their relationship with God. Good dialogue should, in addition, result in the deepening of the faith of every participant (Andrabi 266). Ottuh et al contend that learning about other people's religions can lead to a greater understanding of Religious Truth (47). According to Andrabi:

Interfaith dialogue is an exercise of learning about those that are radically different from me and my community and learning to coexist with those who subscribe to different beliefs, customs, and worldviews other than my own. Whether you are Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Atheist, Agnostic or anything else, the interfaith dialogue is a place where anyone of us can learn how to

be aware of religious/non-religious stigmas, strengths and differences (267).

Moreover, Andrabi argues that the purpose of interfaith dialogue is to increase our understanding and respect for other religious systems and institutions, thereby increasing our appreciation of their values (265-266). For Adam and Tayviah, peace is the ultimate objective or goal of interfaith or interreligious dialogue, so the dialogue process must be peaceful (52). Andrabi submits that though dialogue does not solve all problems or bridge all gaps, but its importance is really in creating a space for conversation where differences can be peacefully and respectfully confronted and understood. Dialogue fails if people pretend differences does not exist (267).

Understanding African Indigenous Religion

African indigenous religion is the religious belief system or faith tradition that evolved from and developed in the African environment. The religion is indigenous to the African people because it was planted in Africa by Africans and it germinated and grew in the African soil. It is a system of beliefs and practices which evolved from the culture and worldviews of the African people. In essence, African indigenous religion reflects the total way of life of the African people. According to Olaleye, African indigenous religion is the religion that sums up the total life of Africans. It is a religion that permeates every aspect of African life. The religion evolved slowly over many centuries in Africa. As Africans responded to various life situations and experiences, religious ideas and practices gradually arose and took shape in the process of human search for solutions to existential problems confronting the human race in Africa (19). While some scholars believe that African

indigenous religion is a revealed religion, others are of the opinion that the religion emerged from African past experiences (Bonsu112). Awolalu contends that it is a religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans (cited in Bonsu 109).

It is imperative to state that African indigenous religion has no sacred book or scripture but was transmitted through oral traditions from one generation to another. The religion has existed for so many centuries through the aforementioned means of transmission. According to Iheanacho, African indigenous religion has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans (79). Also, it is believed that African indigenous religion has no specific founder. According to Awolalu, African indigenous religion “is not written on paper but in people’s hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, shrines and religious functions”. “It has no founders like Gautama the Buddha, Christ, or Muhammad; it is not the religion of one hero” (cited in Bonsu112). Citing Worldmark Encyclopaedia of Religious Practices, Bonsu observes that the practitioners of African indigenous religion understand the founders of their religion to be God or the gods themselves, the same beings who created the universe and everything in it (112).

Bonsu further asserts that generally, African people are very religious, as such, religion permeates all aspects of life. Africans exhibit religious beliefs and practices in drumming, dancing, singing, ceremonies, festivals, marriages, among others (109). Little wonder Idowu maintains that “Africans are in all things religious” (1). Olaleye posits that Africans never lose the consciousness of the divine presence and intervention in their daily affairs. The strong

religious education of the African people has assured them that neither the advancement of science nor mere human endeavor is sufficient to solve the existential problems of humans today (20). Iheanacho asserts that African indigenous religion relies on the use of oral literature to express communication, philosophy of life, social cohesion and public governance. He opined that the African communicative system was carried out successfully in generations through myths, folklores, songs, dances, proverbs, and idioms. African religion has no historical date of origin. Its origin is lost in ambiguity because of time space between the time of its emergence and historians date of recording (79). Anyika asserts that African indigenous religion is a moderate religion which harbors no sentiment of hatred or opposition to any other religion in its own yard but can react on opposition (cited in Iheanacho 79). The structure of African indigenous religion include: belief in God, belief in the divinities, belief in spirits, belief in ancestors, and the practice of magic and medicine, among other. The central theme of African indigenous religion is justice.

Nature and Challenges of Interreligious Relations and Dialogue in Nigeria

Interreligious relations in Nigeria have been more of hostility than friendship in recent times, especially among adherents of Islam and Christianity. The extreme and unreasoned approaches to religious beliefs and practices by some Muslims and Christians in contemporary times have serious negative implications for interreligious relations and dialogue in Nigeria. The recent upsurge of fundamentalism, intolerance, violent extremism, terrorism, all in the name of fighting for God and other forms of organized violence in the socio-religious space

currently bedeviling the peace, security, and safety of human lives in many parts of Nigeria, especially in the northern region have been largely attributed to extreme approaches to religious beliefs and practices by fanatics (Atoi 98; Atoi 14; Atoi and Ajiji 130). It is pertinent to note that religious antagonism, hatred and suspicion have become prominent features of interreligious relations in Nigeria because of the issues of religious truth-claims in Islam and Christianity and the intolerant attitude of Muslims and Christians toward other faith traditions in the country. The determination of these two major missionary religious traditions to promote their monotheistic ideology in public life has made the matter worse in recent times (Atoi 5; Atoi and Babale 231). Atoi and Babale contend that the advent of Islam and Christianity brought social upheaval and violent confrontations into the religious landscape of the Nigerian society (234).

It is imperative to state at this juncture that the social upheavals and violent confrontations in Nigerian religious space was ignited by adherents of Islam and Christianity when they started treating African indigenous religion with so much disrespect. Muslims and Christians openly describe the religious thought forms of the African people with derogatory terminologies such as, primitive, savage, paganism, heathenism, idolatry, and fetishism. Many adherents of Islam and Christianity in the Nigerian society have continued to demonize the African indigenous religious beliefs and practices, which has eventually culminated into the destruction and burning of the sacred vessels, vestments, altars and shrines of the practitioners of African indigenous religion (Idowu 108; Atoi et al 2019; Atoi and Babale 234). Some scholars have continued to argue that it is totally wrong to speak of the religion of any living people

with such derogatory terminologies. It is not only inappropriate but also offensive to describe African religious belief system in such manner (Idowu 109-134; Atoi and Babale 234-235). Ubrurhe observes that Christians and Muslims in Nigeria are contemptuous of African indigenous religious beliefs and practices since they have developed the habit of destroying the images and symbols of the religion instituted by the African forbearers (Cited in Atoi and Babale 235).

Many Nigerian Muslims and Christians have packaged their thought patterns in such manner that they do not think that religious beliefs and practices outside their own should be considered as true. Hence, any religious tradition that contradicts their belief systems, they tend to oppose vehemently. This attitudinal approach to religious beliefs has continued to polarize Nigerian citizens along two major opposing camps, creating the cliché of ‘we versus them’ with hatred and violent tendencies toward each other (Atoi and Babale 232). It is pertinent to note that the fanatical attitude exhibited by fanatics in Islam and Christianity have continued to influence some adherents within these two religions who initially have friendly disposition and genuine desire for peaceful co-existence with their religious neighbors in Nigeria’s pluralistic polity. The hostile and unfriendly nature of interreligious relations in Nigeria is seen both at inter and intra faith levels. In essence, it exists between one religious tradition and another, and between sects or denominations within the same religion (Atoi and Babale 235).

One of the major issues confronting interreligious dialogue in Nigeria that must be mentioned here is the non-inclusion of the adherents of African indigenous religion as participants of interfaith dialogue in the country. It must be emphasized at this juncture that it is only the adherents of Islam and Christianity that are

usually invited to the dialogue table in Nigeria. African indigenous religious practitioners have never been invited to dialogue with adherents of the aforementioned religions. This approach to dialogue has continued to affect its success rate in Nigeria because the act of excluding African indigenous religion from interfaith dialogue has denied those involved in the exercise the valuable inputs from the practitioners of indigenous religious tradition. It is pertinent to state here that the values of African indigenous religion are needed for a fruitful interreligious dialogue in Nigeria.

Interreligious dialogue in Nigeria is equally confronted with other challenges such as, lack of trust, and conflict of interest among the parties involved, social exclusion of minority groups from the dialogue processes, participants’ misconceptions of the beliefs and practices of each other, intention to convert people to one’s own religion in the process of dialogue, among other issues. Little wonder, Akande and Olawale contend that there is the need to look for opportunities for peaceful interaction and communication between adherents of Nigeria’s two most popular religions, Christianity and Islam. They emphasized the need for a sincere effort to be made to achieve mutual understanding for the benefit of all people (2-3).

African Indigenous Religion as Model for Interreligious Relations and Dialogue in Nigeria

Considering the principles of communalism, openness, accommodation, tolerance, and the recognition of the equality of all religions inherent in the religious worldviews and theological conceptions of the African people, there is no doubt that African indigenous religion can serve as model for interreligious relations and dialogue in Nigeria. It is

imperative to state that there are diversity of beliefs and practices in African indigenous religious space. There are myriads of deities in African cosmology and belief systems with various shrines and priests or priestesses dedicated to each divinity. Despite the diversity that permeate African indigenous religious belief system, the practitioners of the various forms of indigenous religion in different communities do not make exclusive or absolute truth-claims about the nature of God or regard other forms of religious beliefs and practices as false or inferior to their own. Rather, they see all forms of religion in the society as true and valid based on their respective conception of the ultimate reality. This disposition of indigenous religious worshippers has helped to prevent issues that would have resulted to crises in African traditional societies.

Worshippers of African indigenous religion believe that all the deities or divinities in African cosmology are appointed by the Supreme Being to represent the different departments of life for the purpose of the common of all. To them, all the divinities are working under one sacred canopy of the Supreme Being as theocratic ministers to ensure that there is a cordial relationship between the creator and all the creatures (Idowu 54). The mode of worshipping or venerating the various divinities varies from one deity to another, yet the worshippers believe that their different methods of worship does not make one true and the other false. This is the reason why African indigenous religious worshippers give due respect to all forms of religious beliefs and practices. It is pertinent to note that the attitude of respecting and tolerating different forms of religious traditions within a society is what is needed for a peaceful and fruitful interreligious relations and dialogue in contemporary world.

When Islam and Christianity entered into Africa, the Indigenous religion, which is the original occupant of the land accepted the two foreign missionary religions because the African indigenous religious practitioners believed that the society is large enough to accommodate all kinds of religions or faith traditions (Atoi 2). This is so because African indigenous religious ideology is polytheistic in nature. The attitude of welcoming Islam and Christianity whole heartedly into its territory, demonstrated the level of preparedness of African Indigenous religion to accommodate and cooperate with other faith traditions for the exchange of knowledge about the nature of the ultimate reality and the quest for meaning in life across cultures and belief systems.

Moreover, African indigenous religious worshippers understood the fact that there are some differences in the way the various religious traditions conceive the Supreme Being because of the different cultural orientations and philosophy of life that exist in various societies of the world (Ubrurhe 239; Atoi and Ogunrinade 27). The philosophy and theology of African indigenous religion as well as the attitudinal approaches of its adherents to other faith traditions have demonstrated how it is possible for different religions to live together in peace and harmony within a society without any of them hurting the feelings of the members of other religious traditions. The friendly dispositions and attitudes of the adherents of African indigenous religion toward the practitioners of other religious traditions have the capacity to facilitate mutual respect, cooperation, and better theological understanding of the nature of the divine reality among the diverse faith traditions in the Nigerian society.

It is extremely important to reiterate at this juncture that adherents of Islam and Christianity did not

reciprocate the same friendly gesture extended to them by the practitioners of African indigenous religion when they came into the geographical location in West Africa known today as Nigeria. Rather, they choose to disrespect the religious thought patterns and worldviews of African indigenous worshippers. Observations have shown that despite the negative attitudes of Muslims and Christians toward African indigenous religion, its practitioners in contemporary Nigerian society have continued to be peaceful and non-violent in their relationship with all religious traditions in the country. It is pertinent to note that the philosophy of peace and non-violence is socially and religiously required for peaceful and harmonious human relationships in multi-religious societies. Muslims and Christians have a lot to learn from the peaceful and non-violent disposition of African Indigenous religious worshippers. Indeed, the attitudinal approaches of the practitioners of African indigenous religion toward adherents of other religious traditions in Nigeria should be emulated by Christians and Muslims in order to extend the frontiers of harmonious interreligious relations in the country.

Conclusion

Having examined interreligious relations and dialogue in Nigeria, this essay was able to logically establish the fact that adherents of Islam and Christianity have a lot of lessons to learn from African indigenous religious beliefs and practices in order to have a cordial interfaith relationships and peacefully coexist with members of other religious traditions in the country. Just like African indigenous religious practitioners acknowledge and continue to respect the various beliefs and practices of other religions, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria should recognize and accept the fact that there are existing differences

in the conception of the ultimate reality, cultural behavior and philosophy of life among the diverse religious traditions in the country. As such, Nigerian Muslims and Christians should remember that they are Africans and should be willing to accommodate, tolerate, and respect the religious beliefs and practices of other faith traditions in the Nigerian society.

Moreover, the realization that the divine or ultimate reality and the meaning of life can be seen from different points of view and that human beings have found various means of interpretation of the nature of reality and values in life, should naturally promote accommodating spirit, tolerance and understanding and discourage intolerance and lack of understanding in interreligious relations in Nigeria. Religious adherents across all faith traditions should have the willingness to be open minded toward the beliefs and practices of others.

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