

Promoting Interfaith Peaceful Coexistence among the People in Ekiti State

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Abstract: *In recent times, Nigeria has been experiencing quite a number of turbulences among the various religions in the country. As a matter of fact, religious crisis is not new in the world. It is one of the most prominent among all conflicts that have faced mankind. History has it on record how religious conflicts had caused problems in the past of which an example was the crusade. This crisis in Nigeria has not only caused disruption to the economy, politics and social activities of the country internally, but has also cost the country its good image at the international level. The rate of religious crisis in Nigeria was what earned Nigeria the most terrorized country in the world after Afghanistan in 2019. Nonetheless, it is necessary to note that the rate at which these religious problems have been surfacing in the country also differs. In essence, certain locations in the country face religious problems more than others. Ekiti state among every other state in Nigeria only interacted on few religious disparities since its creation in 1996. In Ekiti state, there have not been any open religious clashes between Christians and Muslims unlike some other states in the country. This is as a result of the peaceful coexistence of the disciples of the different faiths in Ekiti. The leaders were urged to admonish their followers on the best way to promote understanding, harmony and cooperation among religions. The study relied heavily on numerous primary and secondary source materials including books, journal articles and other scholarly publications relevant to the study. It also benefited from the wealth of experience and insight of foremost traditional ruler, some clergymen from various churches, Islamic Scholars; academics, youths as well as members of the public..*

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I. Introduction

From time immemorial, people have professed the faiths of the world religions. All religions lead their followers to the honor of the Creator of all beings, it is sad today to see disparities, violence and conflicts in the world, as well as attacks on the beautiful works of the

Creator by the adherents of the different religions. Aptly, no one disputes the fact that all religions preach peace globally. In the world, there is tremendous support for religions. So, if nations have continued to experience violence and even genocide as in the cases of Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia and currently Sudan; then there are pertinent questions to be asked: Is religion a source of conflict? Is it a point of mobilization? Has religion been used by fanatics and political bigots to promote conflict? Can religion be used violently to achieve political and social goals? Currently there are different negative news about organized armed violence associated with the adherents of the world's religions in different parts of the world, in Senegal and Nigeria in particular. Incidentally, however, in Ekiti state, Muslims and Christians have co-existed peacefully for decades. Based on this, one appreciates the mutual co-existence between Muslims and Christians in which has promoted relative peace in the State.

II. Research Methods

2.1 Interfaith

as Muslim and Christian or Jew for example. It can be referred to as an interreligious organization or interfaith organization that encourages dialogue and cooperation between the world's different religions. Rev. Ronald A. once stated that when we include Merriam - Webster dictionary (2023) described interfaith as involving persons of different religious faiths. Interfaith also means interaction between different faiths' groups such individuals who have distinct characteristics from ourselves at the table, when we originate from an environment of non-fear, non-judgment, and an openness to speak with all, we, as a community, benefit. We all receive richness, which makes us stronger.

2.2 Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith discourse is defined as cooperative, constructive, and good engagement between persons of various religious backgrounds and/or spiritual or humanistic ideas, on both an individual and institutional level. The term "interpath dialogue" has been proposed by some proponents of interfaith dialogues in order to avoid implicitly excluding those who are agnostics, humanists, and others who do not practice any religion but hold ethical or philosophical beliefs. It is also more accurate in referring to many world religions, which do not place a similar value on "faith" as do some Western religions. Some interfaith dialogues have more recently been given the name "interbelief dialogue." Similar to this, pluralistic rationalist organisations have organised what are known as transbelief dialogues—public reasoning discussions that aim to transcend all worldviews, including religious, cultural, and political ones

2.3 Peace

For some people, peace is the ultimate value and has always been one of humanity's top priorities. The most detrimental peace is preferable to the most honourable war. Peace, according to Deji Osho, is the exact opposite of violence. Violence is a symbol of hopelessness and devastation because it permeates conflicts, unrest, crises, uprisings, assaults, etc. On the other hand, peace is the capacity to virtualize violence rather than its absence. Also, Peace is of greater significance than all justice. One would prefer the most terrible peace to the justest war that was ever waged. it is important to state that a good conflict or a horrible peace have never existed. The most common (Western) interpretation is that peace is the absence of discord, violence, or war, which is recorded in the New Testament and may have been the initial meaning of the Greek word for peace. R. J. Rummel opined that the pacifist has adopted this concept, as they believe that all violence is evil. He added that this notion is commonly acknowledged among irenologists and international relations students which forms the primary dictionary explanation

However, peace can also be defined as concord, harmony, and tranquility. It is regarded as peace of mind or calmness, particularly in the East. It is characterised as a state of law or democratic governance, a state of fairness or morality, or a balance of powers.

These interpretations of peace operate on several levels. It is possible for peace to be the opposite of or in opposition to hostile disagreement, violence, or war. It could be referring to relationships with other people or to an inner being (of mind or nation). Alternatively, its definition could be broad, including every aspect of society (as in a global peace), or limited, referring to certain relationships in a specific circumstance (like a peace treaty). It is possible for peace to be continuous or dichotomous, passive or active, actual or vague, normative or descriptive, either advantageous or adverse.

The issue is, of course, that peace takes its meaning and features from a theory or framework. Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists will all perceive peace in distinct ways, as will peace activists and internationalists. Socialist, fascist, and libertarian theorists of international relations, as well as power or idealism theorists, have distinct perspectives. Peace, like justice, freedom, equality, power, conflict, class, and any other idea, has a wide range of interpretations.

2.4 Peaceful coexistence

This is a concept of societal friendship and harmony. It is the absence of hostility and violence. In a social sense, *peace* is commonly used to mean a lack of conflict (such as war) and freedom from fear of violence between individuals or groups. Human society is entangled in a never-ending battle between several opposing forces: strong and weak, wealthy and poor, and pagans and believers. For all intents and purposes, living in peace represents or is about having the capacity to control and regulate the inevitable consequences of the competing interactions between the opposing forces that exist in any human community. In the context of human sociology and politics, coexistence refers to the interaction or cohabitation of two or more individuals in any setting, community, or institution. The concept of peaceful coexistence can be defined as the harmonious interaction or relationship between a group of individuals living together in a political, social, economic, and cultural setting, system, or society.

2.5 Conflict

Conflict is a particular relationship between states or rival factions within a state which implies subjective hostilities or tension manifested in subversive economic or military hostilities. Conflict can be described as a condition in which an identifiable group of human beings whether tribal, ethnic, linguistic, religious, socio-political, economic, cultural or otherwise is in conscious opposition to one or more other identifiable human groups because these groups are pursuing incompatible goals (Ibid). More importantly, conflict arises from the interaction of individuals who have partly incompatible ends, in which the ability of one actor to gain his ends depends to some important degrees on the choice or decisions that other parties will take. Conflict could be violent or uncontrollable dominant or recessive, resolvable or insolvable under various sets or circumstances (Omotosho, 2004).

A. A Mohammed argues that conflicts are inevitable wherever scarce resources are unequally distributed among competitors and inequity is reflected in cultural and political relationship between groups (a good example are Christians and Muslims in Ekiti). With regards to various issues in dealing with conflict, it is important to bear in mind not just cases of overt, physical violence, but also sometimes the subtly disguised forms of structural and cultural violence. In fact, Albert's position on conflict as cited Yagana B. M. and Fiama J. M was that there is nothing wrong with conflict, it is a critical mechanism by which goals and aspirations of individuals and groups are articulated; it is a channel for a definition of creative solutions to human problems and a means to the development of a collective identity. The repercussion of conflicts between person to person, group to group, community to community, state to state or nation to nation rarely ceases with the termination of overt hostilities. However, conflict can solve contention issues between nations or it can further exacerbate them. In any case, the consequences of conflicts are usually felt for some time after a war end. So, peaceful coexistence is "a living together in peace rather than in constant hostility".

2.6 Causes of conflict

The causes of conflict can be classified into two; Remote and immediate factors. Conflicts of different kinds have been experienced in Nigeria for decades now and there seems to be no sign of possible end to them in the national psyche. These conflicts have been tagged religious, ethnic, communal, political or social, etc. More often than not, religious appellation is identified with the conflicts. But there became a shift in the acceptance of the stark reality in the mutual relationship between conflicts and religion such that the conflicts are described with hyphenated categories such as ethno-religious, socio-religious or politico-religious conflicts. Religion has been the smokescreen for the hyphenated categories.

More so, peaceful co-existence as described by different scholars such as Hanna (2013), Burns (2005), Afidal (2006), Bar-Tal (2002), Adams (2000), Odejebi (2009), Peterson (2012) is essentially about understanding the nature of conflict at various levels from personal to global, studying the causes of war and human aggression, exploring a range of awareness of the rights and responsibilities of individuals and groups in the world.

Nigeria is a country with a population believed to be over 220 million as at 2023 with various ethnic groups. The National curricula for religious tolerance and religious education do not spring from nowhere. It evolved over time as a reflection of the needs, perceptions or feelings and historical development for the societies concerned. Religion often coincides with the ethnic groups, but not always. Basically, most Hausa-Fulanis in the north are Muslims, and most Ibos in the South-West are Christians. However, Yorubas in the South-West are both Muslims and Christians with Muslims slightly in the majority and there is a fair amount of inter-marriage. In the case of Ekiti State, there are both Muslims and Christians with Christians in the majority and there is fair amount of inter-marriage.

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 Community and Civic Engagement

Community engagement is an important mechanism to maintain peaceful coexistence in a multi religious society like Ekiti. It is comprised of the active involvement by diverse members of a given society in mutually beneficial interactions. Peaceful coexistence between interfaith is very important. It is, in fact, a vital necessity on which in large measure our future depends. Without peace and justice between these religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in Nigeria and Ekiti in particular. The future of Ekiti depends on peace between Muslims, Christians and others. These notions highlight the urgent need for Muslims and Christians to address the polarization that is growing between them. This has been fueled by persecution, injustices and by individuals and groups stirring up religious divisions to achieve political or material gains.

In Ekiti, it is all assumed that all is well simply because Christians and Muslims live together in the same house without any friction. In many cases, they share the same toilet, bathroom, kitchen and go to the same farmlands without problems. Sometimes they participate in each other's feasts and festivals through sharing of meals and drinks even though they rarely attend the places of worship different from their own during these festivals.

They are fans of the same football clubs and social organizations. The adherents of the two religions go to the same markets to 'shop'. Christians purchase goods produced by the Muslims without discrimination. In the same vein, the Muslims feed on the products on sale in the markets by Christians. Muslims also do not see the need not to buy goods from Christians. Muslims and Christians are happily married in Ekiti and in some of these marriages the parties retain their religions before marriage in their marital life.

Sulaiman Kolawole opined that there is no tolerance for one who forces another person to submit to his/ her will and convert to the religion unwillingly. Quran says:

“Let there be no compulsion in religion, for the truth stands out clearly from falsehood. So, whoever renounces false gods and believes in Allah has certainly grasped the firmest, unflinching hand-hold. And Allah is All-hearing, All-knowing.” (Qur’an 2:256).

This is the foundation for tolerance towards any and every religion and their people. There is no force and no compulsion for any individual to accept Islam. If he or she wants to accept Islam, it has to be necessarily out of their own free will and not at the point of sword. This is the essence of Islam. Islam is an open invitation to human kind and they have the full right either to accept it or to reject it.

There are salient issues that need urgent attentions which can escalate into a full-blown violence in Ekiti. They are all at latent stage now. It is good to propose the following as some of the steps that could help in promoting interfaith peaceful co-existence among people of Ekiti State.

It is expected that the Inter-religious bodies could help to sustain peaceful co-existence between their members. It is important that religious leaders in Ekiti must be united.

It is a known fact that the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) has been a body for the meeting for the adherents of the different religions. The main structure of Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) is formed by the initiative of the leadership of Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria during the tenure of former President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 as a forum for high-level dialogue between the leaders of Christians and Muslims in Nigeria while the different States of the Federation were commissioned to establish it in the 36 States of the federation.

It is within the provisions of the Nigeria government concerning religious matters; the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council was structured purposefully for peaceful co-existence among people of faiths in Nigeria. This is because the leaders of the different religions have recognized the body as an avenue for heart-to-heart discussion on how to live together.

It is very unfortunate that only the apex bodies, such as CAN and the NSCIA (NACOMYO as its foot soldier), attempt to speak for all Christians and Muslims. If interfaith groups are to transform Nigeria’s political landscape in a peaceful way today, this will be only if they act in concert and in common interest. Relations between the government and the interfaith are often unequal and depend on an individual group becoming involved in politics.

The existence of differential relationship between the interfaith/FBOs means that many religious organisations perceived themselves as victims of policies influenced or executed by others. The close encounters between different religious groups also have a potentially positive side, which involves dialogue, imitation and negotiation.

3.2 Factors Promoting peaceful coexistence

The peaceful coexistence in Ekiti is more than just living together. Bello in his words identified the following as the causes of the harmonious cohabitation of people of various religious beliefs in Ekiti State:

a. Family Relationships.

In Ekiti State, it is difficult to locate a family, either nuclear or extended, without a member who is a member of a religious organization,

b. Knowledge and Intellectualism.

Academic excellence is well acknowledged among the Ekiti people. Their relationships with one another have mirrored this, disregarding their shared religion;

c. Acceptance.

The Ekiti people must keep their internal peace and harmony since they view one another as members of a single family.

d. Tolerance.

It is impossible for two or more people living together to avoid offending another individual in some way. For their mutual benefit, Ekiti people accept and forgive one other with ease. However, Fatuki travelled to his home town in IRE – Ekiti to break Ramadan fast with the Muslim community in the town. Mr. Wale Fatuki, an Ire Ekiti native, joined the Muslim community at the Town Central Mosque in 2024 for Iftar, or the breaking of the fast, during the holy month of Ramadan, in a touching demonstration of religious tolerance. It was underlined by Mr. Fatuki that "religion should not be a source of division but rather a bond that unites us as a community."

e. National Inter-Religious Council (NIREC).

This organisation was established by the government to keep an eye on state-wide religious organisations' operations. NIREC seeks to ensure that issues that cannot be settled amicably between the parties concerned are handled impartially, without favouring any one association over another.

f. Cultural Diversity and Tolerance:

Ekiti State is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and diversity, as well as its tolerance for different cultures. Regardless of religious differences, the people of Ekiti State have a long history of peaceful coexistence. Peace between various religious communities is facilitated by this embrace of variety and tolerance for different cultures.

g. Interfaith Cooperation and Dialogue:

A number of religious organisations and leaders in Ekiti State actively participate in interfaith cooperation and dialogue initiatives. They get together to build a sense of solidarity and unity among various religious groups by promoting respect, understanding, and cooperation between them.

h. Government Policies and Support:

The promotion of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence is a critical function of the Ekiti State government. It puts into practice laws and initiatives that support religious liberty, safeguard the rights of religious minorities, and stop prejudice against people because of their religious convictions.

vii. Social Cohesion and Community Engagement:

Communities in Ekiti State, especially Ado-Ekiti, frequently host interfaith gatherings, meetings, and other activities that unite individuals of all religious backgrounds. These gatherings strengthen links, encourage social cohesiveness, and increase mutual trust between people and communities.

i. Common Goals and Shared Values:

Faleemu opined that at the point of entering into Madina, Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) was able to write about every tribe in Madina at the time of his arrival, even the two Jewish tribes, Al-Arsaq and Al-Khazraj, who had long since gone extinct. Furthermore, the Christians of Madina, a large number of whom did not convert to Islam, value the Islamic legal system and ask prophet Muhammad to designate a Muslim judge on their behalf. Abu Ubodah bin al-Jarrah, who possessed legitimate judicial authority, was dispatched by the prophet Muhammad with them. Despite differences in religion, individuals in Ekiti State frequently have similar objectives, such as advancing justice, peace, and prosperity for all. This common goal unites people from different religious backgrounds and fortifies ties within communities.

j. Initiatives for Education:

In Ekiti State, educational establishments are essential for fostering religious understanding and tolerance. By incorporating lessons on religious diversity, tolerance, and respect into their curricula, they help students develop an accepting and respectful community.

k. Interpersonal Connections:

Many people in Ekiti State have close friendships, neighbourhood connections, or professional interactions with people of diverse religious backgrounds. These interpersonal ties foster empathy, compassion, and benevolence while aiding in the healing of religious divisions.

We implore leaders at all levels in Ekiti to encourage more equitable relations between Muslims and Christians, and if they are able to overcome or reduce the prevailing rhetoric of marginalization, it may also be able to encourage not only an assessment of the appropriateness of fears nurtured with the state, but also the ability to take the fears of others seriously. The following points are our observations about NIREC in Ekiti State.

- It is very unfortunate that the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) is a mere political appointment;
- It has not been able to unite or reconcile Muslims and Christians in the areas of political appointments;
- It has not been able to resolve the issues of the use of Hijab in the government/Community schools that were jointly established by Muslims and Christians in Ekiti;
- It has not been able to resolve chieftaincy or Obaship crisis between Muslims and Christians in Ekiti.
- Marriage of inconvenience amongst members of NIREC: This is because as leaders of different religious traditions, they cannot preach reconciliation to others if they are not reconciled with one another. Again, one of the causes of tension between Christians and Muslims in Ekiti is that the adherents of both religions lack the basic knowledge of each other's faith. As a result of this there is the fear of the other religion.

IV. Conclusion

Education is the Constitutional Provisions on Freedom of Religion. It is an Important Aspect of Civic Education from Elementary School to Tertiary Institution. Respecting the rights of others on the choice of religion is very important for the peace of any society. The natural law confers some rights on every human being. One of these rights is the right to freedom to practice the religion of one's choice. The fundamental human rights of all Nigerians treated in details in Section 38 (1) of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended has been able to put this better. The Hijab is a God given right to Muslim women as it is enshrined in the Quran chapter 24 verse 29. Even among the Christians especially the Catholic Reverend Sisters. The use of head cover is common. It is worrisome how hijab issue solely become the problem in the community schools in Ekiti. Some Community School Principals have not taken seriously the issues of the use of Hijab in the government/Community schools that were jointly established by Muslims and Christians in Ekiti as directed by the Ekiti State Government.

4.1 What did Scriptures say

Living together in love, truthfulness, faithfulness, and contentment is the most basic concept of peaceful cohabitation found in the Bible. More so, the ability to love, tolerate, and abide by Allah's laws in our interactions with our neighbours and those in our immediate vicinity is what is meant by peaceful coexistence in the Islamic context.

On this note, there should be extra curriculum activities in the schools in Ekiti. For example, the pupils should be made to know what the Qur'an is to the Muslims and the Bible to the Christians. It needs to be pointed out that proper handlings of the revealed Books of these religions are very important facts in sustaining peace between the adherents of these

religions. The Muslims will not be happy seeing pages of the *Qur'an* used as wraps in the market. So also, the Christians will not be happy seeing that the Bible is not treated with respect.

In the same vein, the persons of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and Jesus Christ should be made clear to the pupils. Using of foul languages to describe the founders of Christianity and Islam has been a source of clashes. Politics could lead to conflicts among people of faiths in Ekiti.

Ekiti politicians should be cautioned not to drag the Muslims and Christians into hot peace in their political campaigns. This is because it is possible for a Muslim politician to sensitize the populace on the need to have a Muslim to occupy a particular office that has always been occupied by the Christians and vice versa. Politicians should avoid using religions as a tool to achieve their political goals.

4.2 Media Reportages on Religious groups

The Media is an important sector. In the Contemporary world, many Journalists have, in one way or the other, in the past been sources of unity and conflicts in the different parts of the world. Journalists should avoid reports that could cause tensions between the Muslims and Christians. Information on the activities of the adherents of both religions should be confirmed and discussed before it is aired on the Television and Radio stations concerning religious affairs in Ekiti and Nigeria at large.

4.3 Traditional Festivals

It has been noted earlier on that the activities of the interfaith or Interreligious groups have been limited to the Muslims and Christians in Ekiti. It is good to find ways of dialoguing with the adherents of African Traditional Religion through the traditional rulers who are close to them. This is because, in the past, it has been noted that in some towns, festivals of the adherents of African Traditional Religion affect the whole town especially in cases, where masquerades invaded mosques and churches in Ekiti. For example, on the 16th of September 2016, masqueraders stormed some churches including, St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Oke Ila, Ado Ekiti. They smashed the head of a worshipper with a broken bottle. The victim was left in a pool of his blood. The alleged excesses of the masqueraders made the Ewi, Oba Rufus Adeyemo Adejugbe, to announce a ban on the activities of the masqueraders in Ado Ekiti then. Hence, for a peaceful coexistence to be sustained in Ekiti, God's sanctuary must be allowed and respected.

Similarly, in Ikun Ekiti on June 1, 2017 during Ramadan, masqueraders attacked the worshippers with cudgels, stone and iron, thereby inflicting injuries on them. About five of the worshippers were said to have sustained varying degrees of injury. Meanwhile, the Muslim community in Ikun Ekiti in Moba Local Government Area of Ekiti State accused some leaders of the community of masterminding the attack on them. NACOMYO, under its leadership accused the leaders and the security agencies in area of complicity in the attack on the Muslims. It is good to propose that traditional festivals should be limited to a close area in Ekiti towns and villages. The idea of imposing a dusk to dawn curfew on a particular town is not the best. This is because there are Christians, Muslims and free thinkers in the different towns who may not want to be disturbed. Hence, these ceremonies should be done in such a way that there will be free movements of vehicles for travelers who may want to pass through such towns and who may not be aware of the events. Such events should be limited to the shrines while worshippers and tourists who are interested in the ceremonies could be part of the ceremonies without any disturbance.

V. Conclusion

There have not been open religious clashes between Christians and the Muslims in Ekiti unlike some other states in Nigeria, thus the effect of the peaceful coexistence of the adherents of the interfaith in Ekiti is easily visible. Ekiti State's interfaith communities coexist peacefully because of a number of social, political, cultural, and educational elements that support tolerance, communication, cooperation, and respect between various religious communities.

Nevertheless, there should be creation of more job opportunities for the youths in the both governmental and private sectors so that the unemployed youths would not become tools of religious violence in Ekiti state. This study depicts that NIREC has not been able to achieve absolute religious peace in Nigeria. However, interfaith trainings and Scriptural reasoning are hereby recommended as veritable tools for achieving religious peace in Ekiti and Nigeria at large. It is important to state that peaceful coexistence in Ekiti is more than just living together. Leaders at all levels in Ekiti are implored to encourage more equitable relations between Muslims and Christians, and if they are able to overcome or reduce the prevailing rhetoric of marginalization, it may also be able to encourage not only an assessment of the appropriateness of fears nurtured with the state, but also the ability to take the fears of others seriously.

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