# INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND RELIGIOUS PEACE BUILDING IN NIGERIA: READING ACTS 15:2-15

**Aboekwe, Mary Emilia**
*Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University*
*Igbariam, Anambra State, Nigeria*
emiliachy@gmail.com

**Abstract**

*The conflicts in Nigeria have triggered the worst humanitarian crisis since after the independence, and if not checked, will continue to rise. Population and values displacements are increasing and an entire generation of children has and is being exposed to war and violence, increasingly deprived of basic services, education and protection. Three major religions are being practiced in Nigeria; Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. These religious affiliations make it more difficult for the country to engage in meaningful interfaith dialogue because she is deeply affected by religious identities and meanings. Hence peace search based solely on secular values will probably not be sustainable. It is therefore the aim of this paper to recommend religious dialogue as expressed in the Acts 15: 2-15 which involves the different religious believers and recognize their religiousness. The council of Jerusalem thus demonstrated the willingness of the religious leaders to make compromise on certain issues in order to maintain peace and unity.*

**Keywords:** Interfaith, dialogue, religious peace building.

**Introduction**

The insecurity in Nigeria today is of great worrisome and concern to all stakeholders and the entire citizens. It has triggered the most humanitarian crisis since after the independence. Sectarian conflict is so high in Nigerian that of the three major tribes, existing situation seems to suggest that almost none appreciates the other. The country is deeply affected by religious identities and meanings. Economic analysts, legal experts, religious leaders and political scientists and even the ordinary citizens are alarmed by the devastating consequences of this unfortunate situation. Many are apprehensive that the unity or as the case may be, the unity of the nation called Nigeria is in jeopardy. All are in dire fear with no trust in their day to day dealings with others. Most people are compelled to doubt and to question almost everything as to its authenticity. Nothing appears ordinary these days. There is tension everywhere which pushes many to placing security measures in their various residential places consequently pushing them to be unusually and abnormally hypersensitive to any state of unrest and disorder.

The various regions in the country; the southern, eastern, western and northern regions are a volatile mix of insecurity, ethno-religious and political instability. Many tragedies and devastations had become noticeable and felt due to the domineering, overbearing manifestation of ethnic and religious genocide. Many have been killed, others maimed while

other people's property have been destroyed. The situation even saddens the heart when all these take place with impunity; no repercussion of judicial redress and moral approbation seems to been given to all these violence

In the light of all these ugly and threatening situations in the country, for which various formed committees and institutions have failed to fight, this paper therefore is posited to recommend the use of interfaith dialogue as in the case of Acts 15: 2-15 where Christians and Jews reach a certain compromise in some aspect of their belief to gain peace and tranquillity. Consequently, the situation in Nigeria at this moment needs this kind of interfaith dialogue if peace, unity and development must be gained.

## Conceptual Framework
### Interfaith

The term interfaith dialogue refers to cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions and faith, at both the individual and institutional levels. Increased awareness of religious plurality, the potential role of religion in conflict, and the growing place of religion in public life present urgent challenges that require greater understanding and cooperation among people of diverse faiths to increase acceptance of others and to better understand their identity. For Greenebaum (2014) such interfaith dialogue can take a wide variety of forms, ranging from joint appeals by high-level religious leaders, to attempts to develop mutual understanding and the recognition of shared values and interests, to grassroots efforts to encourage repentance and promote reconciliation.

### Dialogue

Etymologically, dialogue means a speech across, between, through two or more people. Dialogue comes from the Greek *dialogos*. *Dia* is a preposition that means "through," "between," "across," "by," and "of." *Dia* does not mean two, as in two separate entities; rather, *dia* suggests a "passing through" as in diagnosis "thoroughly" or "completely." Logos comes from *legein*, "to speak" Crapanzano (1990). Logos means "the word," or more specifically, the "meaning of the word," created by "passing through," as in the use of language as a symbolic tool and conversation as a medium. As Onians (1951) points out, logos may also mean thought as well as speech–thought that is conceived individually or collectively, and/or expressed materially. Consequently, dialogue is a sharing through language as a cultural symbolic tool and conversation as a medium for sharing. Accordingly, dialogue refers to the mutual exchange of experience, ideas and opinions between two or more parties; i.e., a conversation. Dialogue is two-way or multi-way communication. It presumes the opportunity to reply on several occasions in order to enhance a line of reasoning. The concept of dialogue contains a dimension of simultaneity and direct contact, either physical or via technical aids. In order to achieve genuine civic participation, there must be some form of dialogue between citizens and those in positions of power. In a dialogue, everyone taking part must be given the chance to study the other parties' suggestions and opinions, contemplate them and respond. According o Turner (1969 p. 140)

> Dialogue is a culturally and historically specific way of social discourse accomplished through the use of language and verbal transactions. It suggests community, mutuality, and authenticity–an egalitarian relationship. So understood, dialogue provides a meeting ground, *communitas*, and manifests itself in a variety of spontaneous and ritual modes of discourse in which nature and structure meet.

Listed below are some of the phrases used by people who have engaged in dialogue in many different schools, corporations, government, non-profit organisations, communities, families:

- a level playing field with respect for all
- a chance to get all our cards up on the table and play with a full deck
- space and pace that allows for all to hear and be heard
- recognition and strengthening of relationships
- an exploration of our individual and group assumptions to reveal our thinking and generate new possibilities
- building shared understanding of differing points of view
- ability to hold the tensions of complexity and paradox and see systemic patterns

## Religious Peace-building

According to Little, David, Appleby, and Scott (2004)

> Religious peace-building is a term used to describe the range of activities performed by religious actors and institutions for the purpose of resolving and transforming deadly conflict, with the goal of building social relations and political institutions characterized by an ethos of tolerance and nonviolence.

Philpott, Daniel, Powers and Gerhard (2010) contend that religious peace-building includes the beliefs, norms, and rituals that pertain to peace-building, as well as a range of actors for whom religion is a significant motivation for their peace-building.

## Religions in Nigeria
### Emergence of Islam in Nigeria

Islam infiltrated Nigeria through the Northern Part of her borders. Islam predates Christianity in Nigeria. Metuh (1985) asserts that Islam came to Northern Nigeria about five or six hundred years before Christianity. Enwerem (1995) points out that Islam arrive Nigeria sometime between 1000A.D and 1100 A.D., it first come in contact with the town Bornu in the North-eastern Nigeria before it overtook the entire Hausa States between 14th and 15th Centuries (Trimingham 1962). Ekeopara (1996) opines that initially, Islam was propagated only among City dwellers and was chiefly patronized by the upper class for economic, social and political reasons. It was not until the time of Uthman Dan Fodio's Jihad that Islam spread to every nook and cranny of Northern Nigeria and was forced upon the people. In his studies, Ekeopara (1996) observes that:

> From 1750 AD, Islam in Northern Nigeria entered into a new phase. It became militant and intolerant of the Traditional religious system. By this time, Muslims were no more satisfied with receiving tributes. They were now bent on wiping out all associations of pagan custom with Islam. The infidels or unbelievers were forcefully converted by the military might of the Jihadists and not through preaching (p. 12).

Historical evidence shows that upon capturing a place, the Jihadists immediately introduced Islamic system of Law and government in order to cement their stronghold in the region.

**Emergence of Christianity in Nigeria**

Christianity entered Nigeria in three phases. In the first phase, Christianity is reported to have made its appearance in Nigeria in the 15th Century. Historical facts abound that Benin and Warri in the Niger Delta region are the first cities to witness missionary presence in Nigeria. The earliest known Christian Mission that first showed up in Nigeria is the Portuguese Roman Catholic Mission which came to Benin in 1485 at the invitation of Oba Uzolua and later in 1514 by Oba Esigie, Kings of Benin (Agha 1999; Tasie 1978). Njoku (1980 p25) asserts that

> Roman Catholics were the first to send missionaries to Southern Nigeria. By 1487, the Portuguese, who had already opened up trading connection with Benin City two years earlier, sent out Portuguese Catholic Christian Missionaries to Benin City and Old Warri. These early missionaries laboured under difficult conditions. Despite the initial good reception, the mission to both Benin and Warri collapsed due partly to inadequacy of the numerical strength of the missionaries and partly to the cold feet which the Obas and their people developed later.

History shows that the initial attempt in planting Christianity in Benin failed because "The Kings of Benin City remained strongly attached to their indigenous religion" (Baur 2009, p.75).

The second attempt in the 16th Century under Oba Esigie succeeds to a certain extent as the Oba himself and most of his chiefs did submit themselves for baptism and actually professed and practised Christian religion fairly in their own terms. Ultimately Christian churches were built but unfortunately the Benin Mission appears to have remained confined to the royal court. Much later, it is reported that Some Spanish Capuchins, some Augustinian monks and some missionaries from the Sacred Congregation de propaganda Fidei had their turn in the Benin and Warri Mission field with both positive and negative responses each time. How far this Benin mission expanded is not known. But it is most likely that the crucifixes, mutilated statues of saints and several Catholic emblems that were discovered within the Benin royal court several years later reveal that some measure of success was recorded in the Benin missionary work. Njoku (1980) affirms that,

> When the British came to Warri in 1897 they said that they saw people with rosary beads like that of the Roman Catholics. The Chief, the Olu of the Jekris (Itshekris) had a silver crown with cross in front which was sent to his forefather by the king of Portugal. He wears a garment resembling a Dalmatic and wears a chaplet with a crucifix attached (rosary beads) round his neck (p26).

In the second phase, Christianity is reported to have penetrated Nigeria through Western Nigeria. Lagos as at 1841 had developed into a notorious slave market with its King Kosoko as the Principal promoter of the trade (Dike 1957). Evidence indicates that it was after his deportation by British administration that real missionary enterprise began in Yoruba land. Among the earliest missions that evangelized Yoruba land are the Wesleyan Methodist Mission and the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) ably represented by the Reverend Thomas Birch Freeman and Catechist Henry Townsend respectively in 1842. Samuel Ajayi Crowther became the first Yoruba man to get converted at Sierra Leone as a freed slave. He became instrumental in reaching his own people with the gospel (Oduyoye 1969).

Calabar Mission followed in 1846 with the Scottish Presbyterian Mission taking the lead in evangelizing the Efik people. Essien Ukpabio, a native of Greek town emerged the first convert and was baptised by the Reverend Hope Waddle, the first pioneer missionary to

Calabar after being to Ethiopia. Other missionaries like Mary Slessor joined later in the missionary work in Calabar. King of Greek town, King Eyo Honesty was one of the main actors that helped missionaries to plant Christianity in Calabar. From Calabar, the Presbyterian Church spread to the other parts of the former Eastern region (Ajayi 1965; Kalu 1978). According to Ajah (1994) "Christian Missions came to Eastern Nigerian mainly through two angles. The first angle was through Lagos area or from Western Nigeria, and the second angle was to the eastern end of the country through a sea port" (p.40).

In the third phase 1885, the researcher will intentionally choose the mission of the Irish Catholic missionaries in Onitsha, the Lower Niger Mission. This mission to Onitsha was providential in the sense that the primary destination of the missionaries was Lokoja in order to begin the Upper Niger Mission. The missionary team was led by Father Joseph Lutz, a French Alsacian priest who had served previously for over ten years in Sierra Leone, a man of apostolic dynamism and experience. His colleagues were Father Johan Horne, a newly professed priest and two Brothers: "Hermas and Jean – Gotto, formerly of the station at the St. Coeur de Marie" (Metuh and Ejizu, 1985:12).

### Encounter between A.T.R., Islam, and Christianity in Nigeria

Undoubtedly, some values, institutions and world views that are at variance with those of the indigenous religion are introduced into Nigeria through Islam and Christianity. These obviously, appear to create some serious conflicts with the already existing values in Nigeria. According to Danfulani (2001), "Islam and Christianity constituted a threat and a disruptive force to African tradition and custom" (p. 28).

It is observed that at the beginning, the propagators of both Christianity and Islam never saw anything good in African Culture and her religion. Those values and customs Nigerians guarded zealously from birth were all despised by the propagators of the new religion. They hated all their traditional religious practices. The Christian Missionaries, particularly condemned polygamy and other cultural custom of the Africans as akin to idolatry. They frowned at human sacrifice, the killing of twins, blood bath and other cruel aspects of African Culture (Iwe, 1979). This posture of the missionaries has some implications on the life of the African Christians who eventually became dissatisfied with the Europeanised Christian traditions, culminating in the founding of the historic African Independent Churches (AIC).

As it happened at the initial stage, Islam and Christianity really suppressed ATR, almost to the point of strangulation. But as time went on, there were some kind of give and take from each of the religions in Nigeria. For instance, in the predominantly Muslim area in Northern Nigeria, the Muslims' ways of dressing have influenced the general mode of dressing in a way which seems to be the general culture of the Northerners. Islam has equally been infected with the traditional belief and practice of magic and medicine. Christianity too has borrowed heavily from some of the traditions of the Africans.

### Interfaith Dialogue

The nation Nigeria is deeply affected by religious identities and meanings. A peace process based solely on secular values will probably not be sustainable. According to the writings of several academics, the reconciliation must involve the religious believers and recognize the religiousness. An empirical research was published in 2007 called Unity in Diversity – Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East, where interfaith dialogue was studied in Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan. The study demonstrates the desire for interfaith dialogue in

polarized society, and confirms that religion can be a source of peace instead of war and violence. Resulting from this study of Abu-Nimer, Khoury and Welty (2007), interfaith dialogue contributes toward conflict resolution because its concept of reconciliation, involves processes of confession, repentance, mercy, and forgiveness. These processes are drawing on religious resources as the basis for dialogue. Millions of residents in the Nigeria are motivated largely by religion. Bringing religion into the dialogue allows the participants to engage in the process, with their religious identity as their primary point of reference.

In times of conflict, religious believers from different faiths often find that they have more in common with one another than they have with non-religious people from their own background. Interfaith dialogue requires individuals to meet as equals in a process of giving and receiving information. Abu-Nimer, Khoury, Welty (2007 p41) suggest the following ground rules for making an interfaith dialogue as effective as possible. All participants should;

- be willing to share their views in the context of their own life story, and not presume to speak for the entire religious tradition
- recognize the complexities and varieties of the other faiths
- stand firmly in their own faith while remaining self-critical and open to new perspectives
- undertake a realistic view of their faith, and not focus on "defence" against others
- be considered to have equal status and importance
- commit to some basic ground rules for the meeting

## Contextualizing ACTS 15:2-15 to Contemporary Nigerian Society

Early Christianity in Jerusalem witnessed a very controversial case that nearly rocked the unity of the church. It was dialogue that saved the situation. This section therefore discusses the relevance of the method adopted for resolving this crisis in the early church to Nigeria. There are several methods and strategies there are to solving a crisis. The method adopted in Jerusalem Council was identification of the problem, having understood the nature of the problem; it was extensively and freely discussed. This strategy involved dialogue, debate, tolerance, resolution, and recommendation. The resolution was given immediate implementation.

Different steps were observed taking by the council in resolving the conflict. Acts 15: 1-15:

- First, there was identification of the nature of conflict and the cause, and then a meeting was summoned for debate and dialogue.
- The issues involved were extensively discussed with open mind by listening to different opinions and suggestions.
- There was good understanding among the members of the Council.
- A practical positive step was taken to implement the resolution and recommendation arrived at by sending emissary with a letter for immediate implementation. It is to be noted that the recommendation was not put in a cooler and there was no begging the issue. A letter was sent and two people; Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leading men among the brethren, as emissary to explain in detail the decision of the Council.

It is to be noted here that good understanding and workable agreement was reached that satisfied both parties in the conflict. This satisfaction confirms the statement or belief that conflicts are better settled or solved through dialogue and not in the battle field. Onaiyekon (2011 p.10) asserts that "Dialogue calls for understanding among the conflicting parties." If two opposite parties understand each other, they would be able to settle their differences through genuine dialogue. This was the suggestion of Paul to numerous conflicts of interest in the Church in Corinth. It was the argument of Peter and James at the Jerusalem Council for a conflict that was capable of destabilizing the early Christian Church. (Acts 5: 6-21).

## Conclusion and Recommendation

There is a peace-making force in religion that can help us to mutual understanding, joint efforts for peaceful coexistence and genuine humanity. The Gospel calls Christians, and the Qur´an calls Muslims, to be witnesses for God. Both the Bible and the Qur´an speak of a God who is merciful, just, sovereign and forgiving. If mission, Christian or Islamic, is in God´s name, it must be carried out in God´s way. This means dialogue, fairness, respect and the opportunity to respond freely. Moucarry (2001) asserts that God´s attributes in Islam and Christianity provide a basic understanding of the peace making force in religion. Moucarry (2004) explains that the first attribute to understand is what prompts God to be merciful. In Islam it is his goodness and his generosity, while Christians believe it is motivated by God´s sharing in human suffering and his compassion. Christianity perceives the need to be reconciled with God and to be saved by him. It is also important to understand the role of love in each religion. Moucarry (2004) emphasis that Love in Islam is conditional, while Christians understand God´s love in an overwhelming and personal way.

## References

Abu-Nimer, Mohammed, Khoury, Amal I, Welty, Emily, (2007). Unity in Diversity –Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East. Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press.

Agha, A. (1999). Early European Missionary to West Africa: An Introduction to West African Church History, Enugu: SNAPs NIG. Ltd.

Ajayi, J. F.A. (1965). Christian Missions in Nigeria, London: Longmans

Ajah, P. O. (1994). Christianity in West Africa, Uburu: Truth and Life Publications Ltd

Baur, J. (2009). 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa, 2nd Edition Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa.

Crapanazno, V., (1990). On Dialogue. In T. Maranhão (Ed.), The Interpretation of Dialogue (pp. 269-291). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Danfulani, U. H. D. (2001). "Religious Conflict on the Jos Plateau: The Interplay between Christianity and Traditional Religion during the Early Missionary Period" in Swedish Missiological Themes, Vol.89, No.1, p.7-39

Dike, K. O. (1957). Origin of the Niger Mission 1841-1891. Retrieved May 12, 2020 from anglicanhistory.org/Africa/ng/dike origin.

Ekeopara, C.A. (1996). The Development of Islam after the Death of Mohammed. An Unpublished lecture Note, University of Calabar.

Metu, E.I, and Ejizu, C.I. (1985). Hundred Years of Catholicism in Eastern Nigeria 1885-1985. The Nnewi Story. Nimo: Asele Institute.

Enwerem, I.M. (1995). A Dangerous Awakening: The Politicization of Religion in Nigeria, Ibadan: IFRA.

Greenebaum, S. (2014). Practical Interfaith – How to Find Our Common Humanity as We Celebrate Diversity. Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing.

Iwe, N.S.S. (1979). Christianity, Culture and Colonialism, Port Harcourt: n.p

Kalu, O.U. (1978). "Protestant Christianity in Igboland" in Kalu, O.U. (ed.). A History of Christianity in West Africa: The Nigeria Story, Ibadan: Daystar Press

Kanu, I. A. (2017). *The culture of political corruption and the emergence of terrorism in Nigeria.* In Mahmoud Misaeli and Rico Sneller (Eds.). The Root Causes of Terrorism: A Religious Studies Perspective (pp. 280-291). United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Kanu, I. A. (2016). Corruption in Nigeria as a Socio-Cultural Context for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. *Harvard Journal of Management Sciences and Entrepreneurship.* Vol. 3. No. 5. pp. 187-196.

Kanu, I. A. (2011). Corruption in Africa and its Challenges for the Enterprise of Christian Theology. *International Journal of Research in Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol.4. pp. 492-500.

Kanu, I. A. (2017). *Igwebuike* as an Igbo-African Philosophy for Christian-Muslim Relations in Northern Nigeria. In Mahmoud Misaeli (Ed.). *Spirituality and Global Ethics* (pp. 300-310). United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Kanu, I. A. (2016). Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria as a Religio-Political *Locus Theologicus* for *Misericordia Vultus*. *Harvard Journal of Humanities and Social sciences.* Vol. 3. No. 4. pp. 117-128.

Little, David, Appleby, Scott, R, (2004). A moment of Opportunity. The Promise of Religious Peace building in an Era of Religious and Ethnic Conflict. US: State University of New York Press.

Metuh, I. E. (1985), "Muslim Resistance to Christian Missionary Penetration of Northern Nigeria 1857-1960: A Missiological Interpretation" in Metuh, I.E. (ed.). The Gods in   Retreat: Continuity and Change in African Religions, Enugu: Fourth Dimensions Publishers.

Moucarry, C. (2001), Faith to Faith – Christianity & Islam in dialogue. Nottingham, England:  Inter-Varsity Press.

Moucarry, C. (2004). The Search for Forgiveness – Pardon and punishment in Islam and Christianity. Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press.

Njoku, R. A. (1980). The Advent of the Catholic Church in Nigeria. Owerri: Assumpta Press.

Oduyoye, M. (1969). The Planting of Christianity in Yoruba land 1842-1880. Ibadan: Daystar Press.

Onaiyekan, J. (2011). Dividend of Religion in Nigeria. Ilorin: University of Ilorin.

Onians, R.B. (1951). The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time Fate. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Philpott, Daniel, Powers, Gerhard, (2010). Strategies of Peace; Transforming Conflict in a Violent World, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Turner, V. (1969). The Ritual Process. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Tasie, G.O.M. (1978). Christian Missionary Enterprise in the Niger Delta, 1864-1918, Leiden: E.J. brill

Trimingham, J.S. (1962). A History of Islam in West Africa, London: Oxford University Press.