

**AN EVALUATION OF CHRISTIAN/MUSLIM RELATIONS IN
ILORIN DURING THE FOURTH REPUBLIC**

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Introduction

Religion is as old as mankind on this universe. This is because of the indisputable fact that man is composed of spirit and matter. It is an incontrovertible fact that every society is a precarious organization of different, often conflicting human interest, aspirations and ambitions. It should, therefore, surprise any rational human being how it was possible that cohesive order and unity could be achieved in the society. It is from this perspective that the role of religion as an integrative phenomenon, provider of bond that brings people together will be understood. Not only that, religion also promotes love for fellow human beings as it cultivates in man a feeling of mutual belonging in which he could transcend his narrow personal and functional interests.

In order to gain a clear understanding of what is intended in our discussion of this subject matter, it is very important to attempt a definition of religion, distinguish between commendable or positive role of religion and condemnable or negative role. It is also important to state that religion, the world over, normally plays a very positive role in the society while it is the adherents of religion that manipulate it for a negative purpose. Thus, the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Ilorin will be x-rayed with a view to determining how well they have fared in their stay together, highlighting areas of differences and similarities, thereby providing

possible ways of matching forward in an atmosphere of tranquility, peace and harmony.

Religion: Its Meaning, Role and Place in the Society

Religion has been defined by different people in so many ways. In Webster Dictionary for instance there are seven different definitions for religion, out of which this particular one is adopted for the purpose of this paper: "A state of mind or way of life, expressing love for and trust in God, one's will and effort to act according to the will of God especially within a monastic order or community." In a similar vein, Hornby defined religion as; "a particular system of faith and worship based on religious belief. It also sees religion as "a controlling influence on one's life", or "a thing that one feels strongly about."

From the above definitions, religion may be described as a system of beliefs and practices directed towards the 'ultimate concern' of a society. 'Ultimate concern' a concept by Paul Tillich, has two aspects, meaning and power. It has meaning in the sense of ultimate meaning of the central values of a society, and it has power in the sense of ultimate, sacred or supernatural power which stands behind those values. What one can deduce from the foregoing is that all the revealed religions are one truth, emanating from one origin. But there are variations in some of the duties and obligations and the ways of regulating human life. The ruler of Abyssinia for instance, who knew Christianity well, was a witness to this identical sourcing and his story is recorded by Islam. When the Muslim migrants were brought into his presence and recited some verses of the Qur'an, he declared: "What you have recited and what Jesus brought emanate from one niche."

The major Prophets in both Islam and Christianity worked to pave the way for the prophets who came after them, to give the human movement momentum and to tie

man to the creator of the universe.' This basis, on which all the messages stood, is quite clear. We can detect it in their texts and in their ideological pillars (in the Bible, the Old and New Testaments).

Thus, man is by nature religious, many attempts to live without religion look unnatural. If we set out to build up a life and culture or where we attempt to discuss the progress of any community from which faith has been eliminated, we shall have to cut across the grain of man's make up, reject his most creative designs, hold the different parts of society together without the dove-tailing and the glue which have accomplished it until now. In Nigeria, three main religions exist; they are Islam, Christianity and Traditional religions. However, two (Islam and Christianity which is the focus of this paper), are the common and the most popular religions. The adherents of these religions are found to abound in every part of this country with large followers. Religion is a strong tie that unite people of different cultural and ethnic background together on the one hand, and through it, community are torn apart on the other, thereby leading to hatred, rancour, war and calamities.

Religion and Society find a meeting point in human being who practices religion in the society in which he may be an active member. If religion is one term of institutionalized human behaviour, then it follows that it ought to make contribution, one way or the other, to the maintenance of the social system. It is from this point of view that one cannot agree less with the fact that religion has always been playing a very significant role in inter-group relationship.

There is no doubting the fact that man is always helpless in the face of adversity such as suffering and death just as he may not readily find answers to human destiny, discrepancy between expectations and actual happening, the demands of morality and discipline may be difficult for him to understand. Religion readily provides different rationally integrated solutions to the problems. In this way, religion plays

a very significant role in providing emotional tranquility for man in the face of difficulties and calamities.

It is often difficult for man to subdue his selfish interest for the overall interest of the society and for the benefit of the greatest number of the people the society. However some few individuals are brave enough to have self-control with which they could be able to tame their ambitions and desires. If we look at the impact of religion on adhere very critically we come to the conclusion that religion promotes discipline in the society. People, more often respect whatever order that may be linked with religion than mere man-made rules and regulations, which may not enjoy much acceptance.

Emile Durkheim, while exploring the way religion works on individual life has demonstrated how it can organize a person's experience into some kind of order which has ultimate meaning. He explained further that religious practice is also integrative because in most cases it brings people together in ritual re-enactment of their shared understanding of the structure of their world".

It is also part of the role of religion in the society that religion gives identity to an individual and his group who belong to the same religion. Consequently, such as individual will enjoy support of his religious group when in adversity, as he will also enjoy consolation in disappointment. Religion attaches him to society goals, enhances his morale and provides him with peace of heart during crisis period.

Although religion has a role as an integrative and a cohesive force in the society, it is also possible that religion could be sharply divisive and disruptive even destructive. It should be observed that no religion preaches violence, destruction of properties and vandalistic tendencies; it is only adherents who sometimes abuse the tenets of their religion by taking law into their hands to perpetrate religious unrest.

Religious intolerance could also erupt where people adopt very provocative way of promoting their own religion in a multi-religious setting.

Christian/Muslim Relationship in Ilorin: An Overview

Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State, is situated in the Northern Yoruba land. It is about three hundred and twenty (320), and one hundred and sixty (160) kilometers North of Lagos and Ibadan respectively. It is also five hundred (500) kilometers south of Kaduna and five hundred kilometers of Suleija/Abuja (Akande, 2005).

Before the creation of the twelve-state structure in Nigeria on May 27th 1967. Ilorin town was a provincial headquarters. Aloba and Emielu (1970: 12). in Akande (2005) said, of Ilorin that since the city assumed the status of a state capital, however, its Political structure, socio-cultural, religious and economic outlook have phenomenally changed. There are today, several urban and religious problems similar to those experienced in older capitals such as Lagos, Ibadan, Kano and Kaduna. Places of worship and religious institutions, such as Churches and mosques can be seen on almost every street. The important point about this town, as pointed out by Hassan (1985:4), is that "the city is still growing, even religiously." Christian/Muslim relationship in Ilorin have been cordial until the early 80s when the Christians attempted to carry their own evangelization to the Muslim dominated areas. According to Dr. Muhammad Ali Olukade in an exclusive interview in "The Path", it started when banners, posters and stickers with the inscriptions "I FOUND IT", "I FOUND JSUS" found their ways into Muslim houses and buildings. The Muslims, according to him, considered it an affront and an assault.

Another incident as reported by Olukade was when the Christian took the Palm Sunday procession to areas considered by the Muslims as traditionally sacrosanct chanting "Jesus is here", "Jesus is here". This incident led to a violent clash between

the Muslims and the Christians in March, 1086. Other incidents of face-off between the two religions as recalled by Olukade were in 1999 when the Muslim complained that some Christian boys and girls were throwing bangers and knock-outs at Muslims observing "Salat tarawiyy" during Ramadan at Ojagbooro. Also when the Christians planned to bring Pastor K.A. Paul during Ramadan to evangelize at sacrosanct areas in the year 2001. Last but not the least is the aborted Bonnke crusade in August, 2004. (The Path, 2004). These facts were corroborated by Shaikh Abu Sherif who was one time Chairman of Inter Religious Peace Committee in the Ilorin Emirate in a memo to the Kwara state Government published by People's Advocate of April 14-20, 2005. These incidents were some of the major incidents of face-of between Christians and Muslims in about three decades of their mutual existence. The Muslims contended that they were provoked, intimidated, assaulted and insulted by the above attitudes while the Christians too accused the Muslims of intolerance, unaccommodating and unfriendly. For instance, in an open letter to His Excellency, Dr. Bukola Saraki on the 2004 Bonnke aborted crusade, the Kwara State Women Wing of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) observed that the Christian Community in Kwara State duly consulted and obtained necessary consent for the five days Great Gospel Power Crusade but that the Muslim public officers used their position in government to deny Christians the use of the Stadium Complex.

However, the views of some Christians on the above allegation by Dr. Olukadewere that Ilorin, as the State Capital, belongs to all, and since they stay, live and reside in Ilorin, pay their taxes, there should be no such restriction in the performance of their religious duties (Kwara State Women Wing of CAN open letter to Dr. Bukola dated 26th August, 2004).

Unhealthy religious rivalry has been a prominent feature in Ilorin between Christians and Muslims, thus threatening the security of lives and property. This views is

supported by Dopamu in *Studies in Religious Understanding in Nigeria* edited by Abubakre, Razaq D. (1993).

When he says that in most cases, religious crisis are between Christians and Muslims. The adherents of Afrel (that is African Religion) seldom engage in such unpleasant practice or indulge in mutual bickering.

The likely reason for the hostility that exists between the two religious groups in Ilorin was given by Hassan (1985:5):

Islam had been established in Ilorin for more than thirty years before the missionaries came. And almost all aspects of their lives are regulated by Islamic injunctions. Their government and social life are for instance Islamic.

This as observed by Akande (2005), should not be the reason for such hostility, as none of the religion preaches violence, hence, she charged that, rather than fighting for God who allows rain to fall, we should instead come together in an atmosphere of love to build a strong and virile Nigerian society. This same view was supported by Samartha (1981:230), in Akande, 2005 that:

In an all situations where people of different faiths live together, the need is to relax the tensions that divide them and foster the conditions under which cooperation becomes desirable and possible.

However, Muslims and Christians have lived together in Ilorin in an atmosphere of peace for quite a number of years and when compared to some other states of the Federation, the peace and harmony recorded in Ilorin, is far greater than elsewhere.

This view was shared by Bishop John Onaiyekan during the ordination of a new Bishop (Ayo Maria Atoyebi) in Ilorin on 17th May, 1992 when he said, "It should

be made known to the world that Muslims and Christians relationship in Ilorin is cordial, this is evident in the fact that Muslim governor attends Christian programmes... "([www.diafrica.org.nigeria op/kenny/yale 2.htm/muslim/christian relationship](http://www.diafrica.org.nigeria/op/kenny/yale2.htm/muslim/christianrelationship)). Christians Clergy too do attend Muslim programmes in the town. A practical example was in November 2004 at the Kwara Hotels where Christian Clergy, Pastors and Bishops attended the dialogue session of the First International Islamic Conference put up by the World Muslim Congress, Nigeria Branch which has head office in Ilorin, where thought provoking papers were presented. A similar dialogue was put up in 1978, precisely between 7 - 11 August by Dr. I.A. Balogun, when he was the HOD Religions Department, University of Ilorin. This University is one of the Universities in Nigeria where religious tolerance and harmony is encouraged. In this way, any student offering courses in either of the religions belong to the Department of Religions, and students compulsorily, irrespective of their religious background offer a particular course termed, "Religious Understanding" RCR 654 at both undergraduate and Master Level.

This is not so in other universities and even colleges of education where we have Christian and Islamic Religious departments separately.

Unlike Zamfara State, where the Rt. Rev. Samson Bala (the First Bishop of Zamfara, Gausau Diocese) said that the state radio station had closed its doors to Christians. Commercials and paid advertisements containing Christian Literature are accepted but only Islamic religious programme are aired (http://Latheism.about.com/librey/irt/iifoo/blirf_nigeriaoo.htm?terms). The situation in Ilorin as different, radio, and television stations open and close with

Muslim and Christian prayers, Islamic and Christians programmes are given equal slots. The same thing with the state owned newspaper The Herald, where specific pages are dedicated to Muslims on Fridays and Christians on Sundays. The

development of Churches in Ilorin has greatly improved despite the fact that Ilorin is a predominantly Muslim town, even now churches could be found in predominantly Muslim areas like Surulere, Oloje, Ogidi and Ipata to mention but few. The most interesting thing is that, in some of these areas, they are situated side by side with mosques. These developments have greatly improved the social outlook of the town. For instance, many mission schools owned by Christians or even private schools owned by Christians have many Muslim children as students, schools like Bishop Smith Memorial College, St. Anthony's Secondary School, Cherubim and Seraphim, St. Joseph's Nursery & Primary School etc. are clear samples. However, there is still low turnout of Christian children in Muslim Owned schools. A visit to Ansarul Islam Secondary School, Iqra College Jama'atu Nasril Islam Secondary School, Mohammad Kamal, Al-Alim Nursery and primary schools pointed to this observation.

Muslims and Christians in Ilorin have had course to celebrate their festivals like Christmas and Eidul, on the same day where Eid-l-celebration falls on a Sunday. They have comported themselves with maturity, going to their various praying places without any harassment. No wonder, the state is known as "State of Harmony". In order to sustain the level of cooperation between the two religious bodies in the state, the Kwara State Government in 2005 put up a body known as Committee on Inter- Religious Affairs. Besides there is a special Assistant to the governor on inter-religious matters. Since inception, the committee on inter-religious Affairs according to special Assistant to the governor on Inter- Religious matters had treated over two hundred petitions covering inter and intra-religious cases (Herald on Sunday; September 3, 2006),thereby nipping in the bud possible cases of religious unrest in the state.

Another effort by the government (past and present) in encouraging inter religious harmony in the State is the government's sponsorship of Christian and Muslim pilgrims to the holy lands at government expense.

Recommendations

The religions in Nigeria, especially Christianity and Islam, hold some common belief which are supposed to serve as basis for peaceful and harmonious living. Apart from this, each of these religions has got some peculiar tenets, which also aim at peace and security. The two religions, that is, Islam and Christianity, have a belief in a Supreme Being who is the Creator, Lord of the universe. This makes all believers to be members of one big human family. The Lord's Prayer, for instance, among the Christians in Matthew 6:9-10 says; "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven..."

This prayer points to the fact that, God is the Father of all, and whoever believes in Him and follows Him will enjoy on earth the same peace and security which exist in heaven. Similarly, Qur'an 39:62 affirm; this universality of God thus: "Allah is the Creator of all things and He has charge over everything." Islam itself means peace and submission. The point thus is that both Islam and Christianity preach peace and so ought to serve as vehicle for promoting peace and security.

Adherents of both religions should learn to respect each other's faith and avoid acts that can provoke or cause ill-feelings among themselves. They should treat themselves with respect, love and affection. It is through this that they can enjoy continuous peace and harmony.

Government should intensify their efforts at creating peace, love and harmony among the various religions in the state. The state machinery should not be used to favour one religion at the expense of the other. Justice and fair play should be their

watch-word. Present effort which has brought peace and harmony should be sustained.

Religion should be seen as an integrative force so each religion should maintain good morals, enjoin one another to do good and" restrain each other from doing evil. When this effectively utilized, it will strengthen the bond of unity and cooperation that had existed between them. Government, through the Committee on Inter- Religious Affairs could organize conferences and seminars, where common theological themes would be addressed and discussed at regular Intervals as is the practice in the Department of Religious Studies, Kwara State University, Malete, an instance of which animated to the product of this book.

Religious tolerance should be taught right from the home to the school at all levels of our educational system. The syllabus should be designed in such a way that Christian students can offer some courses in Islamic Studies and Muslim students can also offer courses in Christian Studies.

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, it has been established that religion is one of the strong forces that bind people together irrespective of ethnic or cultural affiliation. It plays decisive roles in the life of an individual, nation or community. It is a cohesive force in society, it could be divisive and disruptive and even destructive departing on the adherent's usage. Hence, the need to handle it with great care. Through it, the people of Ilorin have had course to be at war with each other and through it too they have had course to benefit from each other politically, economically, socially and even educationally. Above all, it was established that even though there were minor disagreements, Muslims and Christians in Ilorin, more than anywhere in this country have been the best of friends, they have lived together peacefully, harmoniously and

in love for more than three decades. A lesson that is sure for all and sundry the world over.

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