

# Religious Encounter and Identity in Nigeria: Issues Bordering on Religious Freedom and Peace

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## Abstract

Religious encounter and identity have been an issue confronting Nigeria which has resulted in several conflicts mostly in the northern part of the country. The resultant effect is the death of several people, the displacement of many more, and the destruction of properties the estimation of which will be difficult to properly quantify. Religion is meant to unite the people and not to cause division. In the face of development, religious identity has been a cog in the wheel of peaceful coexistence and development. This has affected freedom of religion with the result that people cannot practice their religion without fear. This study adopted a qualitative research method. This made use of secondary sources such as books, journals, articles, reports and Internet sources. The study found that religious identity has affected religious freedom vis-a-vis peaceful coexistence. The study recommends, among others, charting a course that will restore and enhance a healthy religious encounter among adherents of all faiths and foster peace that will create the conducive atmosphere for development and improve the quality of life which all Nigerians yearn for.

**Key words:** Religious encounter, identity, religious freedom, peace

## Introduction

Nigeria which is home to millions of Christians, Muslims, and adherents of indigenous religions has been described as one of the world's major laboratories for the study of religious-based conflict and reconciliation especially with complicated relations between Christians and Muslims in the Northern and central regions of the country (Vaughan, 33). A survey of people's religious beliefs carried out in 10 countries by the British Broadcasting Corporation in 2004 indicated that Nigeria was the most religious nation in the world. 100% of Nigerians believed in God or a higher power. Of these, 91% regularly attended a religious service in contrast with 21% in the UK and only 7% of Russians with an average of 46% across the 10 countries. 71% of Nigerians said they were willing to die for their God or their beliefs (BBC News, February 26, 2004). If these statistics are anything to go by, it would suggest that an appreciation of the

religious arena in Nigeria is a *sine qua non* to understanding the myriad of issues that have influenced the course of the country from its emergence since its amalgamation in 1914 to the present and even for the future especially as it affects conflict and peace.

In this paper, we will discuss the concepts of religious freedom, religious identity and religious encounter in Nigeria, and the interplay of these variables in setting the tone for such understanding that will engender peace in the polity and create the atmosphere for the prosperity its people have longed for. To do this, we will be addressing the following questions. What is the extent of religious freedom in Nigeria? What is the relationship between religious identity and the nature of interaction among religions in Nigeria? What is the implication of the interaction of these variables for conflict and peace in Nigeria?

## **Legal Framework for Religious Freedom and Peace**

United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo remarked at the release of the 2017 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom that “Where fundamental freedoms of religion, expression, press, and peaceful assembly are under attack, we find conflict, instability, and terrorism. On the other hand, governments and societies that champion these freedoms are more secure, stable, and peaceful” (U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Nigeria par. 5). Religious freedom is a fundamental right of every individual, regardless of race, sex, country, creed, or nationality, and should never be arbitrarily abridged by any government. Freedom of religious belief and practice is a universal human right and fundamental freedom articulated in numerous international instruments (US Department of State, 26). Of these are the Four Pillars of International Religious Freedom namely the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981), and the 1989 Vienna Concluding Document (Derek 26).

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (UN UDHR5).

This declaration strongly affirms respect for the religious differences of individuals while stressing the political principle that a key role of government is to protect religious choice, not to mandate religious conformity.

The preceding documents have found expression in the Nigerian 1999 Constitution (as amended) which similarly provides for freedom of religion in chapter IV 38. (1-3) where it explicitly states that:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or religion not approved by his parent or guardian. No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination (FGN15).

Notwithstanding the provisions of the constitution, the Nigerian nation has witnessed gross violation of religious freedom such that by 2010, it had risen to the top tier of the world's worst violators, according to an Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF Annual Report 66). The report observed that in a ten year period of religious violence (1999-2009) when more than 12,000 Nigerians - Christians and Muslims alike - have died. Its 2017 report showed that religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained poor as it observed that the Nigerian government at the national and state levels continued to tolerate violence and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, and suppressed the freedom to manifest religion or belief (USCIRF Annual Report 35). Based on its findings in 2018, USCIRF again finds that Nigeria should be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2009 (USCIRF Annual Report 3). This demonstrated that the Nigerian government and judicial system that have the responsibility of upholding the provisions of the constitution have so far been unwilling or unable to protect either side (Duin 41). It meant that there were no credible reports of abuses of religious freedom by the federal government as an act of commission. However, there were reports of abuses of religious freedom by certain state governments and local political actors who stoked communal and sectarian violence with impunity. For instance it was reported that in some Northern states, authorities denied building permits for construction of Christian churches and for expansion and renovation of existing ones. Churches occasionally applied for residential permits as an alternative. Even then, when such residential permits were granted, they were specifically instructed not to use it for the building of churches (US Department of State 12). Similarly, Muslims in the predominantly Christian Southern part of Kaduna State alleged that local government officials prevented the construction of mosques and Islamic schools. The officials however denied discrimination, attributing application denials to zoning regulations in residential neighbourhoods and a large backlog of applications (US Department of State, 23).

In addition, the Civil Liberties Organization, a prominent nongovernmental organization, contended that Zamfara State promoted Islam as a state religion through its establishment of a Commission for Religious Affairs. This Commission, while technically secular, tended to favour Muslims. For example, the Commission made recommendations for the state government to fund the construction of mosques but did not recommend the use of state funds for the construction of churches (US Department of State 23).

The issue of the application of Shari'ah in several states in the North has created a tense atmosphere for non-Muslims. The USCIRF report noted that:

Although the jurisdiction of Shari'ah technically does not apply to non-Muslims in civil and criminal proceedings, certain social mores inspired by Shari'ah, such as the separation of the sexes in public schools, health care, voting, and transportation services, affected non-Muslim minorities in the North. Many non-Muslims perceived that they lived under the rule of a Muslim government and often feared reprisals for their religious affiliation (US Department of State).

Furthermore, the report declared that in many communities, Muslims or Christians who converted to another religion reportedly faced ostracism by adherents of their former religion. In some Northern states, those wishing to convert to Islam applied to the Shari'ah council for a letter of conversion to be sent to their families, which served to dissolve marriages to Christians, and to request Hisbah protection from reprisals by relatives. Similar procedures did not exist for those converting to Christianity, other than church procedures, such as religious studies and baptism. Muslim women in some parts of the South allegedly faced job discrimination in the private sector, especially in banking, if they wore a hijab (head covering traditionally worn by Muslim women). There are no legal restrictions concerning hijabs (USDOS – US Department of State).

On April 20, 2010, Berom youths allegedly barricaded the road in Riyom LGA, stopped vehicles, and killed seven persons after interrogating passengers to ascertain their religious affiliation and ethnic identity. Similarly on May 19, 2010, Muslim Fulani youths in Kwasam, KiruLGA, Kano State, allegedly burned a Baptist church and the pastor's home (US State Department 26). In February 2018, 15 people were killed and properties worth millions of Naira destroyed in a clash between Christians and Muslims in KasuwanMagani of Kaduna State. In the same community, over 70 people have been killed in like circumstances in October 2018. Such incidences of attacks and counter attacks on the basis of religious and or ethnic identity which is an infringement on the religious freedom of Nigerians have been common especially in Jos and its environs since the onset of crises in the area in the early 2000s up to the time this paper is being written (Negedu 16). In summary then, it can be concluded that although the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees religious freedom, this freedom is being abused at the level of the government especially in some states and local governments by acts of omission or commission covertly or overtly. It also does not appear to have taken appropriate measures to address this abuse by private individuals or communities to arrest the situation.

## Religious Identity

While discussing the relationship between identity and religion, Kuna considers that it appears to be located precisely at the confluence of the purposes and roles that religion serves in life and death, in the kind of meanings such phenomena create, in the way it constraints behaviour, and the extent to which it institutionalizes social action (42). The way people perceive and define themselves as adherents of specific religious experiences, in a sense 'in-groups,' against outsiders that do not share the same religious experience or 'out-groups,' and the way in which institutional systems provide each with readily avail-able repertoires that make life that much meaningful are critical elements in the construction of identities.

In Nigeria, the most prominent identity groups are the ethnic, religious, regional and sub-ethnic (communal). This is both from the point of view of the identities most commonly assumed by citizens especially for political purposes and the identities often implicated in day-to-day contestations over citizenship as well as competitions and conflicts over resources and privileges. To emphasize the inter-connectedness of ethnic, regional, and religious identities and the fact that they are often mutually reinforcing, they are sometimes compounded or hyphenated as ethno-regional and ethno-religious (Osaghae and Suberu 14). Although the three are interrelated, the religious factor has of late assumed a more salient role as it appears to be pervasive especially in the Northern part of the country where virtually everything is seen within the prism of religion.

Religious identities in Nigeria are usually classified into three – Christian, Muslim and Traditional. Of the three, traditional religions is the least politically active except in parts of Kogi, Kwara, and Nassarawa States where masquerade activities associated with traditional religion have been a major source of conflicts. In effect, Christian and Muslim identities have been the mainstay of religious differentiation and conflict, with Nigerian Muslims much more likely to evince or articulate a religious identity than Christians (Lewis and Bratton as cited in Osaghae and Suberu 14). This is particularly so in parts of the North commonly referred to as the 'core' or 'Hausa-Fulani North' - which is roughly coterminous with those states that adopted Shari'ah law in the Fourth Republic. Religious identity is more critical than ethnic identity and in fact, serves to activate ethnicity. Lewis and Bratton in their study realised that they opted for religious (Muslim) identity than say the Yoruba who were more prone to define themselves ethnically. This is perhaps the reason why most of the cases of religious violence in Nigeria have been recorded more in the Northern part of the country.

## Religious Encounter

From the onset, it is necessary to clarify that by religious encounter we are not talking about religious, spiritual, sacred, or mystical experience relating to an individual's contact with a transcendent reality, an encounter or union with the divine which Rudolf Otto refers to as the numinous (Earth pages.org n.d.). Much as this will no doubt affect the subject we will be discussing, however, we are discoursing on the interaction of religions, or what perhaps might be termed interreligious dialogue. Four types of interreligious encounters have been identified. These are the dialogue of life through which believers of different religions bear witness before each other in daily life to their own human and spiritual values, and help each other to live according to those values in order to build a more just and fraternal society; action involving cooperation for integral development and the safeguarding of religious values; theological exchange between experts in religious traditions or official representatives of those traditions and the one involving communicating on various dimensions of faith with each other. This is to say that religious encounter involves interaction at the levels of being, doing, thinking, and reflecting on one's experience of faith (Michel 23).

We have drawn on the work of Raimon Panikkar-Alemany, the foremost proponent of inter-religious dialogue, to deepen our understanding of the concept.

While discussing the inevitability of religious encounter and the imperative of dialogue Panikkar noted that:

Today all the 'Berlin Walls' of individualistic religious postures are collapsing, along with the apartheid of exclusivistic belief systems. Not only from a sociological point of view are people living in a 'supermarket' of ethnic 'groups,' religious 'ways,' and lifestyle 'options.' From an anthropological viewpoint as well, people can no longer lock themselves up behind safe pillars of orthodoxy (Panikkar 5).

There is hardly any aspect of human relations where even the most divergent religious (and also anti-religious) positions do not come into close contact including the school, the office, the family and even on the Internet. How adherents of religions interact and profit or suffer lost as a result depend on their perceived or correct knowledge of each other's faith. This is where the matter of dialogue is necessary. Panikkar has echoed the importance and the nature of such a dialogue when he said that:

If a truly religious encounter between ourselves and with the Earth does not take place, we shall end by annihilating life on this Earth. The dialogue of religions is not merely an ecclesial or an officially 'religious' affair, nor is it just an academic subject-matter, much less some new vogue because maybe church services have become dull or their attendance fallen off. This dialogue is the field in which the historical destiny of humankind may be played out in a peaceful way. It is a vital necessity, a necessity for life. (7).

According to Panikkar, this dialogue of religions is not walled up in the enclosures of 'religious' institution but stands or falls in the midst of life. It is not some special area of competence for so-called theologians or religious 'leaders,' much less for academic 'experts' as doing so will shut out religion from the public forum which is dangerous because in the domain of dialogue, humanness is at stake therefore it cannot be left to so called specialists.

Dialogue is not an engagement to be feared because it does not intend to reduce all religions to the lowest common denominator or to establish some generalized and superficial religiosity but rather communication, sympathy, love, polar complementarity to preserve life. This is because at the root of dialogue is humanity and its preservation. People are therefore invited to the table, both old and new uprooting them from the native soil of their own traditions. It

weaves a net of connections which relates and transforms the world of religions. This, according to Pannikar, is itself in the spirit of religion. People have to be alive to practise religion but where their very existence is threatened by religion, then it is tending toward irrelevance. It is therefore of utmost importance that religion should consider the pursuit of peace and harmony as human imperatives of the highest order.

## **Religious Identity and Interaction in Nigeria**

Although Nigeria's official site on the nation's statistics (National Bureau of Statistics) does not have figures of the religious demography of its people, it acknowledged that Christianity and Islam are the most widely practised with numerous local faiths grouped together as Traditional Religions (NBS 12). According to a 2009 estimate of Muslim population in the world in the report of a research by the Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion & Public Life, Nigeria occupied the 6<sup>th</sup> position with a total of 78,056,000 representing 50.4% of the nation's population and 5.0% of the world (Pew Research Centre's Forum 32). Similarly, a 2011 report by the same research body on the size and distribution of the world's Christian population showed Nigeria with 80,510,000 Christians representing an estimated 50.8% of the national population and 3.7% of the world's population also ranked 6<sup>th</sup> globally (Pew Research Centre's Forum 10) This is an indication that Nigeria is roughly divided into half Christian and half Muslim population as has been observed by Shaba (16).

While the Northern part of the country which comprises of Hausa-Fulani and other communities are mainly Muslim, the South-South minority areas and Igbo speaking areas in the Southeast are predominantly Christians. The Middle Belt and the Yoruba-speaking communities in the Southwest are a mixture of Christian and Muslim populations. This differentiation is important because it underlies the North-South cleavage (in terms of the North being predominantly Muslim and the South predominantly Christian) which sharpens ethnic cleavages in the country (Okpanachi 19). This has created walls of identities that have at various times led to the destruction of lives and properties including a civil war (1967-70) and has continued to threaten its corporate existence as a nation.

Nigeria presents an interesting scenario for the study of the interaction of religion due to the complex of individual, as well as crisscrossing and recursive identities of which the ethnic, religious, regional and sub-ethnic (communal) are the most salient and the main bases for violent conflicts in the country (Osaghae and Suberu 21). Religious identity has been used as a basis to whip up sentiment in the midst of slight provocation among the people within the community. Overtime, peace cohabitation was quite strong that no one asked or cared about the religious affiliation of his or her neighbour. Everyone was seen as one but the scenario today has taken a different dimension both at state and at the community level where every decision is predicated on the choice of religion of the people involved.

## **Options for Robust Religious Encounter in Nigeria**

Many Christians and Muslims in Nigeria are living in the illusion that the 'other' is the problem and the solution is either the 'other' accepts conversion or is eliminated, supposing that religious homogeneity equals peace. Empirical evidence shows otherwise. There is proof that some of the most diverse States in the world such as Switzerland, Belgium, Malaysia and Tanzania enjoy relative peace and stability, while some of the least diverse are the most unstable or violent for example, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and, perhaps, Sri Lanka (Osaghae and Suberu). Specifically, as regards religion, Somalia is a country of about 99% Islam (International Religious Freedom Report 20), yet it has remained a failed state. Similarly while 94.45% of people in Northern Ireland as at 1991 were Christians, the country witnessed violent conflicts that led to the segregation of Belfast, the capital city into Catholic and Protestant enclaves until

the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement of 1998 (Northern Ireland Office)

The understanding and acceptance of this reality can help position Nigerians to begin to think in terms of how to approach the inevitability of coexistence both for now and the future. This has implications in many respects. It means that both religions must create room for each other in the scheme of things in the private and public space and also at the individual and corporate levels. It is from this that peace and development can prevail in the society.

As eager as they may be for proselytisation, they should be much more keen in showing by life what they seek to offer than by provocative utterances. A Catholic priest and a scholar told the story of his experience in religious dialogue while teaching at the theology faculty of Selcuk University in Konya, Turkey. The community where he resided was wholly Muslim but his neighbours anonymously continued to render services to him for the six months that he was there. When he sought to know from one of the neighbours who the people were that would come around to take care of his house while he was away at work so he could appreciate them, he was told that:

You don't have to meet them. They didn't do this for you; they did it for God, and God who sees all that we do will reward them. The Qur'an teaches that *rahipler* (monks) are one of the reasons why Christians are the closest community in friend-ship to Muslims, so it is an act of worship (*ibadah*) for us to treat you with kindness (Michel Par 20).

This is genuine dialogue by which adherents of each religion can share its truth to the 'other' and violence in this case will be unthinkable.

With regards to shari'ah we agree with the position of Onaiyekan who insisted that Nigeria should be one nation under one law and if there are aspects of any other laws including shari'ah that can add to the quality of our laws, they should be incorporated for the general benefit of Nigerians. All that is needed is to apply two basic principles. First, that the law of the land should not command what one's religious law forbids. And secondly, the law of the land should not forbid what one's religious law demands. In between, there is a wide range of cases which the state can leave to the free management of individuals and groups. The law of the land can permit what one's religious law forbids. It is up to one not to do what his/her religious law forbids and he/she suffers no liability from that regard. Similarly, the law of the land need not command what one's religious law demands. All that should be expected of the state is to ensure basic norms required for a peaceful and orderly nation on the basis of the people's common agreement (Onaiyekan 8).

Religious encounter can be mutually beneficial if it is done with sincerity and honesty as religions should. In a dialogue of life, Muslims and Christians can use their religions as platforms for mobilisation towards addressing social issues in the community which government may not or does not have the capacity to tackle. This may include societal vices such as drug abuse among youths or community development projects such as drain-ages and general environmental hygiene. In the area of security, both religious adherents can collaborate either by forming vigilante within the community or by a way of making financial contributions to establish a formidable security team for their community. By so doing, the relationship between the two dominant religion can be strengthened. The implication of not doing so is that the criminals usually blend together mindless of religious or ethnic divide to carry out dastardly acts against the people in the community.

Muslims and Christians should seize every opportunity to show solidarity with one another whether it has to do with sharing in joy such as weddings, naming ceremonies or sorrow including deaths and burials or disasters. For some time now, the Muslim community in Jos have during the Ramadan period invited Christians to share in their meals and they have usually obliged. Similarly, when in 2012, there was flood that led to the displacement and death of

some residents in predominantly Muslim communities in Jos, Christians visited them not only to commiserate with them but carried along supplies of relief materials to alleviate their suffering. In a community like Jos that has gone through the trauma of violent conflicts, such acts can convey immense therapeutic power.

Adherents of the two religions are averse to crime and criminals especially people whose aim is to cause confusion and disaffection in the community. DadinKowa and State LowCost/Rantya communities in Jos have remained peaceful in the midst of the crisis in Jos because Christians and Muslims in these communities have agreed to expose and send away miscreants in their midst or hand them over to law enforcement agents (Dinshak 14). This has helped built trust and community cohesion leaving little room for mischief makers and religious leaders have contributed toward this development.

Religious encounter at the level of business can also help strengthen ties between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. Joint economic ventures such as community cooperative societies that will bring them together can be a binding element as it deals with issues of bread and butter which affect the daily lives of all humans. It can therefore be highly impactful in encouraging healthy religious encounter.

Government and Civil Society should also provide avenues of interaction for youths of both faiths especially for the purpose of socialising. This can take the form of sports, picnics, drama and such healthy media.

Prominent and well to do individuals who are seen as leaders in the religious community should make deliberate efforts to extent their wealth in creating job opportunities or offering support or scholarships to youths of all faiths. This will profitably engage restive youths, keeping them from destructive activities. It will also strengthen healthy inter-religious dialogue in the community.

Prejudice is a major hindrance to profitable religious encounter. Since prejudice thrives on ignorance, inter-religious dialogue at the level of theology should be encouraged. The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) should encourage and even arrange such fora at various levels to educate each side on the basic tenets and believes of the other. Students should be exposed to such rudiments at the school level as well.

It is unfortunate that social segregation in conflict and post conflict communities has led to the emergence of exclusive educational institutions (Dinshak 32). This is a minus to healthy religious encounter. Efforts must be made to encourage schools that are still mixed and as soon as peace begins to be restored, governments and communities should take steps to re-establish such schools else a future of intense religious intolerance is being prepared.

Much as religious freedom allows everybody to believe and practice what he/she may, it is also an acknowledged fact that no one's exercise of freedom should be a hindrance to another (your freedom ends where my nose begins). The recognised leaders of both the Christian and Muslim religions such as the Christian Association of Nigeria and Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs should moderate the preachings of its clergy to check fundamentalist tendencies that promote violence and sanction them appropriately. Leaders of such bodies should also promptly denounce such theologies to allay fears of complicity on their part.

Similarly, the practice of blocking streets for religious meetings on Fridays for Muslims and Sundays for Christians is another exercise of freedom that encroaches on the rights of others to move about freely. The nauseating experience of such arrangements does not help in creating the atmosphere for positive religious encounter. Leaders of these religions should consider decentralising where the venues cannot accommodate them or move out of the metropolis.



The vexed constitutional issue of citizenship and indigenship must be addressed at the national level so that there will be a level ground for all Nigerians of all faiths and ethnicity to carry on with their lawful responsibilities peacefully and without molestation. The federal government should set up mechanisms to monitor and ensure compliance at all levels in this regard.

## Conclusion

Religious encounter in Nigeria is not an invention. Nigerians of all faiths interact daily in the market square, schools, sports ground, offices and politics. The problem is that it has taken down turns leading to unhealthy relationships and precipitating violence. Religion

should be beneficial not only as an eschatological hope for followers but the dividends should manifest in the present world. Even those who do not believe in any religion should profit from those who profess it else it is worth nothing. The interaction of religions ought therefore to enrich human beings rather than impoverish them. It should replenish the earth rather than seek to destroy it. Cooperation among the adherents of the two dominant religions can fashion the way out of the social problems confronting Nigeria ranging from insecurity to economic issues such as corruption in the corridors of power. If the people present one voice irrespective of religious affiliations, the people in power will restrain themselves from doing things that will jeopardise the development of the system. Economic hardship has no regards for religion rather it can respond to one purpose where people are opposed to corruption and other vices that can support hardship. Nigeria has a lot to gain from peace and unity. Issues of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, insecurity, challenges that both religions can jointly address with one voice by bringing government to account-ability will enhance development. The challenge therefore is to chart a course that will restore and enhance a healthy religious encounter among adherents of all faiths and foster peace that will create the conducive atmosphere for development and improve the quality of life which all Nigerians yearn for.

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