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## **HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY**

### **1. Religious Pluralism**

When one speaks of interaction one really means the action between one another while tolerance means to recognize and respect others' beliefs, practices without necessarily agreeing or sympathizing. As is well known Nigeria is pluralistic as regards religion and as such the citizens are in much need of interaction and tolerance among one another. As a religious pluralistic country Nigeria has the following three dominating religions:

#### *i) Traditional Religion*

This is the earliest, and it began as soon as the society became established. It has belief in one God with a pantheon of spirits who serve as intermediaries between Him and man. It is called Traditional because "it is handed down from age to age through the oral traditional . . . . It is not handed down in a book, but through retold stories and re-nated history."<sup>1</sup> In this religion harmony between human life and spiritual life is maintained through the spirit of dead ancestors and on part of human beings the harmony is facilitated through the observance of religious practices and taboos. "The African Traditional Religion makes no explicit claim to a specific revelation for its origin . . . Rather, the African Traditional Religion is part of the original, general revelation vouchsafed to all mankind from the primordial times."<sup>2</sup>

#### *ii) Islam*

"Islam arose more than six hundred years after the birth of the Christian Church."<sup>3</sup> This religion has Muhammad as its founder. It

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1. A. O. Iwuagwu : *The Ethical Basis of African Traditional Religion* (Owerri : 1976), p. 7.
  2. A. O. Iwuagwu, 1976, *Ibid.* p. 8.
  3. Harry Boer : *A Brief History of Islam* (Ibadan Day Star Press, 1969), p. 5.

has belief in one God Allah who is omnipotent. It has its birth place in Mecca from where it spread to other parts of the world including Nigeria. It is a religion of revelation for it teaches that "Allah sent revelations of his will to Muhammad."<sup>4</sup> Harmony in this religion is entirely at the pleasure of Allah and human obedience or submission to the will of Allah is one of the channels of appropriating the authority that belong to Allah.

### iii) *Christianity*

This religion also has belief in one God revealed in and by Jesus Christ. "The history of the introduction of Christianity into Nigeria is a little more elaborate as it involves many sects. We note the 15th Century Portuguese Christianity in the Old Benin Kingdom which flourished for nearly a hundred years and died away... It was in the 1840's that the modern Christian missionary enterprise in Nigeria began in earnest and also in a fairly dramatic way."<sup>5</sup> In this religion harmony between human life and the spirit is restored through the redemptive work of Christ. Men's share is through the spirit of Christ and membership of the church.

## 2. Interaction and Tolerance

The question of religious interaction and tolerance is very important and it impresses itself upon us urgently at the moment. We want to be absolutely realistic and appreciate the fact that we are not living in an abstract country but in a country where we are confronted by the reality of relationship. It will make for a better situation in the country if we stop running away from facts and try to understand situation as it really is. "All Nigerians are highly religious people but there are many people, some of them highly sophisticated who consider their religion the real religion and despise others."<sup>6</sup> As A. C. Bonquet<sup>7</sup> has rightly said things are no longer in a water-tight compartment. He means that in no place in the world can people think of themselves alone but they must think of themselves as persons in relationship

4. Harry Boer, 1969, *Ibid.* p. 20.

5. Edmund Ilogu "The Religious Situation in Nigeria Today," Seminar on the Religious Situation in Nigeria Today, U. N. N., August 1972, p. 62.

6. E. O. Awa, "The Religious Situation In Nigeria Today" Seminar On The Religious Situation In Nigeria Today, U. N. N., August 1972, p. 5.

7. A. C. Bouquet: *Comparative Religion, A Short Outline* (Baltimore Penguin, 1956).

for we live in a fantastic century in which man flings together with his neighbour or fellow man from far and wide. We have to appreciate the facts that our societies are now situated in the midst of religious and cultural plurality and we shall only be deceiving ourselves to ignore the fact. In a pluralistic society people have to meet in conferences or assemblies, meet together in a community where they eat together and drink together and plan to fight together when they are not fighting one another. It is therefore rather sad that the vital issue of religion with regard to clear understanding is either being completely ignored or not taken seriously. Many have said that animosities resulting from religious differences are to a certain extent inevitable. In reality it is not religion as religion that is causing animosities but religion mixed with the factors of racial differences, economic rivalries of fear of domination. Surely it is the aim of all religions—Traditional religion, Islam and Christianity—to create peace with the communities of worshippers.

As we know the various ethnic groups are nothing other than societies of brothers who live to strive not only their individual prosperity but bound together in a bond of brotherly love for the good of all. According to Mr. Justice Dan O. Ibekwe, "In the beginning the various communities which made up what is today known as Nigeria were developing in their own simple ways. It is however, correct to say that, those communities were not integrated as is the case now."<sup>8</sup> Interaction therefore concerns persons, living men and women of different faiths as they meet, mingle, live and act together and interact with one another. Thus interaction of religions is basically the interaction of peoples who practise these religions. It is one thing to send away the imperialists and assume responsibility for our affairs and no other to keep whole peoples in different cultures and languages together as one people.

On October 1st 1960, Nigeria celebrated her independence granted by British Colonial Government. She is now faced with the question 'what does independence mean in actuality?' This question cannot be answered in terms of arbitrary boundary lines drawn by a colonial ruler or in terms of a grant of independence by a foreign government. She has now to settle down and learn that spiritual and moral independence are absolutely necessary, if physical independence is to be real. As stated by the then Head of State Lt. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo "As a nation we

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8. Mr. Justice Dan O. Ibekwe : "Conflict of Cultures and Our Customary Law" *African Indigenous Laws*, U. N. N. Institute of African Studies, 1974, p. 287.

are still far from the type of society we are striving to build, but foundations have been laid on which we can continue to build to achieve our desired objectives of a disciplined, fair, just, humane and self-reliant African Society. There must be equity in a society to strengthen the stability and security of the society."<sup>9</sup> Nationhood can only be achieved and attained through all natural processes becoming which is that there must be an understanding and acceptance of the fact that all the peoples of the country are severally equally valuable and equally indispensable organs of the body. The aspiration of all Nigerians is "To live in unity and harmony as are indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation under God dedicated to the promotion of inter-African solidarity, world peace, international co-operation and understanding."<sup>10</sup> In practical terms the peoples, the ethnic groups the various clans in the country must accept one another naturally with due respect as full and responsible beings, and that there shall be no discrimination whatever on any ethnic people, ethnic group or clan. Nigeria is now a common heritage and a common concern for all the indigenous peoples and we must accept one another culturally and religiously for our own survival. The call then is that ignorance about and uncharitable judgement of one another must be cast away and there must be intelligent and mutual sympathy if real oneness is to result out of a nation of bewildering diversity.

### 3. Human Nature our Common heritage

In interacting with each other our minds must be kept clean of prejudice and preconception, though this is not easy because we are all human beings born and brought into communities which gave us our first consciousness as persons, into native cultures and traditions which implant into us certain automatic bias with reference to the cultures and traditions of other peoples. As we have our own propensities, it is nothing short of conversion to be able to divert the mind of prejudice and preconception. We need the exhibition of mind at the full strength of its powers a sensibility engaged and enriched by the coherent teaching of its very contemporaneity.

For real religious interaction it should be honestly admitted that there is that which is basically common in all religions that which belongs to

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9. Lt. Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, 1979 New Year Message, *The Constitution of Fed. Republic of Nigeria* Apapa Times Press, 1979, p. vii.

10. *The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, Times Press, 1979, p. 9.

the very essence of religion for example the belief in the Supreme Being. We may look at it from two complementary dimensions, the nature which is common to all men, with its common inherent needs and its universal propensities and that by which man is gripped as a result of which religion came into being.

In the *Merchant of Venice*, Shylock says "I am a Jew, Hath not a Jew eyes, hands, organs, dimension, senses, affection, passions? Feed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you trickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die?"<sup>11</sup> In this catalogue of the elements of human structure, emotions inclinations and susceptibilities, Shakespeare holds the mirror before every person. Every person of whatever nationality can appropriate what Shylock has said substituting his own ethnic nomenclature for the word Jew.

There are rationalists who wish to see religion only as a means of societal cohesion and preservation or only as a means of personal integration something that exists for pragmatic or an utilitarian end. If there should be religious interaction there should be a change of attitude which tends often to exaggerate our situation and think that we have a monopoly of whatever goodness there is. The truth is that there is no division of human race which has the monopoly of evil or goodness. Each people has her recognised catalogue of moral values which are practised actively as certain elements within the community. Therefore, we find that man everywhere has basically the same physical nature, identical spiritual and moral needs. The hunger and thirst of the physical man or of the inner being have one common yearning for satisfaction. All these facts about human nature are recognised by the traditional religion, Islam and Christianity each according to its own theology. In one form or another the starting point of every religion is a confrontation with the numinous. Thus every religion traces its origin to the holy, the transcendent, the infinite, the undimensional. There is that which is unique to each religion, that which essentially makes it what it is. This fact of uniqueness must be recognised respected. It is indeed true that the consciousness of the sacred constitute the common basis of all religions but the basis is not the summit.

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11. Shakespeare *'The Merchant of Venice'* (New Swan Shakespear, Longmans), p. 107.

Of the three religions in Nigeria there is not one which has the right to speak as if there are many gods. The basic theology of the traditional religion has always insisted on one God, one universe, one credo and one point of dispensal of the members of the single family of mankind. Both Islam and Christianity speak also of one God. The uniqueness of each religion certainly creates a difficulty when one tries to study religion in interaction.

"It is clear that in a pluralistic world a homogeneous religious system that is trying to swallow other systems is out of place."<sup>12</sup> The essential problem that the study of religion possess is how to preserve religious truth, tradition, orthodoxy, the dogmatic traditional structure of ones own religion and yet accept them as knowledge of other traditions and accept them as spiritual valid way of God.

For a time study of religious interaction the scholar should know the scripture of the religion he is studying for each scripture enshrines the basic doctrine of its religion and the foundation of its ethical demands and sanctions. The scholar must be both reverent and serious and have a spirit of meditation. It is perilous to make statements about the tenets of any religion unless it is varified from its scriptures, even though the scripture may be oral as in traditional religion.

The history of Nigeria is a sad thing as it is today, hardly inconsequential of the conflicts between adherents of various religions and various degree of violence they have perpetuated. Man is quite egocentric and has arrogated to himself the right to execute judgement on behalf of God and according to his own conviction. Pure religion should of course cure man of this kind of egocentricity and give him the grace to respect the life and property of other persons while maintaining and upholding the truths of his religion.

It is a recognised fact that there is a dilemma in remaining faithful to ones own religion while recognising the value of other religion. We recognise that there are religions which are essentially missionary, whose adherents must preach and propagate the faith in action. Nevertheless if we take Christianity for example, the christian is enjoined to preach the gospel in love and sympathy and with due respect to

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12. Aylward Shorter *African Christian Theology* (Geoffrey Chapman London, 1975), p. 142.

the personality of all with whom he comes into contact. Following the steps of their master they should rather suffer than make others suffer. Smith in the *Rebel Nun* maintained that there are no words greater than: Love one another, then everything will be justified to the end without exception, otherwise there will be nothing but abomination and burden.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have seen that of the three religions Islam and Christianity are each a religion with a definite bias in particularity. Christianity speaks of one God, and all other religions are vanity. Islam also stemming from Judaism like Christianity made claims of world conquest and as such sought to do it by more or less possible means. Islam also claims to be universal religion and has supported its claim with physical, material and spiritual Jihad.

Naturally where there are two religions each claiming to be rivalry and antagonistic as the meeting of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria there has been one of mutual disdain and reciprocal condemnation. As for the traditional religion it appears to have been accorded no recognition at all by both Islam and Christianity but the structure of the Nigerian society does not permit the two religions - Christianity and Islam to push their antagonism to a logic conclusion. The adherents of the three religions have to live together and be just to one another in the same community. In parts of Northern Nigeria it may be possible to find a whole block of communities which are entirely Muslims. As one comes towards the South it becomes clear that the religions are making compromise for themselves through their adherents.

The one important area where the three religions are inevitably interacting remarkably is the area of healing, protection, living in prosperity, things relating to the images or of life. Here we find the generalities of Nigerians regarding Christianity and Islam as inadequate for their purpose under certain circumstances and they must either prevent completely to the old traditional ways or at least supplement what the two religions afford with traditional remedies.

Islam seems to find a point of sympathetic compromise with the traditional religion, unlike Christianity it allows the practice of magic and the use of charms.

Another aspect of the religious situation which results from the interaction of religions and culture in Nigeria is the fact that there is among Nigerians an open attitude towards religious allegiance.

Christianity as well as Islam has given certain days of rest and festivals which are enjoyed by adherents of other religions.