CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS: THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

Matthew Hassan KUKAH, Bishop of Sokoto Diocese, Nigeria

Introduction:

The institution of the Secretariat for Non-Christians on May 17th 1964 marked a major turning point in the history of the Church’s view of its missionary life. The further publication of Nostra Aetate on October 28th, 1965 blazed the trail for the commitment of the Catholic Church to dialogue. As fallout of the Second Vatican Council, it is important to examine the impact of the Council on Christian Muslim relations.

If we are to be guided by the empirical evidence, it will be right to say that after almost fifty years, not much progress has been made in the way of dialogue. What is more, it also seems that the conversation has been unidirectional, that is, that it is the Catholic Church which has been responsible for almost all the initiatives towards with Islam.

This short paper, assessing the impact of dialogue between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria will focus first of all in briefly tracing the origins of this dialogue. Secondly, I will examine the content of the dialogue forums in Nigeria that is the key issues around which dialogue has been formulated in Nigeria. Thirdly, I will examine the agents of dialogue by looking at the institutional infrastructure for dialogue in our country. Finally, I will look at the challenges dialogue in a multi ethnic and multiparty environment as we have in Nigeria.

Origins of Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Nigeria:

The history of the relation between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria is closely tied to the history of the Nigerian state. The tensions generated by the colonial state laid the foundations for most of the tensions that still persist today. Before the emergence of the colonial state, the relations between the peoples of what would later become Northern Nigeria were marked by the conflict, war and violence that were the hallmark of the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate¹.

The British colonial state was built on a mutual suspicion between the colonial state and the Muslim community because of the violence that attended the process of the establishment of the state. The colonial state, for economic and political reasons soon made common cause with the conquered Fulani ruling class. To consolidate this relations and to further exploit its economic benefits, the colonialists propped up the existing feudal system that they had overthrown by a power sharing mechanism that entrenched their powers by designing an architecture of power that subordinated the non-Muslim communities across the Middle belt to the structure of feudal power that would later be known as the Emirate system. Large swathes of lands and communities who had successfully repelled the Fulani ruling classes in wars were now parcelled out and brought under the rule of Emirs. An understanding of the history of this injustice is fundamental to appreciating the reaction of say, the peoples of the Plateau to the situation in Plateau state today. The decision by the colonial state to further create the Sabon Gari (strangers’

quarters) system of exclusion and separation in pursuit of a policy known as *non-interference* further deepened and widened the chasm of fear and suspicion between Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria\(^2\).

In 1964, the Muslims set up the Jama’atu Nasril Islam (Society for the Victory of Islam, JNI) as an association to defend and protect the interests of Muslims. It would later expand to include Muslims outside northern Nigeria and transform itself into the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA).

Thus, even before Nigerian independence, and after, the political struggles of the peoples of the Middle Belt were tied to unwinding these foundations of injustice: this explains the struggle for a Middle Belt Region and also accounts for why the first political association to be formed in the region was known as the Non-Muslim League\(^3\). The Northern ruling class had shown that it was not willing to create any distinction between the boundaries of Muslim culture and politics in Nigeria. The non-Muslims, feeling left out and treated very clearly as outsiders, decided to seek common cause by also defining their own identity. While the political class struggled within politics, seeking a new political space, the Christians on the other hand, sensing and feeling discriminated against on the basis of their religion, decided to also seek a platform for defining their identity and asserting their rights and freedoms.

Thus, within the Christian community, this struggle for freedom found expression in the setting up of the Northern Christian Association. Its objectives were the protection and preservation of the rights of Christians in the North. It is important to note of course that this was in keeping with the regional nature of the politics of the time. The details of this association, the subsequent politics at the national level are outside the scope of this short presentation but it will be helpful to look at how these relationships have shaped up at a national level. To do this, I will highlight some key areas where these contestations have taken place.

### 1: Religion and the Politics of Power sharing:

The greatest source of tension in Nigeria has been the lack of an adequate power sharing mechanism to institutionalize and guarantee the pursuit of a good society based on justice, equity and fairness. Whereas other parts of Nigeria have tended to concentrate on democracy and the building of a secular state, the Muslims in Nigeria have focused more on some form of a theocracy and a variant of feudalism.

Politics in Nigeria has been dominated by region, religion and ethnicity. Whereas others navigate around the themes of ethnicity or region, the Muslims continue to talk about one North which, intrinsically, is synonymous with Islam. The anxieties of the non-Muslim minorities still persist largely because, whereas they are geographically considered to be part of the North, they do not believe that they are getting a fair share in the power game because of their religious affiliation. And, clearly, those within the Middle Belt who have become Muslim, as it is the case in parts of Benue, Adamawa, Plateau and others, have

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\(^3\) Matthew Kukah: *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*. 
seen a noticeable change in their bureaucratic, professional, economic or political lives. This remains an area of tension.

At the national level, the perceived monopoly and domination of the levers of power by the Muslim North has remained a matter of concern for others in the country. For example, Nigeria has had a total of 13 heads of State. Out of this total only 5 have been Christians. Under the military, General Gowon was the only non-Muslim who became the Head of State. Some of these concerns have filtered into the discussions surrounding the Jonathan Presidency the rise of the Boko Haram insurgency which has been subjected to various interpretations. Clearly, these anxieties account for a substantial percentage of the crisis of confidence between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria.

2: Religion and State Policy: The Sharia Law:

The issues of the role and place of Islamic law since the conquest and displacement of the Sokoto caliphate and the subsequent emergence of the colonial state have been a source of concern to all sides in the Nigerian project. All Constitutional debates about the future of the country have always been marred by the debate over the status and place of Islamic Law in the statutes.

While Muslims have presented the application of Sharia law as a condition sine qua non for a stable polity and a guarantee of justice, non-Muslims have come to see it as a grand design to acquire, control and monopolize power by the Muslim elites. Their conduct before, during and after these debates have shown very clearly that in the main, the call for the application of Sharia law has always been at best, a gimmick for political mobilization. For the politicians on both sides, this issue has come to be seen as a platform for perceived compromise among the elites but also as a viable strategy for mobilization.

Two examples will suffice. In 1978, at the height of the Sharia debate in the National Assembly, all the Muslim delegates walked out of the Assembly. They finally came back, negotiated some favorable terms and the matter was resolved. Interestingly, all but two of the members of the Committee that resolved the crisis ended up as members of the National Party of Nigeria, NPN. A key member, Alhaji Aliyu Shagari who also walked out was later to become the President of Nigeria the following year. It is also instructive that after his election, there was not a mention of the word Sharia right through until he was overthrown by the military on December 31st, 1983.

A second example is what happened over twenty years later when the State of Zamfara declared Sharia and was later on followed by the other States in the North. Despite all the hullabaloo over the decision, not much came out of it. It turned out that it had been merely a strategy by a man who had limited resources but huge political ambition to climb to power. The sum total of all this is that in reality, the Northern Muslim elite have no serious commitment to living under Sharia law in the way and manner that non-Muslims understand or misunderstand. Indeed, it is the prejudices and stereotypes of non-Muslims which have continued to fuel so much passion and frenzy over this debate. In the end, it all comes down to the wise words of an Islamic scholar who has noted:
You do not require the law of Shariah to make you behave honestly. You do not require the law of Shariah to be imposed to make you speak the truth and to appear as witness in court or, wherever you appear as witness honestly and truthfully. A society where robbery has become the order of the day, where there is disorder, chaos, usurpation of others' rights, where the Courts seldom witness a person who is truthful, where filthy language is a common place mode of expression, where there is no decency left in human behaviour, what would you expect Shariah to do there? How the law of Shariah would genuinely be imposed in such a country, this is the question⁴.

Sadly, things that are taken for granted and look normal and harmless regarding religion are not so in Nigeria. The reason is that religion has been conscripted into the politics of the country, no thanks to the legacy of the dead, but not buried, Hausa Fulani caliphate. So where do we go from here and how does our nation intend to confront these challenges so that religion can really and truly be freed from the stranglehold of modern day politicians who are prepared to make religion political and make politics religious. To try to answer these questions, let me review the state of affairs since the return of the country to democratic rule in 1999.

**Breaking New Grounds for Dialogue: From Belligerence to Accommodation:**

Perhaps, the first sign that the face of religion would change in the political life of Nigeria, especially among the Christian community, was at the inauguration of the Obasanjo Presidency after he had openly declared himself born again in the course of his sojourn in prison. This came to a head with the Thanksgiving Prayer Service which was organized by the leadership of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) a day after his inauguration⁵. This is not the place to review the legacy of the Obasanjo administration, but for the purpose of our review, we can note the following:

- The successful completion of construction work on the Ecumenical Centre after it had been abandoned for over twenty years.
- The appointment of a Presidential Chaplain for the Villa
- The construction of a Presidential Chapel in the same Villa.
- He supported the setting up the Nigeria Inter-religious Council, NIREC.
- He strengthened the National Christian Pilgrims Board by appointing a National Chairman.

In the case of Islam, the Muslim community enjoyed patronage from the President. Among other things for example:

- He organized the fund raising for the renovation of the National Mosque
- He openly participated in the Muslim Ramadan and broke his fast with Muslim leaders.

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⁴Hazrat Mizra Tahir Ahmad Khalifatul Masi, *Sharia: The Relationship between Religion and Politics in Islam*: (A speech delivered by Interreligious Consults, Suriname, June 3, 1991)rf44a4r44r4

⁵This event took place at the *International Conference Centre, ICC*, Abuja on May 30th, 1999 and was well attended by the leadership of CAN, senior clergymen and diplomats. The author was in attendance.
He developed very close ties with the then Sultan, the late Alhaji Maccido and took a title
He maintained the tempo of support for the Muslim Pilgrimage
He ensured transfer of power to the Muslim North.

The President’s final decision to sack his chaplain for involvement in politics was significant.6

What was significant of course was the fact that these gestures had brought religion closer to the Presidency in a way and manner that had never happened. However, as it was clear, there were tensions. First, the two Muslim and Christian bodies, making up the Nigeria Inter-religious Council (NIREC), could not agree on who would Chair the meetings and had to settle for a position of Co-Chairmen. For the period of the Obasanjo administration, not much happened in NIREC between the two faiths beyond the routine meetings. There were arguments as to the role and place of women: for, whereas the Christian body decided to bring in women, the Muslims did not take easily to this. The second area was the confusion as to the roles of the Muslim religious leaders who were, in reality, traditional rulers. To bridge this gap, the Christians decided to appoint two Christian traditional rulers to the Council.7

The activities of NIREC slightly changed with the tragic death of the then Sultan Macido in a plane crash. Alhaji Sa’ad Abubakar, his brother, a retired military officer and a gentleman with very good education and with a wide experience within and outside Nigeria succeeded him.

There was noticeable change in the last five years since the emergence of Alhaji Sa’ad Abubakar, the new Sultan of Sokoto and President of SCIA (Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs), and Archbishop John Onaiyekan, Archbishop of Abuja and President of the CAN (Christian Association of Nigeria), as Co-Chairmen of NIREC. Under their leadership, NIREC changed the face of Christian-Muslim relations significantly and came into national and international memory. Under the leadership of both men, ordinary Nigerians began to feel somewhat relaxed and positive about the prospects of religion being a force for good and not associated with violence. Both men have appeared publicly in such national initiatives as Health campaigns (Malaria, HIV Aids, Polio etc), they have traveled together for international Conferences, have signed Statements together in moments of national crisis and so on. Both Federal and State Governments began to feel more confident in terms of how they can relate with both faiths.

On April 20th 2010, CAN took a very prophetic step. It organized one-day seminar in Abuja under the theme: My Muslim Neighbor. Both the Sultan and Archbishop Onaiyekan presented insightful papers which spoke closely to the issues of collaboration and

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6 The Chaplain, Professor Obaje stated that he had been anointed by God to become the Governor of his home state, Kogi. His attempts of course fell flat and he ended up falling between the stools of two kingdoms.
7 The significance of this point has probably never been fully appreciated. For, whereas the CAN concept of Leadership meant Priests and Bishops, for the Muslims, Traditional rulers have always presented themselves as the religious leaders while in reality, they are not!
cooperation in a manner that was unprecedented. Both men in separate statements focused on issues of religious freedom, love, tolerance, evangelism, good governance etc. About a month later, the SCIA, at one of its annual meetings in Kaduna, took an unprecedented step and decided to devote a session to addressing the issues raised by the CAN initiative. For the first time in their history, they also extended invitations to the leadership of CAN along with other religious leaders to participate at a special session of their historic meeting. At the session, Archbishop Josiah Idowu-Fearon, Anglican Bishop of Kaduna, presented an excellent paper, *Islam in the Eyes of a Non Muslim.* After the presentation, three other Christian leaders including this author were formally requested by the Sultan to speak for between 5 and 10 minutes. This event was spectacular and epoch making. It has offered a major platform of hope for the future of Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria.

It is of note, that in its over 40 years of existence, the Kaduna meeting was the first of the SCIA that was hosted by a Governor who is a Christian. This was sequel to the new twist in the political developments of the country after the death of President Yar’adua. Secondly, it was also the first time that non-Muslims were invited to the meeting of SCIA. A combination of these factors is indicative of the fact that Nigeria is on the verge of a new phase in securing a new place for Religion in national life on the one hand, and hopefully reducing the tensions that had come to characterize Christian-Muslim relations in the country. It depends on whether the leadership of both faiths carries through with the same trust and enthusiasm that has been displayed by Abubakar and Onaiyekan.

Unfortunately, the CAN elections of 2010 turned the tables. First of all, CAN had broken faith with its unwritten law that Vice Presidents of CAN will always naturally succeed their President at the end of their tenure. This was how things had been from the beginning of CAN. But in 2003, Rev. Peter Akinola, the Primate of the Anglican Church decided to contest the elections even though he was not the Vice President. Amidst tensions, controversies and allegations of bribery and blackmail, he won the elections against Archbishop John Onaiyekan, the Catholic Archbishop of Abuja and the sitting Vice President.

After his tenure, Rev. Akinola could not win a second term as the leadership of CAN then elected Archbishop Onaiyekan. He too held the position for one term before Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, again defeated him. Sadly, the virus of corruption had already entered the body of Christ as regionalism and ethnicity seemed to now play a role in turning bribery into a major part of CAN elections. The 2010 elections were even worse, again marked by some degree of regionalism.

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9 Mr. Patrick Yakowa had been sworn in as the Governor of Kaduna State after the sitting Governor Architect Namadi Sambo had been nominated Vice President by the new President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan.
10 It is important to note that Archbishop Akinola and Obasanjo are both Yorubas from the same town of Abeokuta, Ogun State.
11 Pastor Oritsejafor’s elections were quite messy and the allegations of bribery were rampant and public knowledge. As with Obasanjo’s Presidential ambitions, Dr Goodluck Jonathan comes from the neighboring
The Presidency of Pastor Ayo has been controversial because of the adversarial manner he has handled relations with Muslims. He has tended to see politics in everything and has pitched the body of Christ against the Muslim power blocks. The Sultan has been most matured and balanced in the way and manner that he has handled dialogue even in these very difficult situations. What then is the future of Christian Muslim relations in Nigeria? I will conclude by making just three key points.

Conclusion: the Future

First, there is an urgent need for the leadership of both Muslims and Christians to find the best way of freeing religion from the grip of Nigeria’s murky politics. The notion that any of these groups can become the praying wing of the party in power is gaining ground. Christians must quickly return to the fine principles of Ecumenism which were the founding ideals of the Organization. It seems that Christians now see CAN at the State and Federal levels as being at the service of those in power. Thus, a culture of Chaplaincies, Pilgrim Boards, and Prayer Warriors has emerged. The difficulties here lie in the fact that in all cases, the contest for positions of Chaplains, Chairmen of Pilgrims’ Welfare Boards is taking its toll on the Christian community especially as the body of Christ is presenting itself as being made up of contending and competing political associations. The motto of CAN is, That they may be One. Sadly, today, the motto looks like, That we may be one with the Political authorities!

Secondly, the impression has gained ground over time that both Jama’atu Nasril Islam (Society for the Victory of Islam, JNI) and Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) were set up to fight each other. The dubious notion that both sides see these associations as platforms for defending our members and our faith is dangerous and it is a program for tension and even violence. It is one of the reasons why the relationship between Christians and Muslims has been so ineffective and the integrity of the bodies open to question. These postures have made the leadership rather vulnerable: posturing and defending my people become an excuse for wanting a piece of the pie12.

Thirdly, there is need for us to appreciate the opportunities for dialogue opened up for Nigerians under a democratic setting. I am convinced that although our democracy is not perfect and we are far from the goal posts of credibility, we still have the best opportunity for building a new and viable nation.

However, it is important that religious leaders really understand the nexus between religion and politics. Now, with the return of democracy, our role is to be vigilant but to focus more on the quality of the democratic outcome given that what we fought for is now here. The temptation for compromise is there when members of our faith, region or ethnic groups take power. The real role of the prophetic leader requires offering directions for the attainment of the Common good of all. And here, religious leaders should no longer

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12 For example, a leader of one of the CAN branches told me that he had to mobilize people against Archbishop Onaiyekan’s Presidency because the Archbishop was too friendly with government and was not getting things(read money!) for Christians.
present themselves as defenders of their people, but defenders of the people, God’s children as opposed to the adherents of our faith.

There is need for the Catholic Church to reclaim its authority as a founding father of CAN, so as to rescue the Association from sliding further deeply into the morass of politics due to greed and the manipulation of the leadership. Clearly, the last ten years have witnessed some serious challenges for CAN to the point that many in the Catholic Church have continued to wonder whether it is useful for the Catholic Church to remain in the body. The Catholic Church has been at the forefront of creating these kinds of platforms especially in areas of conflict such as the Philippines, Ghana and South Africa13.

Our country is ours to build. The Catholic Church must revisit its teachings in such areas as the Common Good as a byproduct of the Social Teachings of the Church as a means of encouraging our politicians to help rebuild our broken society. It is important that both faiths reclaim the moral ground which has become infested with so much corruption. This collaboration is important both for religion and the nation itself.

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