

*Appendix 17:*

**Wednesday, April 14, 2004 DAILY TRUST**  
**Desirability of inter religious dialogue**  
**By Dr Lateef Adegnite**

In the name of Allah most Beneficent, Most Merciful. Praise belongs to Allah, to whom all praise is due and I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah, and I bear witness also that Muhammad is His slave and messenger. May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, his family and his companions.

May the peace of Allah be upon you all also.

I bring you fraternal greetings from His Eminence, Alhaji Muhammadu Maccido, the Sultan of Sokoto and President-General, Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, as well as from the entire Nigerian Muslim community.

I acknowledge the good gesture of the leadership of your Council in extending an invitation to me to deliver a goodwill message at this conference. I recall that some years ago, I also had the honour of fulfilling a similar role at your Ibadan conference. This form of practical inter-religious dialogue is most desirable as it helps to promote better understanding among religious leaders for the benefit of their respective communities in particular and the nation generally.

Islam expressly enjoins such interactions as Allah specifically calls on Muslims to invite People of the Book (Christians and Jews) to constructive spiritual discourse from time to time with a view to striking common grounds for the betterment of mankind. We should avoid an adversary approach to religion and using cut-throat tactics to win or retain souls for our respective groups. Allah emphatically reminds us in the Glorious Qur'an that if He had so willed He would have made us all to belong to one faith. It is therefore imperative that we understand and tolerate one another, respecting our differences but spreading goodwill at all times.

In this context, His Holiness Pope John Paul II deserves a glowing tribute for his sustained commitment to inter-religious dialogue through the Special Commission instituted by him, under the leadership of our Cardinal Arinze.

We must also commend the Pope for recently according Nigeria a special recognition with the selection of another eminent Nigerian as a Cardinal. We heartily congratulate Cardinal Anthony Okogie on his well-merited elevation, and by extension, we rejoice with the Nigerian Conference of Catholic Bishops for having two of your Members so prominently placed in the Vatican. There is a growing religious felling in the country. The intensity may suggest that all is well with Nigeria. On the other hand, the situation may be interpreted differently, namely that Nigerians are running to religion as fugitives from their woes. For life is hardly bearable in the country today. The poor are in perpetual fear and the rich also cry. There is distress everywhere, economic and social spheres inclusive. It is glaring that Nigerians are passing through trying times. Yet not long ago, an International Study Group came out with an astonishing finding that Nigerians are the happiest people in the world.

Is this not a conundrum? Can misery and happiness co-mingle together? Is this phenomenon of suffering and smiling natural? This is where faith becomes an issue. It could well be that the deeply religious nature of Nigerians - Muslims and Christians alike - provide some clue. The Muslims, for example, believe that once they have *Iman* and do good deeds, whatever befalls them: good or bad, they must accept. If it is good, they receive it with gratitude to Allah; if otherwise, they accept their situation and wait patiently for a better time.

The Qur'an says: Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and is a true believer, verily to him will we give a life that is good and pure, and we will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions. Surah Al-Nahl, verse 94

The Prophet of Allah (PBUH) added:

*"The affair of the believer is really wonderful. All his affairs are good: when he is touched by ease and affluence, he is thankful, and that is good for him, and when he is touched by suffering, he is patient, and that is good for him, and this is only for the believer"* Narrated by Muslim.

But the Nigerian believers are not in full control of their affairs. modern government has become pater familias directing the economic, social and political destiny of the people. The reality therefore is that the citizen today owes the good life or otherwise to the prudent management or utter mismanagement of the earthly rulers-governments at all levels. Therefore, it is strictly not of the making of the ordinary citizen that his or her life is wretched, that the per capita income of Nigeria is one of the lowest in the World; that potable water is a rare commodity; that electricity supply is epileptic; that hospitals have become consulting clinics; that major motor roads are hardly motorable; that widespread corruption has been elevated to a national culture.

If an ordinary Nigerian is poor and hungry, but safe in his neighbourhood and within the confines of his home, he may be content with his mere existence as most religious people tend to be. However, the truth is that no one is safe in Nigeria today. Insecurity continues to take its toll. The high and the low die cheaply here, with most high profile murders unsolved, not even those of Ministers and Party Stalwarts.

Given the appalling scenario outlined here, would an objective observer be wrong if he declares Nigeria a failed state? Who takes the responsibility for this dismal situation? Does the Country not have enough natural and human resources to fare better? Billions of Naira are budgeted annually, but at the end of each year, there is little to show for the huge expenditure.

I do not intend to apportion blame for the sorry state of Nigeria. Maybe we are all responsible: the government, the citizenry and the religious leaders, in varying degrees. Government or the political leadership has been generally poor over the years. The citizenry remains largely indiscipline and ever ready to join the bandwagon the dishonest, corrupt and immoral. The faith leaders themselves seem to have abandoned their time-honoured role of promoting ethical values in the society.

However, consistent with the theme of this conference, I shall confine my attention to the expected role of religious leaders in checking the rot that is today brutalizing many Nigerians. One must ask, why with the profuse outward manifestations of faith by Nigerians, the Nigerian Project should prove a calamity?

Consciously or otherwise, religion has been split into two: the Spiritual and the Material, with the vast majority of people giving attention to the former while neglecting the latter. President Obasanjo was making the same point when not long ago, he remarked that there was too much religiosity, and little spirituality in Nigeria.

I am dismayed to note for example that majority of Nigerian leaders who have presided over the affairs of this nation have been Muslims.

Many of them have tended to ignore the norms, which a ruler according to Islam, must follow, to ensure the welfare and happiness of his subjects. Our leader, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), presided over a Model government in Medina, and the precedents he laid down are there as a guide to honest and sincere rulers of today. These Nigerian Muslim leaders that they tended to

leave Islam on their praying mats at home, as they proceeded daily to their offices where they felt free to do what they pleased, including plotting against the very people they were supposed to serve. This is clearly an un-Islamic practice.

It is incumbent on us as faith leaders to reverse the misfortune of our people, and put back real and genuine smiles on their faces, by securing for them a decent living in place of the wretchedness which is their present lot. To attain this laudable objective, I propose that the following lines of action be pursued by the faith leaders:

Interceding on appropriate occasions with the political leadership of the Country on behalf of the people. Religious leaders are the conscience of the civil society. They must therefore courageously speak out for them.

As and when it is necessary, we should loudly condemn policies, measures and actions which violate religious, moral and human values of the society.

Embarking on advocacy among the people including carrying out political education programmes aimed at promoting rights consciousness. In this regard, the people would be enlightened on how to exercise their voting right responsibly, voting for programmes and not for money. Religious leaders must also support the people in the defence of other rights such as freedom of speech and information, and freedom of religion.

Other important rights should not be ignored such as the right to education, gainful employment, shelter and healthcare. Gender equality is also important as well as sustainable quality environment.

In particular, the faith community must assist the citizenry to do something about their current social and economic plights through economic empowerment aimed at poverty alleviation, reduction and eventual elimination.

Sparing better attention and thoughts for the disabled, destitutes and those living with HIV / AIDS in the Country.

Muslims are enjoined not to turn beggars back but should give them *sadaka* (alms) willingly. However, more should be done for them than mere tokenism. They should be re-habilitated and empowered to fend for themselves through training and acquisition of appropriate skills. Importantly, religious groups should avoid adding to the misery of the people and complicating the problems of Government by sponsoring, provoking or fanning religious conflicts, which often degenerate into violence, resulting in unnecessary destruction of lives and property. For instance, we should resolve never to lapse into the kind of anger that precipitated the violent Sharia protests which occurred in Kaduna State in 2001 and in other places. With the benefit of hindsight it is clear beyond any doubt now that the crave for Sharia by the Muslims is in fulfillment of their religious freedom as guaranteed by the Constitution. It was never aimed at imposing Islam on non-Muslims or asserting domination over any religious group.

The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) established in 1999 is doing a good job and should be used from time to time for airing and resolving differences between the major religious groups. Re-enforcing the spirit and resilience of the people of religion through sermons and counseling directed at re-affirming their faith in the face of adversities should also be encouraged. This, however, does not mean that the people should resign themselves to poverty and unhappiness, as though these are divinely ordained experiences. Rather the people should regard their current conditions as presenting a challenge which they could effectively meet by reordering their lives such as by shunning corruption and all forms of dishonesty as well as becoming more productive in their diverse endeavours.

Intensifying what the religious people know how to do best, namely praying to the Almighty God to show His mercies on them by changing their conditions for the better, they must of course at the same time return to the scripture, living their lives according to the Commandment of God and observing ethical values which ensure purity of soul.

Let us remember Allah's admonition:

*"Verily, Allah will not change the condition of a people as long as they do not first change their state themselves"*

I must also end this message with a prayer, May the Almighty Allah make us worthy of His grace and may the people of Faith and Nigeria as a Nation, witness better times sooner than later.

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