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CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS
IN WEST AFRICA

Edited by

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WAATI

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SCRIPTURAL HINTS ON MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE IN THE *QUR'AN* AND BIBLE

L. O. Abbas & I. O. Uthman*

Introduction

The *Qur'an* and the *Bible* are among the holy Books divinely revealed for human guidance. The fact that humans are weak and limited in knowledge requires that they should be constantly guided to ensure that they do not stay away from God. Such guidance were made in the form of Books through the appointed messengers of the Creator.

Prophets and/or messengers were sent at different times to different communities or nations. They came with some messages apparently from the same sender, but the message was differently accepted and understood. The difference has for long created unnecessary division and unwarranted competition among the practitioners of the various religionists.

The division has been responsible for many intra and international crises and even wars in some places. In Nigeria, in particular, the nation is clearly divided on religious lines, mainly between the Muslims and the Christians. There is a high level of mutual suspicion with its negative effects manifesting in almost all aspects of life viz: employment, appointment, election and school admission into schools.

The tide can be stemmed with better understanding of one another through dialogue as recommended by the *Qur'an* and *Bible*. The leaders of the two groups should use all available means to come together and engender unity, love, and selflessness in dealing with one another where mutual respect would replace suspicion and persecution.

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Origin of Dialogue

Dialogue is simply defined as formal discussion between two groups or individuals¹. Religious dialogue is not a modern time initiative; it is rather a phenomenon of old that had been established since the coming of messengers of God to the world.

In Christianity, dialogue dates back to the time of Jesus Christ himself. Though he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israelites (Mat. 15:24), he nonetheless spoke with a Samaritan woman, admired the faith of the Roman centurion, and affirmed the wisdom of the Queen of the south. For the Muslims, the *Qur'an* encourages dialogue with the adherents of other religions when it states "Call thou (people) to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and good admonition and dialogue with them in a better way" (Q.16:25). It specifies that such dialogue with other monotheistic faiths (like Judaism and Christianity) must be carried out in a fairer manner (Q.29:46).

By way of emphasis, the Vatican Council II has, in one of its exhortations, exhorted: "... Prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration, with followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral good formed among these men as well as the values in their society and culture (*Nosra aetate* No. 2).

The divine prophets, in bringing God's message to their people, did dialogue with them. None was recorded as having shown any element of force in his preaching. But because people at various times rejected, persecuted and even attempted to kill them, some fought back while others ran away for safety². Yet the creator's directive on religious preaching remains sacrosanct and that is, through gentle persuasions and dialogue. While deciding to create human beings, God himself informed the angels by way of dialogue even though their view would have no impact on the divine's decision (Q2:30). In the contemporary world, religious freedom is becoming the societal norm, and in sustaining it, dialogue must be ensured to be one of the cardinal principles of divinely revealed religions.

The Need for Religious Dialogue

The general nature of man is such that is free in thought and action. He shares in the spirit of God (Q.32:9) and was created from clay (Q.15:28). Unlike the angel created from light but without free will, man is given liberty and freedom to act and choose for himself without coercion (Q.45:15). That privilege however imposes on him the responsibility of accounting for his deed to the Creator. He is made to be aware of his duties and activities while alive as explained in the Holy Books. The *Qur'an* informs of the aim for creating man on the surface of the earth, which is primarily to worship God (Q.51:56).

Knowing that by his weak nature man needs constant reminder against straining away, God sent messages to him at some intervals. The messengers were humans like him for the purpose of full comprehension and understanding of the divine message (Q 14:4). The messenger's job was to ensure proper and adequate conveyance of the message without force, while the capacity of man to accept or reject God's call is the result of his time freedom³.

The key job of the messenger, according to the *Qur'an*, is to admonish, advise, warn and deliver message (Q.88:21-22). It implies that God wants a willing and sincere response to his call in full consciousness and freedom. The resultant effect of the response of people to the call is the individual's responsibility. For no one bears the burden of another (Q.13:11). While it is certain that not all human creatures would receive God's message and act positively as to earn them paradise, it is not the deliberate act of the Divine to destine humans to disobedience of His activities, having sent him enough messages.

Man's duty to the Creator is in form of worship as stated earlier. He, in addition, has a duty to others. Islam teaches avoidance of indifference to and carelessness about others. One has a duty to ensure dissemination of information to others to enable them be aware of the nature and requirements of God. The prophet (SAW) once counseled thus:

"Help your brother whether he is an oppressor or he is an oppressed one"

People asked "O Allah's messenger! it is alright to help him if he is oppressed, but how should we help him if he is an oppressor?" The Prophet said "by preventing him from oppressing others"⁴.

An integral part of worship in Islam is sincere interaction, reminding people of their essence from a single parent (Q 49:13). This consciousness makes good neighbourliness imperative with others in the locality and indeed the society at large. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was quoted as saying: "The best of companions in the sight of Allah is the one who is the best of them to his companion, and the best of neighbours near Allah is the one who is the best of them to his neighbour"⁵.

It is not the intention of the Creator that man lives a solitary life. His nature is such that requires a spouse to interact and dialogue with as partner. That is why a Muslim must not refrain from the sacred institution of marriage for both social and religious life. Refraining from marriage reduces one's religious duties to 50% of the required level (*Hadith*).⁶ He also has to live with others in a community, relating and dialoguing with others. His fulfillment in relating with God is in form of worship, adoration and appreciation of His gesture on him. In addition, his duty to people is in form of help and guidance to others.

Relationship with people of other faiths

Islam as a religion does not believe in the multiplicity of the divine faiths. Therefore there should be no competition among the different faithfuls as some would want to think. To the Muslims, Islam is the only religion acceptable to the Creator and recommended to humanity (Q.5:3). The difference lies in the understanding of the message as earlier stated.

The courtesy of brotherhood and goodness recommended by Islam is primarily to the monotheists who received messages before the Muslims. This is so because their prophets, messengers and holy books must be believed by the Muslims and there must not be discrimination of any sort among them. The *Qur'an* states:

The messenger believes in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, and (so do) the believers each one believes in Allah, His angels, his Books, and His messengers. We make no distinction between one another of His messengers... (Q2:285).

In furtherance of the kind of relationship required of the monotheists, God makes their food lawful for one another and in addition, a Muslim is permitted to marry from among the Christians and Jews (Q.5:5). To the Muslims, other monotheistic religions are essentially same with Islam as long as these uphold absolute faith in the oneness of God and engage only in the worship of same.

Accepting and reassuring sameness of the three monotheistic religions (Islam, Christianity and Jewish) and emanating from him, he ordered that the laws therein be enforced and utilized by their respective owners, explaining further that, had he wished, he would have made the three groups one and same (Q5:47-49).

The above provision clearly underscores the kind of relationship expected within the three groups. However, in case, as humans, there exists confusion or mistrust, particularly in religion, the *Qur'an* orders for dialogue for solution and better understanding (Q.3:64). In engaging in dialogue, there should be no force in the acceptance or otherwise of individual's belief. Should there be no consensus, no violence or crisis should be resorted to.

The above discourse is the description of the relationship required of the monotheistic faithfuls. In addition, Islam has provision for people outside the three i.e. the idolaters and even atheists. Idolatry practice is a direct opposite of Islam, which means recognizing and worshipping God who alone is worthy of such. It is simply polytheism which in Islam, considered only crime (sin) that attracts no forgiveness from God (Q4:48, 16).

The *Qur'an* uses many names to describe those that belong to this category, with two most popular names as non believers (*Kafirun*) and idolaters (*Mushrikun*).

Various punishments are, according to the *Qur'an*, prepared for them in this life and especially in the hereafter. They are described as those denying God's signs and arrogantly disbelieving it. It is said that this category will not enter paradise until the camel passes through the eyes of the needle (Q7:40).

Despite the above divine description of the consequence of the disbelieving, Muslims are not permitted to deal with them with harshness and violence. They should rather be dealt with with honour and gentleness. The whole chapter 108 of the *Qur'an* entitled the disbelievers summarizes the kind of relationship a Muslim should maintain with them in matters of religion. It is such that each group holds onto his faith without rancour or violence.

In case one's parent or parents are non believers, one must not, on that account, severe relationship with them. The blood tie must not be cut and one's responsibility on them must continue except that one must not join them in idolatry practice. However, at their death one should ensure that their religious groups be invited to arrange for funeral, while he bears the expenses (Q.17:23-24; 31:15).

Islam is conscious of the welfare of others irrespective of their religious affiliations. No Muslim is allowed to victimise others on account of difference of faith. This, prophet Muhammad demonstrated in Madinah as head of state and the leader of the Muslim community. There he made a constitution that covers the wellbeing of the Muslims, the Christians and the Jews. He never fought the two as they were taken as fellow brothers of the monotheistic faiths.

When some Christians of Najran extraction visited the prophet in Madinah on diplomatic mission, they were well received and catered for. For the few days spent on guests of the Islamic nation, they were allowed to conduct their worship in one part of the mosque of Madinah (the prophetic mosque)⁷. Earlier in Mecca, when the persecution of the Muslims by the Meccan idolaters became unbearable, the first contact for safety was the then King of Abbyssinia, a Christian, who accommodated and secured them from the Mecca attack.

Religious Dialogue in Nigeria

Nigeria as a nation is dominated mostly by Muslim and Christians. It can therefore be safely said to be a multi religious society particularly with the presence of many other ones and the allowance accorded all to operate. Out of the lot, Christianity and Islam are the only ones officially recognized by the law of the land and both generally enjoy government support at all levels.⁸ Therefore, to justify the gesture accorded them, they should seek for the understanding of each other to create a conducive atmosphere for the entire citizenry.

Government at the federal level has done well with the establishment of Nigeria Religious Council (NIREC) with equal representation of both religions. This is an avenue created to bring the two together for interaction of both. To facilitate dialogue between the two, the following points should be considered.

- The two bodies should have sincere attitude toward the project and be committed to its success rather than see it as a competition for any material gain.
- Both should see the need to venture together and be ready to share ideas.
- Common areas to the two should be emphasized in order to promote a sense of belonging for the two adherents.
- There must be consciousness that the two religions emanate from God. To Muslims, the *Qur'an* constitutes the final definitive and perfect revelation of previous books (Torah, Psalm and Gospel).
- To Muslims, the *Qur'an* is the word of God revealed to prophet Muhammad (SAW) for a period of 23 years.
- To Christians, Jesus is the word of God which came in form of man while the word of God in Islam is in form of scripture.
- Muslims realize this and therefore recognize, adore and respect Jesus.
- In spite of some decisive outright differences between the two, some contents of the *Qur'an* are same with those of the *Bible*, especially the Old Testament.
- Both should endeavour to learn the contents of the holy Book of the other and speak about it with respect.
- For dialogue to be meaningful, both should try to forget the injustices of the past.
- Causes and effects of these injustices could be discussed with a view to avoiding such in future. The two should allow forgiveness to prevail.
- Both should unite and defend each other when and where necessary.
- Leaders of the two should work, wine and dine together in the public glare as this would send a positive signal to their followers.
- A joint statement should constantly be issued to correct the ills of the society.
- Both should encourage a religious society where equity and fairness will reign supreme and where the tide of brigandage will be seriously stemmed if not totally eradicated.

Places and Times of Dialogue

Having discussed the necessary points needed for the unity of the two groups for the progress of Nigeria, it is important to specify or determine the appropriate time and places for the execution of the very important project. It is also significant to identify the categories of people that may partake in it.

Dialogue of this nature should not be limited to a level or some categories of people. It should be allowed to take place at all levels of human encounters where Muslims and Christians live and work together. To do the job, one does not necessarily need to be a pastor or an Imam. What is important is to engage people of faith (in the two religions) who are committed to the goodwill and welfare of the community.

Dialogue should be encouraged to take place among family members, particularly where it comprises both Muslims and Christians. At work place, with people of same skill, who work together as companions. In hospitals, where two or more professionals, work together.

There are, in addition to the above, times and events favourable to the job, such as marriage, birthday, naming, house warming and even funeral ceremonies. Also, there are holiday times and festival periods like Christmas, Easter, *Eid al-kabir*, *Eid al-fitri* and *Mawlid*. Those periods, can be used to bridge the gaps that exist between the two groups.

Conclusion

The *Qur'an* and *Bible* constitute the most holy and the commonest divinely revealed to humanity. This is so going by the population of adherents of both in the world.

These books, though they came at different times and to different people, emanate from God, the creator. Parts of the contents of the two show that human beings, rather, than angels, are endowed with knowledge and ability to act freely as they like.

It is the design of the divine that men belong to different religious persuasions of their choice. What is imperative is for them to learn to live together in a society and promote peace. The volatile nature of religion may sometimes cause disagreement that could result in crisis. Such is possible where people are ignorant of the nature and teachings of religion. To prevent or stem such disagreements or crises, leaders of the various faiths should come together and dialogue in accordance with the recommendations of the *Qur'an* and *Bible*.

Such dialogue should not be limited to the leadership of the two religions but rather be made to cover all levels of human endeavour. With sincerity of purpose, the required commitment and support from government, the goal of religion may be achieved in no distant future.

Notes and References

1. A.S. Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford University Press. New-York 2000 p.321.
2. For example; prophet Musa (Moses) ran away from his enemies, prophet Muhammad (SAW) also had to flee Mecca for Madinah with his followers when the persecution became unbearable.
3. J. Kenny, *Views on Christian-Muslim Relations*, Dominican Publications, Lagos 1999 p.83.
4. Sahih Bukhari (summarized)
5. F. Karim, *Al-Hadis*; The Book House, Lahore, 1938 p.249.
6. Karim *Ibid* Book II p.633.
7. Sahih Bukhari.
8. Days of Festivals of the two religions (Christianity and Islam) are declared public Holidays. Government also asks both leaders to pray for the nation when occasions demand for it.

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