

BZ Muslim Dialogue Issues

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In this appendix I am summarizing BZ developments about dialogue among the Muslim community. You will find the later AZ history on the subject in Chapter 3 under the heading “Dialogue....” This separation is not along the lines of the trivial and the important. They are of equal importance, but with priorities forced on me by space, I judge that the later developments are more relevant today. A few paragraphs are found in both. There is no closing paragraph in this file, for the AZ story in the book is its continuation.

The subject of dialogue is an umbrella topic that covers a host of issues that are scattered throughout this chapter, often without reference to dialogue. Nevertheless, dialogue underlies most of these discussions. I could have chosen “Dialogue,” understood in its widest sense as “relationship,” as the heading for this entire chapter. At a sharia seminar organized by JNI, Ahmed Bello Mahmud suggested that the *only* way out of the difficulties created by the adoption of sharia is “through constant dialogue.”¹ If that is true, then dialogue is the most important project leaders and adherents can engage in. I am not about to dispute it.

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In December, 1963, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and Premier of the Northern Region, spoke the following at his installation as Chancellor of ABU, the university that bears his name. ABU, he declared, was “unique in that it stood at the meeting point of the two major cultural systems of the world—Islamic culture from the East and Christian culture from the West—and meeting in the presence of a third culture—that of the ancient states and empires of Africa itself. Our task is to bring about a dialogue between these cultures and fit them to Africa, interpreting one to the other to the

¹A. Mahmud, 6 July/2000, p. 9.

benefit of all.”² Anyone familiar with the 45-year history of ABU since, is bound to shake his head at the way ABU has instead occasionally served as a vortex of religious hatred and bigotry far removed from any semblance of dialogue.

I begin with a BZ definition/description of dialogue provided by Muhammad Sani Umar of Unijos:

*Religious dialogue entails exchanges of ideas and information between followers of two different religions. It should not aim at conversion, but be a genuine attempt at empathetic understanding of the religious beliefs, practices and other concerns of the other partner to the dialogue. It should induce better appreciation of one’s own religion as well as of the other religion. Where religious differences occasion conflict, religious dialogue ought to identify the source of and the solution to such conflict.*³

As ecumenism, multi-culturalism and multi-religion became increasingly prevalent during the 20th century, dialogue between various religions gradually developed into a veritable industry.⁴ Nigerian Christians and Muslims were not excluded from this trend and interest in it.⁵ Ambassador Kazaure observed the growing interest of Western Christians in dialogue with Muslims and attributed this interest partly to the influx of Muslims into their countries and “the steady conversion of Europeans and Americas into Islam.” He took note of international initiatives by both the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) as well as more local efforts in various countries.

Turning to Nigeria, he observed, “Given the frequent expression of religious intolerance in this country, the need for Muslim-Christian dialogue and cooperation is obvious.” He went on to list a number of such efforts over the years. These included

²*Northern Nigeria News*, Vol. 5, No. 12, Dec., 1963. Quoted in V. Chukwulozie, p. 14.

³M. Umar, 1993, pp. 66-68.

⁴See, e.g., website of the American Muslim Interfaith Dialog Center—<http://idcnj.org>. Be sure to tap into its archives to see the almost dizzying range of activity. For reports on interesting dialogues see Folder <Dialogue> on *Companion CD* <Misc Arts/Dialogue/>, especially those held in during 2007 in Canada between the Mennonite Central Committee and a group of Iranians and for one in Washington, DC, between American Evangelical Fundamentalists and Arab ambassadors in 2007 at <Misc Arts/Dialogue/ , files <2007-06-08> and <2007-07-10>.

⁵See vol. 6, p. 22 for sharia conferences. Most of them have a dialogical element.

*the 1978 seminar on Religious Understanding and Cooperation in Nigeria, sponsored by the University of Ilorin; the Presidential Panel which met in Abuja in 1985; the Reconciliation meeting of Patriotic Christians and Muslims held in the wake of the Kafanchan riots; and another reconciliation meeting of Muslim and Christian elders which took place in Kaduna on 6th June, 1987. All of these initiatives indicate a desire on the part of men of goodwill to promote peaceful co-existence of the two religious communities.*⁶

Tijani El-Miskin of the University of Maiduguri drew our attention to the role played by Nigeria's own Cardinal Arinze, who heads the Inter-Religious Desk at the Vatican. And then there was the Muslim initiative of the Sudanese Government with its "permanent organ of such dialogue" under the country's International Council for Universal Amity. He concluded that "it is a civilized vogue to resort to dialogue to promote mutual cordiality."⁷

V. C. Chukwulozie of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, has left us with an extensive report of what he dubbed the "first official Christian-Muslim meeting" that took place at the Pastoral Institute, Ibadan, on 28 November, 1974. I doubt that it was a first for Nigeria, though it may have been for the Catholic Church. At any rate, it is a fine report of a meeting that raised the bar high for any such future event. Among other things, it resulted in the launching of the unfortunately short-lived journal *Nigerian Dialogue* that was meant to express both Christian and Muslim viewpoints. The most prominent Muslim participant was our well-known Lateef Adegbite, a former AG and Commissioner for Justice of the defunct Western State and prominent Muslim spokesman from the South West, who, together with Bishop Felix Job of Ibadan, served as Joint Chairmen. In his closing remarks, Adegbite thanked Pope Paul VI for "his untiring work for peace throughout the world and for setting up the Secretariat for non-Christian Religions." Furthermore, "he called for objectivity in our sermons when explaining each other's faith and advocated perfect freedom in the teaching and propagation of our respective religions."⁸

⁶Z. Kazaure, 22 Mar/2000; "Strategies for Promoting...", pp. 14-16. Appendix 9.

⁷T. El-Miskin, 1995, p. 10.

⁸V. Chukwulozie, pp. 15-18. For more details of this meeting see the section on Chukwulozie under "Dialogue" in chapter 4.

Deremi Abubakre had a balanced view of dialogue. “Adherents of different religions should not neglect the mountainous points of convergence across religions to focus on the marginal points of divergence.” But, he warned, “there should be no playing hyupocrisy. As the differences should not be ignored or covered up, they should serve as basis for understanding, tolerance, learning and respect.”⁹ These are much-needed words in a Nigeria where governments and some religious leaders routinely cover up the truth with a blanket of political correctness. The prevalence of this practice and its fatal consequences have been discussed at length throughout this series.

I have already referred to the numerous attempts at dialogue, especially conferences. Back in 1987, Northern Muslims already felt the need for dialogue and co-operation. A Committee of Elders of the Ten Northern States met in Kaduna on June 6, 1987. Their purpose “was to seek for a lasting solution to the unfortunate religious conflict which culminated in the recent clashes in Kaduna State.” One of their decisions was “to establish a similar body in each of the ten Northern States, to be called State Council of Understanding.” The Borno member(s) lost no time to prepare for such a body in their state. Alhaji Baba Kura Imam wrote a letter to Jabani Mambula, at the time General Secretary of TEKAN, a native of Borno State and former state civil servant and commissioner, inviting him to join the effort in his home state. He wrote, “I have no doubt that you will be willing and indeed be proud to serve on this council, whose main objective is to foster unity and understanding among the peoples of the Northern States in particular and the entire nation in general.” I have not heard anything about this effort subsequently, but I suspect it died in its birthpangs, at least in Borno. No wonder. Out of the 40 nominees listed, only one was a Christian—Mambula himself. That was a most ominous beginning!¹⁰

Still another form of dialogue takes place when individuals or organizations purposefully organize joint projects between members of the two religions. As sociologist K. A. Balogun already suggested during the BZ period,

all religious bodies should work hand in glove to identify and solve the fundamental aspects of religion in relation to the issues. For instance, what does religion know about family planning, embezzlement of public funds, corruption and human rights, to mention but a few? They should come together to fuse their

⁹R. D. Abubakre, 1992, pp. 131-132.

¹⁰B. K. Imam, June/87.

knowledge and fight these issues in union rather than broad generalizations and mere sentimental statements of concern from different religious bodies

Such joint actions may not only lead to solving social problems together, but should also result in greater understanding of each other as they discuss, plan and work together. To this end, Balogun advised the FG that it

should give directive to the governors in all the states to form a religious council, similar to that at the Federal level, which will comprise all the representatives of the major religions in the country. This, undoubtedly, will augment the efforts of the [pre-NIREC] National Religious Council. It will also provide a forum where many religious problems can be checked and tackled before they get out of hand.”¹¹

There is at least one classic example of what dialogue might have achieved where confrontation failed. I refer to the OIC controversy. “A top Muslim scholar close to the Sultan of Sokoto” suggested that “if Christian leaders had quietly consulted with Muslim leaders, the issue would probably have been amicably resolved. The Muslim determination to keep Nigeria in the OIC was precipitated by an equally extreme opposition taken by the Christians to have the country unconditionally withdrawn from the organisation.”¹²

One group that expressed itself negatively towards dialogue and the compromising attitude that comes with it is the Muslim Movement as represented by Yakubu Yahaya. Asked by an interviewer from *TSM* magazine what he was doing to have dialogue with Christians and reduce tension, Yahaya responded, “I try my best to see that Muslim brothers anywhere try to exist peacefully with Christians, to explain to them what Islam is and even discuss the Bible.” This is hardly dialogue and no surprise. In the same interview he said, “The solution is no compromise. The solution is not talking on the table but to shed out all the idol worshippers and their leaders and all these evils. So our aim and target is to do so here....”¹³

¹¹K. Balogun, “Religious Fanaticism...,” p. 189.

¹²A. Akpaka, 6 Apr/87, pp. 22-23.

¹³Information culled from O. Nnanna, 27 Sep/92 by J. Boer, 2004, vol. 2, pp. 147, 152.