

INTERRELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND MUTUAL COEXISTENCE IN NIGERIA: THE CASE OF IMAM ABUBAKAR ABDULLAH'S SHIELDING OF CHRISTIANS FROM JIHADISTS

Sunday Eusebius Adim, PhD

Abstract

Religious conflict in Nigeria has become an aged long phenomenon with deep historical root that predated the country's independence. Nigeria is blessed with beautiful people of different ethnic groups and a unique traditional religious belief. The arrival of Islam and Christianity into Nigeria created a religious division and fierce competition of superiority which eventually led to incidences of conflict and violence. First of these violence was in the early 1980s with the Maitatsine riots and violent clashes between Muslims and Christians in the North. Ever since, religious conflict and violence have continued to be on the rise with killings almost on a daily bases in different parts of the country. It has become a disturbing situation and a huge challenge. The main thrust of this paper, therefore, is to find a comprehensive approach that would bring about religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence in the Nigerian society. Primary and secondary sources of information gathering were used in the study. Discovery from the study shows that the spread of hate speeches and bigoted brainwashing are the pivotal causes of conflicts that fuels religious violence in the country. The researcher is of the view that both government and religious leaders should translate their rhetoric's on religious tolerance into action by validating their love and commitment for religious tolerance as exemplified by Imam Abubakar Abdullahi.

Keywords: Interreligious; Tolerance; Coexistence; Christians; Jihadists; Artifacts

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the most religious countries in the world where Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion thrive, yet the country is bedeviled with incessant religious crises. This religious intolerance as cancerous as it is, has eaten deep into religious leaders and their adherents' moral and rational reasoning. In a pluralistic nation as Nigeria, it has been discovered that religion is weaponized for attack and maiming of fellow countrymen and women. The issue of religious peace, tolerance and mutual coexistence is seemingly becoming unattainable. It is noticeable that Nigeria's growing problem of faith seriously threatens the unity and social cohesion of the nation. Basic religious values such as love and moral judgments have been eroded by fanatics and religious narcissists who delight in carrying out attacks on fellow human beings in the name of religion. Series of interreligious conflicts between Christians and Muslims in the northern part of Nigeria together with reckless killings by religious fundamentalists in many parts of the country is terrifying.

For instance, the deadly attack in Zango Kartaf on Atyap people that were mainly Christians and the Hausa Fulani Muslims in Kaduna was very horrifying. This Zango Kartaf crisis of 1992 that resulted into violence mainly targeted at Christians which got about 566 persons massacred. The Jos Plateau Christian-Muslim conflict in 2001 also resulted in the death of over 1,000 persons mostly Christians. In 2004 Christians responded by carrying out an attack on Muslims in Yelwa, resulting in roughly 630 deaths. According to Higazi (2011) "Plateau state has been the site of some of the worst of the violence. Episodes of mass killings and destruction have occurred in Jos in 2001, 2002, 2008 and 2010" (p.2). The sporadic shooting and gruesome killing of many worshippers at a Catholic

Church in Owo, Ondo state of the western part of Nigeria by persons suspected to be Fulani herdsmen was very devastating.

In the eastern part of Nigeria, a similar attack was carried out on Nimbo community of Uzo-Uwani local government area of Enugu state. The victims were innocent mourners who were on Sunday night attacked by the Fulani herdsmen, an attack that left many of the community members dead and many others injured. Mention should be made of the attitude of some Igbo Christians against the adherents of African Traditional Religion as disgusting and a clear trajectory to religious crisis. Christians in a neck-deep brazen display of superiority usually went on rampage to attack and subsequently destroy religious artifacts, the symbol of traditional worshippers without regard for religious tolerance.

It is a sad reality that religious intolerance has become a huge threat to a peaceful life in Nigeria, having terrified the people into perpetual fear and concern on the way out of the quagmire. Understandably, the quest for religious tolerance cannot really be over emphasized. In fact, the narratives of religious bigotry can be changed when the right approach is taken to address the situation; just as demonstrated by Imam Abdullahi Abubakar in his spirited regard and commitment for religious tolerance by shielding Christians from the hands of blood thirsty Jihadists. Such an exemplary insight and more of its kind is seen as a forthright approach that would help to redirect the trajectory of religious intolerance in Nigeria.

The Establishment of Christianity in Nigeria

Christianity arrived in Africa in the 1st century AD with several African Christians such as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine of Hippo, Athanasius and so on who influenced its early development and shaping of its doctrines. Speaking on Tertullian, Falk (1997) notes that “His presentation of the Christian faith with a call to a rigorous moral application, and his application, and his defence of the faith greatly contributed to the establishment of Christianity in North Africa despite the persecution by the Septimius Severus” (p.39). At that point, the first touch of Christianity was at the North Africa with the birth of Coptic Church which gave room to the developmental growth and expansion of Christianity to other parts of Africa including Nigeria.

The establishment of Christianity in Nigeria in the 15th century is linked to the efforts of both the Portuguese traders and missionaries known as the Augustinian and Capuchin monks. In the words of Baur (2009) “it is customary to see early Christianity south of the Sahara as a by-product of the Portuguese maritime trade empire” (p. 43). It is of note that among the south Saharanx country in discuss here includes Nigeria including other countries. The Augustinian and Capuchin Portuguese Catholic missionaries with an idea of establishing Christianity in the land began their missionary activities from Benin in 1515 as confirmed in Babalola (1988) saying, “Oba of Benin himself asked for Portuguese missionaries but when they arrived in August 1515 he was away fighting the Idah war” (p.9). The Catholics through the influence of the Portuguese traders became the first missionaries to set foot on the soil of Nigeria. But the Portuguese missionaries failed to actualize their main purpose of Christianizing the people. The reason for the failure hinges on their primary focus on trade and commerce rather than spreading the faith, as corroborated in Ayandele (1966) saying, “Except for the futile, feeble and spasmodic attempts by the Portuguese to Christianize the peoples of Benin and Warri, European contact with the Bights of Benin and Biafra, dating back to the fifteenth century, was primarily commercial until about the middle of the nineteenth century” (p. 3). Eventually, with the stoppage of slave trade and its abolition in 1833, many slaves were freed and this gave opportunity for the emergence of Christian missionaries to Nigeria with some of the Nigeria ex-slaves returning home to impact on their people the new religion they have acquired.

The Niger expedition of 1841 opened up Christian missionaries' advancement into Nigeria through the south west where the Church Missionaries Society (CMS) and the Methodist Missionary Society made a startling impact. According to Falk (1997) "The Methodist Church responded to the appeal from their believers by sending T. B. Freeman to visit the people at Badagry and Abeokuta. Freeman arrived at Badagry in September 1842 and sent a message to Shodeke, the Chief of Abeokuta, informing him of his intended visit" (p. 124). Christian Missionary Society led by Rev Henry Townsend arrived Abeokuta through Badagry in 1842. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) with their team made up of Nigeria ex-slaves such as Samuel Ajayi Crowder, Andrew Desalu Wilhelm concentrated its efforts at Abeokuta. While the Methodist Mission worked and concentrated more at the Badagry axis.

In 1846 Rev Hope Waddell, led a party of missionaries from the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland on a mission to Calabar as one among the early missionaries that arrived to establish Christianity in Nigeria. But, just as all the missionaries before them, they too paid more attention to trade and commerce rather than evangelization and Christianization of the people. In Ajayi (1965) "On his arrival in Calabar in 1846, Hope Waddel found a flourishing busy trade in palm-oil which had brought the town as much prosperity as in the days of the unhindered slave trade" (p. 53). This has been a story of complex narratives of the European missionaries' advancement to Nigeria with two motives first to economically exploit the people and also Christianize them. Because of their dual intention and them having prioritized trade and commerce, the people never took them seriously which resulted in the early rejection of their religion by the people. But this notwithstanding, Christianity kept on spreading and penetrating deeper into parts of Nigeria, with its emergence into Igboland.

The year, 1857 witnessed the establishment of Christianity in Igboland Nigeria by a team of Church Missionary Society in conjunction with some African ex-slaves led by Rev Samuel Ajayi Crowder, Rev Johnson Tylour, Catechist Simon Jonas. The team arrived at Onitsha and was warmly welcomed by Obi Akazua, the Obi of Onitsha, who helped them to settle down with a donation of a piece of land. While the missionaries broke through in Igboland in 1857 with the coming of the CMS (the Church Missionary Society), the Catholic Church had a major breakthrough into Igboland via Onitsha with a team of Holy Ghost Fathers, a Roman Catholic Order as led by Fr Joseph Lutz in 1885. Their arrival in Onitsha Igboland was greeted with a warm embrace from Obi Anazonwu, the then Obi of Onitsha, in showing his acceptance of the team. Obi Anazonwu with the consent of the CMS gave the parcel of land previously given to them (Anglicans) to the Catholic Church, the present site of the cathedral Basilica of the most Holy Trinity Onitsha. This gesture marked a significant turning point for the spread and advancement of Catholic Church (Christianity) in Igboland and by extension Nigeria.

Relatively, the emergence of Christianity in Nigeria played an enormous role in the early socio-economic, spiritual and ethical development of humanity in every part of the country where they operated. Today, Christianity has spread and penetrated most parts of Nigeria in north, west, south, and eastern parts of the country.

The Emergence of Islam in Nigeria

Scholars are of the opinion that Islam entered into Nigeria through the trans-Saharan trade route around 11th century through Kanem-Bornu, the north east of the present day Nigeria. Consequently, Kanem-borun then became the early epicenter of Islamic learning and scholarship. In the words of Trimingham (1974):

One state, Kanem-Bornu, compares in some respects with the greater empires of western Sudan. In longevity its dynasty exceeds those of the Mossi states; in fact it has the longest Muslim dynastic tradition in Africa. In consequence of its early acceptance of Islam, which enabled it to acquire a written tradition, the main phases of its history are known. The religion made its first inroads in the eleventh century during the reign of Hume. (p. 107).

Islam predominates in northern Nigeria, particularly among the Hausa and Fulani. Trade was the major connecting link that brought Islam into Nigeria, and Kanem-Bornu Empire in particular stands out as the nexus of trade between the people and north African region of Egypt.

Muslim merchants from the north sometimes remained in settlements along trade routes; this merchant class would later preach the message of Islam to their host communities. The first documented conversion of a traditional ruler was in the eleventh century when Mai Ume Jilmi of Kanem was converted by a Muslim scholar whose descendants later held a hereditary title of Chief Imam of Kanem (Balogun: 1969). In Hausa land, particularly Kano, Islam is noted to have penetrated the territory in the fourteenth century from the Senegalese basin and Muslim traders from Mali Empire. From Kano Islam spread to major cities of the northern part of Nigeria by the 16th century, and later moved towards the middle belt axis. According to Smith (1960), Kano was a city-state with a largely Muslim population by the 15th century, and its influence extended to surrounding areas.

Concerning the claim of an earlier arrival of Islam in Nigeria before the 11th century, a Nigerian born Islamic scholar, Sheikh Dr. Abdullah Abdul-Fattah Adelabu has argued that Islam reached sub-Sahara Africa, including Nigeria, as early as the 1st century of Hijrah through Muslim traders during the reign of the Arab conqueror, Uqba ibn al Nafiah (622-683), whose Islamic conquest under the Umayyad dynasty, during Muawiyah's and Yazid's time, spread to all Northern Africa or the Maghrib Al-Arabi, which includes present day Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. For Dr. Ibrahim Anoba, a historian, the gradual introduction of Islam into West Africa, including Nigeria, was primarily driven by the interactions and exchanges along the trans-Saharan trade routes (Anoba, 2017).

It is clear from facts available that Islam has since spread and taken over almost the entire Northern states of Nigeria and beyond. Islam as led by Prophet Muhammad strongly emphasizes moral teachings to serve as guide for ethical behaviour, highlighting the importance of fulfilling promises, love, treating others fairly and avoiding harmful actions. All of these sum-up the moral code and teachings in Islam as a religion.

African Traditional Religion

Before the introduction of Christianity and Islam in Africa, and by extension Nigeria, Africa has their own religion known and addressed as African Traditional Religion. The religion has been in existence and it speaks to the fact that Africa was not devoid of religion prior to the emergence of foreign religions. African Traditional Religion originated from the earliest people of Africa, as a religion centered within their culture and history. History in the sense that African Traditional Religion is characterized by oral tradition as passed down to the people rather than through a written scripture. According to Metu (1984) "African Traditional Religion represents a rich collection of diverse beliefs and practices that evolved alongside African culture, religion and tradition" (p. 142). For Idowu (1973) "Taking Africa as a whole, there are in reality five component elements that go into the making of African Tradition Religion. These are belief in God, belief in the divinities, belief in spirits, belief in the ancestors, and the practice of magic and medicine, each with its own consequent, attendant cult" (p. 139).

It is important to point out that, in Africa, the people have a local name for God. Invariably there are other names besides the principal name. God's principal name may be the generic name for deity in general (Idowu, 1973:149). The picture as clearly painted in Idowu shows the uniqueness of African Traditional Religion that recognizes the name God as the principal name, though the name could vary across diverse ethnic groups in Africa. In the Southern part of Nigeria for instance, Ilogu (1974) gave this observation that, "the principal God of the Ibo is called Chineke or Chukwu. Chine-ke literally means the creator God, whilst Chukwu (chi-ukwu) means the Great God" (p. 34). This is to say, that in terms of name, the local name for Deity (God) differ from one ethnic group to another, without a generally accepted name for deity by the entire African traditional religion as in Christianity with names as, Yahweh, Elohim, El Elyon, El Shaddai and so on, which denotes God.

African Traditional Religion can rightly be referred to as animistic, an expression that points to the essential nature of the people's polytheistic belief and mode of worship. Even with the firm belief of African Traditional Religion in God as the Supreme Being and the creator of the entire universe. The religion also acknowledges the existence of spirits in various forms and dimensions. These invisible spirits are regarded as demi-gods that function on behalf of the Supreme Being (God) in the spiritual realm. To this end, it would be important to mention that one clear aspect of difference between African traditional religion and Christianity as stated in Metu (1984) indicates that:

Unlike Christianity and Islam...not one of the religions of the book; they are no documentary sources of their beliefs. The societies in which these religions are found are preliterate societies. The resources available to a researcher are contained in the oral traditions and the religious practices of the people (p. 143).

But even at that, African Traditional Religion to say the least is not much of difference from the idea of God that Christianity preached. African Traditional Religion belief in God inspired moral principles, fostering of moral values and social interaction among the people.

The Concept of Mutual Co-existence

Mutual co-existence is a policy and way of interaction that involves recognizing and living with differences, and, working towards peaceful and non-violent relationships between individuals or groups. Emphases are on tolerance, mutual respect and resolution of conflicts without resorting to violence. Mutual co-existence is not about ignoring differences, but rather, it's all about finding ways to live and interact with them in a way that would promote understanding and peace. It is a framework for building a more harmonious and just society where individuals and groups can thrive together, recognizing their shared humanity and common goals. This principle highlights the importance of harmony in a multicultural and multi-religious environment or communities. The truth is that when we talk about mutual co-existence, one is simply talking of mutual non-aggression. Mutual non-aggression or mutual co-existence underscores peaceful interface among diverse cultures, in promoting understanding and collaboration, leading to an ideal scenario where various societies thrive together without conflict or violence.

This principle of mutual coexistence stresses the importance of harmony in a multicultural and multi-religious environment. In India for instance, their philosophy is central on peaceful coexistence where diverse culture, religion and people live together with understanding, respect, and cooperation. The key thought of the Indian aspect of mutual coexistence of non-violence, harmonious living and so on were captured in their treaty known as panchseel. According to Khokhar (2025), the panchseel agreement was signed between India and China on April 29th, 1954 to promote peaceful co-existence, equality and cooperation for mutual benefits. It focused on five principles, mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, peaceful dispute resolution. This

framework was designed to promote friendly relationship in avoidance of conflicts. Panchseel's principle gained international recognition when it was integrated into United Nations resolution on peaceful coexistence and it became the foundational philosophy of the non-aligned nations in Belgrade in 1961. The wild acceptance of this principle was due to its level of success of peace and mutual co-existence achieved within India in spite of her multi-religious status and between China and India for peaceful international relation. No wonder, it was subsequently adopted by the United Nation as a framework for peace and harmonious living.

In Nigeria, the theory of mutual coexistence advocates that people of diverse ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds can live together peacefully and harmoniously in respect of each other's differences. Suffice it to mention that while individuals may belong to different groups, they are all part of a larger Nigerian nation with shared interests and a common affiliation. This theory lays emphasis on the importance of tolerance, mutual respect and understanding between different groups to foster a strong and united nation. Generally speaking, mutual coexistence entails resolution of the people to live in peace without conflict or attack on each other despite ethnicity, cultural or religious differences.

The Issue of Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

Religious conflict and violence has taken a centre stage in Nigeria and have become a major issue of worry for the people. The religious tension and violence arising from the country's religious class has been quite enormous and disheartening. Overtime, the issue of intolerance, claim of superiority of one religious group over the other is viewed as the major cause of conflict, violence and extreme religious disorder in the country. The wanton killings and destruction of properties in Nigeria were on many occasions as a result of imposition of religious belief over the other, in addition to mere defence of religious belief against a slightest provocation. These have been the problem with the religious groups in Nigerians main three religious institution as examined herein.

An Overview of Muslim/ Christian Religious Violence in Nigeria

A survey of Christian, Muslim religious violence in Nigeria is dated to the 1980s, while corroborating this, Omotosho (2003) affirm that:

The first major inter-religious violent broke out in Kafanchan on 6th of March 1987. It later spread to Zaria and Funtua (now part of Katsina state). Many lives were lost on both sides though that of Muslims was higher. Larger numbers of properties were destroyed most especially mosques and churches. This riot was as a result of the misrepresentation of Islam by one Rev'd Abubakar Bako, who distorted some facts in the Quran and made derogatory remarks about Prophet Muhammad (pp. 1-2).

Understandably, religiously related riots, violence and conflicts that kept spreading across the length and breadth of the nation Nigeria, did not start today but years back. The Maitatsine violent riots in Kano and kaduna which stretched across the northern states of that time, marked the beginning of the spontaneous violence as fueled by the extremists.

The proposed introduction and implementation of sharia law in several northern states of Nigeria in 1999/2000 as led by the former Governor of Zamfara state Alhaji Ahmad SaniYerima sparked up conflicts between Christians and Muslims. Christians were afraid of the major danger the implementation would portend for them as potential target of the new law. Tension soared high and it became very strong that it degenerated into violent clashes with the resultant destruction of lives and properties in most states in the north. The point is that, since the return of democratic governance in Nigerian in 1999, the country have witnessed very many degree of riots, conflicts and violence in various parts of the country, all driven by religious jingoism. The rise of extremist groups

such as Boko Haram in 2002, Iswap (Islamic State West Africa Province) in 2015 and so on were introduced to carry out extremists' ideology of exterminating anything western culture. To impose draconian laws, aimed at instituting Islamic state in the north and by extension Nigeria as a whole against the Christian majority in the south and the freedom of worship as enshrined in constitution of Nigeria as a secular state. This really has created great tension between Christians and Muslims in the country.

It is not out of place that these blood thirsty groups, the extremists, Jihadists and deadly Fulani herdsmen are out to perhaps annihilate every other religion including Christian religion. True to this, Odeh & Ekani (2025) gave a case in point showing that:

In the early hours of Friday, June 13, 2025, more than 200 Christian villagers were slaughtered by heavily armed Fulani jihadists in Yelwata, a farming community in Guma Benue state. This mass killing is part of a disturbing wave of targeted violence that has swept across central Nigeria in recent weeks (p.1).

Before then series of attacks and violence have been carried out on Christians by people believed to be Muslim fundamentalists in many places across the country. One recall the notorious attack of a Christian dominated community of Enugu state known as Nimbo in 2016 leading to the massacre of scores of people. The more painful aspect of these acts is the consistency of these bloody attacks on the same community. In the case of Nimbo, Ugwueze (2024) is noted as saying that, Nimbo community in Uzo-Uwani local government Area of Enugu state has again come under attack by the suspected Fulani herdsmen. This time, they came in, and attacked innocent mourners killing four persons with several persons injured.

Basically, most of these attacks as carried out here and there in Nigeria were all borne out of religious intolerance, hate and pervasive stereotyping of religious adherents. Just as epitomized in boko haram declaration of western culture in education and Christianity as evil that needed to be totally exterminated with a brute force. This remains the potent and major reason of violent attacks on opposite religious adherents mostly Christians. The bloody religious violent attacks on Christians on the advent of sharia law in Kaduna and Gombe on Christians are clear evidence. In Jos, Plateau state the miss world crisis erupted as a result of Muslims expression of their displeasure with the event and consequently attacked Christians and destroyed churches. The Adamawa religious conflict between Christians and Muslims in Numa town is one among the various noticeable attacks.

The religious conflict between Christians and Muslims in Maiduguri, attack on various communities and villages in Benue state of Yelwata, Tyolaha, Tseubiam, Ahume and Aondona, inclusive is the Agatu massacre that claimed the lives of hundreds of people. The reprisal attacks by Christians in Aba riot which led to the killing of several Muslims in retaliation of Christians killed in Kano at the wake of implementation of the sharia law in the north. Another of its kind was the reprisal attack on Muslims en route a wedding party in Plateau state by angry mobs suspected to be Christians, which elicited condemnation from a Muslim forum. In the words of Abdulhamid (2025) saying, the Ahmed Bello University, Zaria chapter of Muslim forum has condemned the murder of 13 wedding guests in Plateau state. The commuters were attacked and the bus conveying them set ablaze by some youths in Mangu local government area of Plateau state on Friday, June 20.

The list of religious attacks and reprisal attacks in Nigeria is seemingly very much inexhaustible as the incidences of religious killings have kept increasing day by day. Conflicts and senseless killings we have continued to witness is because the seed of discord has been sowed and religious fundamentalists have wrongly taken advantage of it to unnecessarily attack one another. These attacks are condemnable and should be total with isolation.

The Conflict with Christians/African Traditional Religion in Eastern Nigeria

Conflict is a normal and natural social phenomenon, but it could become a problem when centered on religion, as it develops into violence. The subject of conflict between Christianity and African traditional religion in the eastern part of Nigeria is rooted on strive for superiority. But prior to the coming of Christianity to Nigeria, history has it that African Traditional Religion has been in existence, as the recognized and practicing religion of the people. But with the introduction of Christianity into Nigeria things took a dramatic turn with a fierce battle for a forced conversion. The crux of belief and the mode of worship of African Traditional Religion as predicated on artifacts, symbols and symbolism suddenly became a concern for Christians that wants them as fetish things forcefully destroyed. These act of coercion and intimidation often time lead to conflict and fierce violence.

For instance, in Ugbenu community, of Awka North Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria, Christians went on a rampage to destroy and burn down shrines in the community and the traditionalists arose in defence of their symbols of worship. The confrontation that ensued between the two religious groups got many people seriously injured and properties destroyed. In the year 2014 at Umuaji Aguaobuowa community in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria, the people witnessed a crusade organized by a group of people known as the indigenous Christians of the town to bring the gospel of evangelism to the community. According to Uzodinma (2014), in the early hours of the day, a group known as Indigenous Christians of Umuaji led by one Joseph Nnaeme, gathered themselves and went on rampage during crusade in the community, during which different sacred shrines of the community was burnt down and other valuable items damaged.

In year 2000, Amansea community of Awka north local government area of Anambra state witnessed a violent attack and destructions by Christians of the community. Christians invaded traditional religious artifacts of the traditional worshippers such as, deities, masquerade costumes, Ikenga, Ofo stick (the traditional Igbo symbol of authority), Ozo title paraphernalia such as traditional caps, traditional wooden seats and staffs (Ngwu-ozo) destroyed and burnt them to ashes. In some other communities in Igboland, churches have been attacked by traditional religious adherents in retaliation for the damage done to the artifacts and their symbol of worship. According to Agina (2011), one of the notable conflicts, which degenerated to setting ablaze, and complete destruction of a local church building happened in a community known as Nsirimo village in Umuahia Town; Abia State of Nigeria on December 1st 2007 was as a result of violent evangelism in the area. On the violent attack on traditional religious artifacts and its destruction in Achina community, Mbachu (2007) observes that in the ethnic Igbo dominated Christian belt of southeastern Nigeria this new Christian fundamentalism is evident. The old deities are being linked to the devil, and preachers are urging not only their rejection, but their destruction.

All of this actions and conducts point to religious intolerance, lording of religious belief on the people while exerting claims of superiority of one religion over and above the other. The refusal to accommodate each other belief system without threat of horror, harm and intimidation has been a great concern.

The Rescue of Christians from Jihadists by Imam Abdullahi Abubakar

M. C. K Ajuluchukwu in Omotosho (2023) said, “Ordinary Nigerian knows nothing about inter-religious cleavages except when incited by their respective doctrinal leader.” In reference to Ajuluchukwu's assertion, Omotosho (2003) said, “This remark is a challenge and indictment to

Nigerian religious leaders, and worth taking up keeping in mind the recent history of Nigeria in search of inter-religious harmony” (p. 15). The obvious, is that the history of Nigeria in search of inter-religious and intra-religious harmony has been a checkered and unyielding endeavor. The reason being that religious violence as witness in Nigeria are products of instigation and brainwashing of followers by leaders.

Most religious leaders incite their unschooled followers into unnecessary bias and hatred of opposite religions; they took advantage of their illiteracy. Since they are not educated they believe whatever they were told and are ready to do whatever they were asked to do, even killing, without recourse to morality and sanctity of human life. The situation is worrisome because things have fallen apart with the failure of religious leaders to imbibe morals on their followers with their deliberate use of false doctrine to corrupt the morality of the adherents. However, there is an indication that things can get better following an inspired attitude of a certain Muslim cleric to safeguard fleeing Christians from being slaughtered by the Jihadists. The incident happened in 2018, when there was an attack in villages of Yelwan, Gindi Akwati, Swei and Ngar of Plateau state with over 100 person killed by the rampaging religious fundamentalists.

It took the wisdom and the courage of an aged Imam Abubakar Abdullahi to save the lives of many Christians from the affected villages that ran to him for refuge at that point in time. In Nasiru (2018) Abubakar Abudallhi said, I was inspired to help the fleeing residents because of relationship of Prophet Muhammad with people of different backgrounds. He preached to Christians, Pagans and Idol worshippers. He had a cordial and peaceful relationship with everybody regardless of their religion. Most of the people who trooped into the mosque that very day were Christians. I accommodated them inside the mosque. We gave them cover. I urge everyone to embrace religious, ethnic tolerance and value for human lives, for if I have opportunity, to save lives I will still do it again. The truth is that, the attitude of Imam Abubakar Abudullahi epitomizes a leader with gut for a peaceful existence of every religion. He placed his life in danger because of his belief in the oneness of all religion and his desire to pursue after religious tolerance and peace.

Following, this noble action of Imam Abdullahi Abubakar many awards of honour and commendations have continued to come his way, celebrating him as a hero, a courageous and as a peace builder. According to Sanni (2019), the US government awarded Mr. Abubakar the Ambassador's peace maker award for heroism in an interfaith dialogue at the US embassy consular, Abuja. This is one among the numerous awards and accolades that continued to greet the heroic and the legendary conduct of the cleric in his passionate disposition for religious tolerance and mutual coexistence for societal peace.

Conclusion

On the issue of Muslims-Christians hostility, Udoidem (1997) is of the view that impetus to this inter-religious violence is given by the basic philosophies of these religions. From the statement of Udoidem, one can rightly say that these philosophies manifest greatly in their show of superiority over other religions with resultant violence. The religious conflict and violence in Nigeria today have become an enigma and like cancer is penetrating every part of the country. It is the inordinate attitude of fanatical religious leaders and their adherents that promotes religious violence in Nigeria. In the words of Sampson (2012), “From time immemorial, religious bigots have attempted to legitimize violence in the name of God; contemporary acts of extreme violence such as terrorist attacks are often justified as holy warfare” (p. 104). Religion no doubt could serve as an instrument of social harmony vis-a-vis motivation for violence. But the common truth is that interreligious mutual coexistence and social harmony in Nigeria which we all crave for can be gotten when

championed by religious leaders. Cleric Abubakar Abdullahi have shown that with the pluralistic religious state of Nigeria, religious tolerance is the means to attaining interreligious mutual coexistence in the country. More so, there should be an end to the polarization of the people of Nigeria along religious line by government institution and religious leaders. Government should rather show commitment towards entrenching religious peace and tolerance in Nigeria as envisioned by Niger state Governor Mohammed Umaru Bago. His presence at Christian and Muslim events is a testament to his believes in mutual coexistence of all religion. In one of such visits, according to Ebbo (2024) the governor expressed concern over the way and manner people treat others, saying, religion should not be forced on anyone. He recounted how he schooled in a missionary school and yet did not change his faith. He called on Nigerians to have respect for humanity devoid of religious sentiment. To this end, it's time for leaders of various religious groups, clergies, clerics and adherents to reject religious intolerance. Government should move beyond rhetorics and put on toga of war and battle religious intolerance by enacting a law that would incriminate religious violence and ensure that it is effectively enforced.

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