

Strategy for Promoting Religious Tolerance Between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria¹

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pp. 17-20

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In the preceding sections, an attempt has been made to identify the causes and certain aspects of religious intolerance between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria and to examine certain factors and developments which demonstrate that it would be possible for the two religious groups to coexist peacefully. In order to achieve this, the following measures are proposed:

1. Since peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria can best be achieved within the framework of national unity and in view of the fact that religious ill-feeling is invariably exacerbated by ethnic tension where the division between the two religious communities runs along ethnic lines, efforts towards achieving national integration as well as a sense of participation and belonging should be sustained and intensified.
2. Given the widely accepted belief that poverty breeds social unrest, including religious disturbances, efforts aimed at achieving quick economic recovery and self-sustained growth as well as narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor and between the developed and less developed areas of the country should be intensified.
3. Since Christian and Muslim religious leaders hold the key to religious tolerance and since the prejudice, mistrust and hostility characterizing relations between both sides are so intense, it would be necessary, as a first step, to convince the leaders that tolerance between the leaders of the two religious communities is imperative and urgent and that the alternative is continued religious tension, disunity and possibly war with incalculable and disastrous consequences for the entire nation. For this purpose, the Federal government should select eminent Nigerian patriots from each of the two religious communities who should not include any of the known religious leaders but who should be sufficiently versed in Religious knowledge to be able to impress on the religious leaders the need for purposeful inter-religious dialogue.
4. Regular meetings should then be arranged between the Muslim and Christian leaders to discuss matters, like the falling standard of morality. In order to create a favourable atmosphere for dialogue, arguments about fundamental theological issues should be avoided. Discussion on the grievances of both groups should also be put aside for the time being.
5. As and when the two religious groups understand each other, an inter-religious organisation for Christian-Muslim friendship should be set up at the national level with branches in all the States of the Federation and with the following four main aims:

¹ Pp. 18-19 are missing as are points 4-8.

- a. Achieve and maintain peace between themselves and their co-religionists since national unity can only be promoted when different religious communities live together in peace and harmony.
 - b. Contribute to the efforts towards national integration by using their influence on the masses to maintain unity and peaceful co-existence of all the diverse communities throughout the Federation.
 - c. Strengthen the moral aspect of national endeavour by affirming and teaching those virtues which operate for the common good and in obedience to God's word as well as calling attention to and arresting those vices which lead to moral decadence and national disintegration.
 - d. Resolve the complaints and grievances of the two religious groups at the local and national level.
6. In order to generate popular awareness of the similarities of Islam and Christianity, the proposed organisation should, in collaboration with the news media, especially the FRCN and the NTA, work out mutually acceptable programmes, with appropriate quotations from the Bible and the Qur'an:
 - a. Indicating that both religions belong to the spiritual family of Abraham, that both believe in God and that both reject immoral conduct.
 - b. Focusing the attention of Muslims and Christians on national identification, reminding them that when they go to Mecca or Jerusalem or when they attend international religious meetings, they are referred to not as Saudis or Israelis but as Nigerians.
 - c. Pointing out the danger of foreign countries or organisations exploiting our deep-seated religious sentiments to destabilise Nigeria.
 - d. Reminding Christians and Muslims of the danger of making disparaging remarks against any religions or religious leader.
 7. Such programmes should be broadcast and published in the main local languages of each state of the Federation so that they may reach all sections of the population, including people living in remote rural areas. All secondary and higher educational institutions should revise their religious knowledge syllabuses to include the contents of the programmes. These measures would be a double-edged sword aimed at promoting inter-religious tolerance between Muslims and Christians as well as good moral conduct and patriotism.
 8. All Muslim and Christian religious festivals should be jointly celebrated by both Christian and Muslim members of the proposed inter-religious organisation, irrespective of whether a particular festival in question is applicable to their religion or not, highlighting the common denominators in Christian and Islamic faiths. For example, on Christmas Day both Muslim and Christian members of the organisation should make such broadcasts and do the same on the occasion of Eid-el-Fitr. The broadcasts, especially if they are televised, would positively affect Muslim or Christian friendship and feeling of oneness.
 9. The usual nation-wide Presidential address on the occasion of all religious festivals should include a statement, with quotations from the Bible and the Qur'an highlighting the moral aspect of national endeavour.

10. Members of families containing adherents of Islam and Christianity should be interviewed by the FRCN and NTA on the occasions of Muslim and Christian festivals to demonstrate how they live peacefully together in spite of their different religious affiliations.
11. As and when mutual trust and confidence between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria are built up, the proposed inter-religious organization for Christian and Muslim Friendship should, with financial contributions from religious organizations on both sides, provide social services especially in times of disaster such as drought, flood and spread of epidemic diseases. As time goes on, the organization may build hospitals, residential accommodation for rental purposes to the poor, orphanage, reformatory schools and schools for the handicapped. These measures would further bring Muslims and Christians together and augment social services provided by Government.
12. The Muslim and Christian wing for the proposed organization should produce guidelines to their co-religionists on how they should conduct their relations with adherents of other religions.
13. Legislation should be passed imposing severe punishment on anybody who publishes or makes disparaging remarks about any religion or any religious leader since such remarks almost invariably result in religious violence.
14. The proposed organization should prevail upon its members to desist from airing publicly their grievances and complaints in order to avoid arousing religious ill feelings. Such complaints and grievances should be lodged, in private, through the organization.