

**ISLAM AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE IN NIGERIA:  
A HEURISTIC ANALYSIS**

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**Abstract**

Peaceful co-existence among diverse religious adherents remains a quintessential factor for a religiously pluralistic society like Nigeria. There is no disputing the fact that Nigeria has experienced several religious crises with obvious effects on peace. These crises are more pronounced among the Christians and Muslims. This paper is a heuristic analysis of Islam and peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. To a large extent Islam has been advancing the course of peaceful co-existence in Nigeria as enjoined by Qur'an and Hadith. It was submitted that the application of Islamic principles of peaceful co-existence will go a long way in preventing, transforming and resolving religious crises and other conflicts in the country.

## **Introduction**

Nigeria is a multi-religious nation dominated by Christianity and Islam. Historically, Islam was introduced into Nigeria from the North by the Arabs while Christianity was introduced by the Europeans through the South. The coming of Islam however was a watershed in the history of inter-personal relationship in Nigeria as it constituted the first kind of internationalization of the horizons of the thought of the people. Permissible and non-permissible foods, drinks, wears, and other daily and occasional requirements of the people began to be similar from that point in history; first among the adherents and later, through inadvertent influence among all. Additionally, Islam is reputed for introducing a measure system into the African continent through the *muddu* (equivalent to about 50 cl.) and *Sa'a* (equivalent to about 1 lit.) measurements which gained currency during the waves of Islamic resurgence which overwhelmed the continent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Udo, 1980).

Prior to the advent of Islam in Nigeria, relationship between various peoples were characterized by conflict. Historical documents bear eloquent testimony to the raids and counter-raids that permeated the region. Examples of

such raids could be seen in the history of the relationship between Dahomey and the people of the grassland area of Oyo and Egbado in Yorubaland in-which the former incessantly raided the latter. Similarly the Hausa city-states were reported to have repeatedly raided the areas around Kontagora and the rest of the middle belt. Although trade was largely speculated to have constituted a strong force for inter-tribal relations during the era under discuss, it is suspected that the role of trade as a channel for peaceful contact between people has been embellished. Historical accounts with those emphases seem to have discountenanced major indices that could vindicate the claim of the presence of a lucrative mutual exchange of goods and services in a flourishing trade as they portrayed.

### **Islamic Framework on Peaceful Co-existence**

Islam has a unique history of uniting between people in any community whence it tarries. The form of unity which Islam forges among its adherents transcends the boundaries of mere similarity between people's requirements, it goes extra mile of trying to weld relationship between its adherents into one single brotherhood which could be stronger than consanguinity. The case of Auz and Khazraj

where two avowed fiends became best of friends has been repeatedly mentioned by historians and Islamic scholars. On account of this extra-ordinarily high spirit of unity and brotherhood some individuals have defied death to save others.

The foundation for this unique sense of brotherhood was laid by the most primary of the sources of guidance of the Islamic faith. The glorious Qur'an is dotted by instructions on the expected structure of relationship between Muslim persons regardless of race, creed, social status and other similar considerations.

The Qur'an is very clear on one of its golden rules, i.e. non-compulsion in matters of religion. It is a well-known fact that one cannot truly impose one's religion on a people as this eventually leads to hypocrisy and insincerity in the hearts of those forced to accept and practice the teachings of the religion. Islam preaches peaceful co-existence as everybody is free to tread the path he chooses for himself as "there is no compulsion in religion." When it comes to the practical guidance on the issue of tolerance, it is well recorded in Islamic societies, beginning with the Madinah community under the guidance and leadership of Prophet

Muhammad, how Muslims interacted with followers of other religions peacefully, especially the one established by the famous 'Madina constitution'. However, if there is an action which disrupts the peaceful co-existence and breaches the peace of the community, then the rule of law will apply. The well-known exiles of the Jews of Banu Quraid'hah, Banu Qainuqa<sup>c</sup> and Banu al-Nadr from Madina are good instances of them bearing the consequences of breaking the law (Maishanu, 2007). It was also recorded in history that some of the Jews that stayed in Khaybar interacted freely with the Muslims till when they seriously bet Abdullah bn Umar and dislocated his hands and legs. At that time, they were sent out of it, for breaching the covenant between them and the Muslims (Maishanu, 2007).

Evidently, the universal Pax Islamica recognizes the legitimacy of every religious community to exist and grants it the right to order its life in accordance with its own religious precepts. According to Maishanu (2007), religious tolerance is mostly developed as a result of mutual respect. Man tolerates the one who respects him, even if he hates his religious beliefs and actions. The Madina constitution outlined common principles of tolerance, peaceful co-

existence and security concern for the religious communities in the city-state. Corroborating this, Durant (1975) states:

At the time of the Umayyad caliphate the people of the covenant, Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews and Sabians, all enjoyed degree of tolerance that we do not find even today in Christian countries. They were free to practice the rituals of their religion and their churches and temples were preserved. They enjoyed autonomy in that they were subject to the religious laws of the scholars and judges.

### **Islam and Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a multi-religious state comprising of African religion, Christianity and Islam. The north, dominated by the large Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups, is predominantly Muslim with significant numbers of Christians. Both Muslims and Christians are found in large numbers in the Middle Belt. In the southwest, where the large Yoruba ethnic group is the majority, there is no dominant religion. Most Yorubas practice either Christianity or Islam, while others continue to practice the traditional Yoruba religion, which includes a belief in a supreme deity and the worship of lesser deities that serve as the supreme deity's agents in aspects of daily life. In the east, where the large Igbo ethnic group is dominant, Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists are the

majority, although many Igbos continue to observe traditional rites and ceremonies in tandem with Christianity (U.S. Department of State, 2005).

Islam no doubt is a religion of peace and has been promoting peaceful co-existence among diverse religious groups. One of the central elements of Islam is to establish an ethical society where peace reigns supreme. The purpose of Islamic law-*Muqasidu-sh-Shariah* is peace. Islam thus abhors any act that threatens peace of any of the enumerated endowments. This informs the Qur'anic statement that: "... persecution is worse than death..." (Oloyede, 2006: 228). Corroborating the above, the Holy Qur'an states:

... whoever kills a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption and mischief in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind. Our messengers came unto them of old with clear proofs (of Allah's Sovereignty), but afterwards lo! Many of them became prodigals in the earth (Qur'an, 5: 32).

The phenomena of ethno-religious killings, ethnic militias, political assassinations, secret cult violence, party clashes etc violate the fundamental tenets of Islam and

undermine the internal security of Nigerian State. However, Islam promotes encourages peace of individuals and states. This has been the basis upon which Muslims in Nigeria have behaved in promoting peace since the attainment of independence in 1960. Nigerian Muslims have always contributed to national peace based on the various Quranic injunctions and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Muslims are promoting national peace through religious exhortation, prayer, fasting and public enlightenment programmes. The various Ulama and Imam through their sermons, preaching and exhortations have been dousing tension and which in turn promote peace.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In a brief form, this paper has brought to the limelight the connection between Islam and peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. The Nigeria state has a lot to learn from Islam to improve peace. The principles of Islam point to the fact that peace can be achieved through tolerance, cooperation, dialogue and justice. Islam, under normal circumstance should be a partner with the state in promoting security of lives and property. In order to secure the Nigeria nation from threats of insecurity, Nigerians, especially Muslims should

bear in mind that the rules of Allah should be applied in all spheres of their lives. This in turn will improve national security. Besides, there is the need for individual learned Muslims and organizations to always organize and participate in various enlightenment programmes to educate people on the stance of Islam on security of persons and states. The programmes should also serve as fora for correcting the erroneous notions of certain people about Islam.

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