# CONFLICT BETWEEN CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIMS
# WITH REFERENCE TO NORTHERN NIGERIA

Rev. Peter O. Awojobi, Ph.D.

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine the conflict between Christian and Muslims with special focus on Northern Nigeria. The questions to which answers will be sought are: Why are Christians and Muslims always in conflict in Nigeria? What were the reasons for the conflict, and what criteria are applied to judge the opponents? It appears that each religious group had their own ideas about what constitutes a true religion, and was using that to judge the other. We learnt that Christianity and Islam are the major religions in the country. The two religions are very old and strong in Nigeria. But, deplorably, these two religions that should teach brotherly kindness and love are often at loggerheads with each other owing to doctrinal differences, political and economic power struggle and defection of members from one religious affiliation to the other. In Northern Nigeria unhealthy rivalry often characterize the devotees of these religious groups. The leaders of these religions are blamed for the transgressions committed by their followers and were therefore as guilty as everyone else in violating the law of the land. It has been observed that adherents that were ill-informed of the basic tenets of a religious faith are always used to perpetrate religious hostilities. It is also those whose consciences have not been properly tutored that perpetrate various forms of social vices. The conflict between Christians and Muslims today especially in Northern Nigeria is due to the failure of the religious leaders to teach Divine will to their faithful.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a personal thing. However in some communities in Africa it is a community affair. I was recently in a village with some Christians to share the gospel of Christ with members of the Community. After presenting the gospel to one old woman and asked whether she would like to give her life to Christ. Her response was that we should come back the next day because she will have to consult her family members. The following day we were there, she told us that the family said she should not accept Christ. We tried to convince her but she bluntly refused.

I was in another community on missions outreach after praying and giving of drugs to members of the community. We learnt that there was a meeting of the Elders of the community. One of them was reported to have suggested to his colleagues that because we have been a blessing to the community, there was the need for the community to donate some families to the Christian faith as a token of their gratitude. This was because no one in that community was willing to come to Christ without the approval or release of the community leaders. To them religious affairs is a community thing.

Adherents of faith in whatever form, are generally viewed as belonging to one family of God, and should as a result promote brotherly love and mutual kindness towards one another.[1]

Nigerian is commonly called 'the Giant of Africa' by reason of her population that was estimated at 133, 88,700 in 2003.[2] The two major religious in Nigeria are Christianity and Islam. Both religious are very old and strong. But deplorably, these two religions that should teach brotherly kindness and love are often at loggerheads with each other owing to doctrinal differences, political and economic power struggle and defection of members from one religious affiliation to the other. This has led to unhealthy rivalry among the devotees of these religious groups. This paper examines the conflict between Christians and Muslims with special focus on northern Nigeria. The questions to which answer will be sought are: why are Christians and Muslims always in conflict in northern Nigeria? What were the reasons for the conflict and what criteria are applied to judge the opponent? How can conflict between Christian and Muslim be resolved? The paper is rounded off with recommendations on how unity, peace and love could be fostered in Nigeria as a pluralistic religious state.

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[1] S.A. Fatokun "Christian – Muslim Relations in Nigeria: Co-operations and Conflicts" in Insight – Journal of Religious Studies Babcock University, Vol. 2 Nos, 1&2. June, pp. 60-69.

[2] "Nigeria" in Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2004 (Electronic Version)

## Origin of Christian and Muslims in Nigerian

Historically, it was the contacts with the western and Arabic Worlds that gave birth to Islam and Christianity in Nigeria. Although Christianity had been in Africa as early as the first century and had great centers in earliest times in ancient places like Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria etc.[3] Nigeria had a taste of Christianity during the Portuguese Missionary enterprise in the 16th Century.[4] This was strengthened during the nineteenth century missionary enterprise of the evangelical societies from Europe and America.[5] On the other hand, Islam came to Nigeria in 11th century and was firmly established in the Kanen-Borno Empire.[6]

It should be noted that Christianity has significantly recorded a higher rate of conversion, development and expansion over the years than Islam because of its connection with western civilization. For instance, the population of Christians in the country is 52.6%, while the Muslim population is estimated at 41%[7]. This fast growing rate of Christianity led to much rivalry, intolerance, and persecution from the Muslims especially in the Northern part of the Country. However, there is cooperation between Christians and Muslims in the Southern, Western and Eastern parts of the Country.

## Conflict between Christianity and Muslim in Nigeria

Conflict is a state of disagreement or argument between people, groups, countries, etc. over a thing, opinion, belief, sentiment, feeling or impression. Conflicts are interrelated because they occur between or enemy connected individuals such as teachers and students, employer and among connected individuals such as teachers and students, employers and employees, neighbors, religious associates, religious bodies or other persons whose interests within the same space, and whose positions or stance influence others.

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[3] Bengt Sundkler & C, Steed, A History of the Church in Africa Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, pp. 7, 34. See also Jonathan Hielder brandt, History of the church in Africa, Achimetu: Africa Christian Press, 1981.

[4] D.O. Olayiwola, "European Missions and Politics in West Africa, 1800-1918" in Religious- A Journal of the Nigerian Association for the study of Religious, vol. 9. Dec., 1984, p. 34.

[5] T.A. Beathan, Christian and the New Africa, London: Pall Mall Press, 1967.

[6] T. Fola and B. Adediran, Islam and Christianity in West Africa, Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press Ltd., 1983, p. 29.

[7] "Nigeria", invoice of Martyrs, 2004.http://presecution.com.

Religiously speaking, conflict arises when each of two different religious persons claims a monopoly of religious truth.[8]  This will lead to antagonism, hostility, clash, dispute, fight, quarrel and war between them.  From the fore going, interreligious conflict is a state of disagreement between two religious persons or group regarding who is or who is not holding absolute religious truth:  It occurs when members of different religions are engaged in argument which often goes with bickering, controversy, demonstration, debate, or squabble over religious beliefs and practices.

To sociologists, conflict is a state of disharmony or discord with oneself,  between a person and another or a person and a group or a group within itself or with another group or a community within itself or with another community or a nation within itself, with another nation or  conflict  among  nations,  all  arising  from  a  misunderstanding,  or  misinterpretation  or misrepresentation of an intention or an action, occasioned either by genuine or error of commission or omission or by a deliberate mischief and , or aggression, usually motivated by selfish reasons.  It is clear from the above that conflicts are inevitable in human relationship.[9]

In Nigeria, especially in the northern part of the country Christians and Muslim are always intolerant to one another when it comes to convert making or defection from one religion to the other.  The antagonism to Christian evangelism from the Muslim is much more than any other religions.  In the same way, some Christians provoke the Muslims by openly condemning their beliefs and practices in church meetings.  However, the level of intolerance is more on the side of Muslims.  In fact, Muslim fanatics have in history destroyed and burnt many churches in northern Nigeria while there is hardly any case of Christians destroying Mosques.

### Causes of Conflict between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria.

Notable causes of conflict between Christians and Muslims are discussed below:

The first is drive for membership.  Both religious groups always embark on activities that are aimed at winning souls.  This often led to bickering and physical combat between Christians and Muslims.[10]   It should be noted that each of the two religions used various strategies to win converts.  For instance, Christian missionaries introduced Western Education, while the Islamic missionaries introduced Islamic education, as instruments of Christianity or Islamizing Nigerian. This makes the two religious to be intolerance to one another.  The intolerance among Christians

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[8] J.K. Ayantayo, Sociological Examination of Inter-Religious Conflict in Africa in perspective on peace and conflict in Africa Ibadan: Institute of Africa Studies University of Ibadan. P. 56.

[9] A.O. Dayosylva "The Writer and Ph(f) aces of Conflicts in Africa" in perspective on peace and conflict in Africa, Ibadan: John Archer Ltd.

[10] J.K. Ayantayo, "Sociological Examination of Inter-Religious Conflict in Africa: p. 58.

and Muslims is presently on the increased in our country.    This often results in open confrontation and the use of dangerous weapons and fire-arms to fore-stall Christian programmes.  Some go to the extent of tearing down of Christian posters inviting people to programs.  Some Muslims even disrupt Sunday worship services in northern part of Nigeria.  Some Muslim boys recently threw stones at worshippers in a church in Kaduna.[11]   There is mutual suspicion among religious people so much at illogical meanings are always read into almost every religious activity of any person whose religious is different from their own.

Also, the introduction of Sharia in some part of northern Nigeria has brought conflict between Christians and Muslim in the area.  The issue of Islamic Sharia law has long been a controversial matter that threatens the unity and peaceful co-existence of any multi-religious nation like Nigeria.  In Northern Nigeria where Sharia is practiced, Christian converts from Islam are executed, yet Christians will not prevent any other relations from joining Islam if they so wish.  Christians must not put on a cross medal, a cross or display Christian religious books where Muslims pass by in the market or cities.[12]

One of the religious implications of Sharia is that Christians must not play Christian music or instruments in their churches where it will disturb the peace of the Muslims nearby.  Recently, Fontua Local Government council in Kastina State revoked the Certificate of Occupancy of a Church land and building because of the use of musical instrument which they claimed disturbed the peace of Muslims in the neighborhood.[13]   In states in northern Nigeria where Sharia is practiced, Christians cannot have any possession or outdoor meeting of any kind.  Politically, no persons in other religious apart from Islam can be in any position of leadership at any level.  Muslims use political powers to subjugate, punish, and to marginalize all people of other faiths.  They also use funds from government treasury to finance Islamic projects and activities.  Legally, under Sharia law a single Muslim witness is equal to three Christian witnesses.  Christians under Sharia are considered as second class citizens.[14]   Sharia was the reason for religious crises in northern parts of Nigeria especially in Kaduna, Jos, Kano, Bauchi, Kafanchen, Zamfara, Yobe, Damaturu, Maiduguri, etc.  Sharia has continued to threaten the unity, peaceful co-existence of any multi-religious nation like Nigeria.[15] Christians see Sharia as a threat to national and state unity, threat to peace and harmonious co-existence especially in the

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[11] S.A. Fatokun, "Christian – Muslim Relations in Nigeria in Christianity and Africa Society p. 319.

[12] B.E.E. Dabki, The Tragedy of Sharia, Cry and The Voice of Masses (Kadunna: 200), p. 11.

[13] Peter Awojobi , "Christian Persecution in Nigeria" in Christianity and Africa Society p. 329.

[14] E. Adam, Sharia: The Socio-political Implications for Nigeria (Abuja: Christian Institute -), p. 20.

[15] Solomon D. Lay "Christian in Politics and Government in Nigeria" A paper presented at the Conference on "Christian in Politics and Government in Nigeria" At TCNN, Bukuru on 3rd-5th April, 1998.

Northern part of Nigeria.[16] Christians also considered Sharia as a threat to the Christian faith and practices as well as a threat to democracy and national development. On February 21, 2000, the Christian Association of Nigeria, Kaduna chapter staged a peaceful procession holding leaves and Bibles in their hands at the Governor's House and the State House of Assembly to protest against the forceful and unconstitutional move by the state Government to implement and impose Sharia as a state Religion on the people of the state.

On their way back from the Governor's House to their various destinations they were attacked by Muslims. Several Christians were killed and properties and houses worth millions of naira belonging to Christians were destroyed.[17] It should be noted that during the Sharia riots, Muslim Jihadist will loot houses or Churches before they set them ablaze. This made Christian Youth to start to defend themselves and the crises spread to many cities in the northern parts of the country. In the process thousands of people have been killed while thousands were deformed.[18]

Persecution and open attacks on Christians have become more frequent since the implementations of Sharia Law in the Northern Nigeria in 1999. According to a source, radical. Muslims in northern central Nigeria have been carrying out a 'holy' war against Christians.The attackers used guns and machetes as their weapon of destruction. They make no distinction between men, women and children. Hundreds have been killed in Christian villages throughout the state. Homes have been destroyed as the attacks against Christians have intensifies.[19] For instance, in February, 2002 an entire Youth Choir in a Methodist Church in Plateau State was hacked to death and burnt in the church. In July 2002, 88 villages belonging to Christians were destroyed in the same state rending at least 100,000 people homeless with an approximated figure of 5,000 men and women and children killed.[20]

In another development in Kano State, in December 2002, six Christians were burnt to death in Kano State in a single family as Muslim militants poured out vengeance on one Pastor Sunday Madumere as a reaction to the role he played in the conversion of many Muslims in the city of Kano to Christianity.[21] In July 2003, the Kano State Environmental Planning and

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[16] E. Adam, Sharia: The Socio-political Implications for Nigeria (Abuja: Christian Institute - ), p. 25.

[17] Y.A. Barau, Narayi Mirror, A Memorandum for the Religious Disturbances in Naruyi Village, 12th March, 2000.

[18] Statistical Data of Death – Churches Burnt by Kaduna State Christian Association of Nigeria.

[19] "Jihad in Nigeria" in Christian Alive, No 1. September, 2004.

[20] Ibid.

[21] See Voice of the Martyrs.

Protection Agency (KASEPA) demolished not less than 20 Church buildings at a claimed sanitization of the state against illegal structure that had no certificate of occupancy.

Another factor responsible for conflict between Christian and Muslim is Prevalence of religious misconception among these religious groups.  Religious misconception is tantamount to holding a religious idea which is wrong or untrue, but which people believe because they do not understand it properly.  There are evidence of how Christians hold wrong conception about Islam and vice-versa.  For instance, to the Muslims the concept of the Trinity- God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit means Christians are serving three Gods.  Whereas, the Christians beliefs about Trinity is one God, that manifested himself in the Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit.  In other words Christianity is a monotheistic religions (Eph. 2:12; Dt. 6:4).  To a Muslims, concepts like slavery is misunderstood and misinterpreted by the Christians.  Muslims see themselves as slaves of God but the Christians see themselves as children of God.  The Muslims call themselves slaves as a signal of total submission to God or as a sign of servant hood to God.  A true Muslim is expected to be submissive to God as slaves are submissive to their earthly master.  This sometimes generates arguments among Muslims and Christians.[22]  It has been observed that religious misconception could be precipitated by three factors.  These are ignorance, poor theological education, and high level of illiteracy of religious adherents.  By a careful observation we discovered that most religious adherents in Nigeria are ignorant of the content and intent of their religions.  It is common to see Almagiris' in northern Nigeria on rampage at anytime.  These are youths that are mostly stack illiterate with little or no understanding of the contents of their religion.  They are often used by different people for riots and social vices in the society.  In fact it is widely believe that most of the Boko Haram sects that are destroying lives and properties in northern Nigeria are product of this group.   Most religious leaders are unknowledgeable but still venture into the religious enterprise.  Some of them interpret scriptures to suit their purpose.  It is no wonder that some of them use fowl and abusive language.[23]

Besides, poor economic situation in Nigeria is a factor for conflict among Christians and Muslims.  Islam in most parts of northern Nigeria is considered as the state religion.  It is believe by Christians that all Islamic activities are sponsored by the state Government because majority of those in the helms of affairs are Muslims.  The fear is that if Christians acquire political power it will be difficult for Islamic project sponsorship by Government to be sustained.  Therefore, Muslim will always fight to remain in power.  Also, most religious leaders and founders of religious organizations because leaders of their group at last resort to improve their economy.[24]

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[22] J.K. Ayantayo, Sociological Examination of Inter Religious Concept p. 56.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

**Effects of Conflict between Christian and Muslim in Northern Nigeria**

There are positive and negative effects of conflict among religious groups in Northern Nigeria. However negative effects always outweigh the positive effects. On the negative side many Christians were killed by jihadist during religious war. Some children lost their parents and thus became orphans. Properties of Christians worth millions of naira are either looted or destroyed. Citizen with great potential who would have made impact in the country have been killed. Thousands of people have been killed while others thousands were left deformed with different types of injuries. For instance, in 1984, Muslims attached Christians during a Palm Sunday procession in Ilorin, Kwara State. The Muslims fanatics seized Christians Bibles, tore them and beat them mercilessly. Some of the Christians sustained injuries. In 1986 the same thing happened of which many churches were damaged along with other valuable properties belonging to Christians.[25] In 1985, Muslim Maitatsine sect fought in Gombe and Bauchi State and over 105 Christians killed. The most recent is the Boko Haram group that has continued to threaten the Boko Haram of the country. Their aim is to Islamize Nigeria.

Also, some Christians are denied of freedom of worship in a secular society like Nigeria. Christians are not allowed to build churches anywhere in the city like Mosques. In most parts of the northern Nigeria church buildings are confide to a particular area. In some cities in northern Nigeria, church buildings that are strategically located are either relocated or asked to build a high fence round it to prevent it from being conspicuous. In some part the time of worship services is regulated.

Besides, many of the Christians civil servants are victimized in the North. The Government refused to promote them to meet up with their mates or counter parts. For instance in Ilorin, Kwara State a Christian cannot be principal of a Government School, even when qualified. Christians are not considered for any serious political appointments. Some Christian children are sometimes denied admission into higher institutions after they have passed all relevant examinations. Many Christians were retrenched primarily by Government without any benefits. Christians are considered as second class citizens. However, conflict between religions group will retard the progress and development of that country.

On the other hand of the positive effects of religious conflicts is that this period often enhances solidarity within each religious group engaged in conflict with other.[26] During the time of conflict adherents of the same religion are forced to come together, perhaps to fight a common enemy. This is the case when a particular religion is threatened by opponents. For instance, the entrenchment of Sharia laws in the Nigerian constitution and its application in

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[25] B.E.E. Debki, The Tragedy of Sharia Cry and the Voice of Masses p. 113.

[26] J.K. Ayantayo, Sociological Examination of Inter Religious Concept, p. 62.

Zamfara state and a few others helped to bring Christian together. The church that has been divided by denominational affiliation started speaking the same language.

Also, the power, strength and the ability of religious groups are often measure during this period. The weight of the support group for a particular religion in a community will be evidence during this time. Inter-religious conflict often leads parties to acquire new information, new ways of seeing and understanding religion different from their own. Such creates an avenue for creativity and formation of new ideas and new ways of behaving, interacting and relating in religious circles.

Furthermore, in the face of conflict and war in northern Nigeria, many people came to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour. The Christians in the northern part of the country appears to be more devoted than their counterparts in the south. They are willing to die or endure torture and imprisonment for their faith.[27]

### **Proposal for Resolution of Conflict between Christian and Muslim.**

For religious conflict to be resolve all stakeholders in religious matters like family, religious centres, religious schools, religious leaders, the press, the external bodies and Governments in the northern part of the country. They all have complementary roles to play in order to stem the tide of religious conflicts. The proposals for resolving conflict between Christians and Muslims in northern Nigeria include promotion of religious understanding and education, establishment of religious dialogue, absolute religious secularism, illegitimisation of religious conflict etc. By reason of high level of ignorant of the content, intent and context of religious faith among followers and adherents of religions. Religious leaders are to give correct orientation, indoctrination and teachings that will promote peaceful co-existence among religious groups. The family, schools, should champion this, while religious centers and theological seminaries should follow suit. The scriptures should be the basis for teaching. Such teaching should be comparative by exposing the students to areas of convergence and divergence in the religions under study. The teachings should aim at promoting religious tolerance and peace in the society.

Also, establishment of religious dialogue is key to resolving religious dialogue. Religious dialogue refers to formal or official discussions between two religious groups. Dialogue should not be aimed at conversion, but to achieve the following:

(a) Facilitate better relationship among religious adherents.

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[27] Peter Awojobi, Christian Persecution in Northern Nigeria, p. 331.

(b)  Explore how the spiritual resources of the notable religious can contribute to some of the common challenges the society is facing daily.

(c) Suggest practical ways of co-operation among religious adherents especially Christians and Muslims.

It should be noted that the parties that will engage in religious dialogue must imbibe the principle of openness, objectivity, reverence, sympathy, empathy, competence and knowledge of religious scriptures and traditions. The person to

engage in religious dialogue must respect the opinion of other religious groups.  They should view the conflict experience in positive terms, expressing positive feelings for the other religion and being positive about the prospects of conflict resolution.  In addition to the above, bodies attempting conflict resolution should treat the other religious person as equal, respect religious differences and allowed representatives of other religions to express themselves freely and openly.

Religious dialogue is gamine because it is a universal phenomenon and social commodity which every person is free to imbibe.  Adherents must realize that no religion has a monopoly of truth regarding religious beliefs.

Government in a secular state like Nigeria must develop and maintain a neutral position on religious matters.  No Government should adopt one religion as the state religion.  The level of support for all religious groups by Government should be the same.  In terms of political appointments, the Government must be fair to all religions in the state.

Moral and religious education should be reinstated in the education curriculum at the various levels in our schools.  This would enhance inter-faith dialogue and promote religious tolerance.

**Conclusion:**

Religion should foster unity, brotherliness and love in any society or nation rather than being used as a tool for injustice, discrimination, and physical annihilation of opposing parties. God the Father of mankind does not discriminate on basis of religions when it comes to natural blessings.  Christians and Muslims in northern Nigeria should see themselves as brothers and sisters from one big family.  They are to settle religious differences on the altar of dialogue than resorting to violence which has resulted in the loss of lives and property.  Respect and tolerance of other religious views is a good weapon of promoting national unity, development and socio-cultural integration.  Leaders of Christianity and Islam should go back and re-examine their sacred texts in the light of the social and spiritual functions of religions.  This will bring about peaceful co-existence among adherents of different religions and also promote brotherliness and

mutual cooperation which will aid national development.  Leaders of religions in Nigeria are to re-orientate their followers on the social function of religion and how they are expected to contribute to national development. Religious leaders are to see the need to work together as one in order to build a virile and strong nation.

On the part of the church, the leadership should wake up to their God- appointed task of teaching and guiding the people in the will of God, while every believer must be awakened to the reality that God has appointed each one as a Priest to intercede for, and teach the will of God, by words and deeds, in the community in which they live.  The church must ensure that proper theological and religious instruction is given to all leaders who, in turn, should be empowered to educate the people.