

Emmanuel O. Nwaoru

Interreligious Tension in Nigeria Today: Challenges and Prospects

Nigeria is a very large country, in land and sea area and in population density; in ethnic nationalities and in diverse languages.¹ Nigeria is not only the most populous country in Africa, but also the most favoured, in terms of human and natural resources, and in cultural diversity. Sadly too, because of its historical origins (an amalgamated nation!) it has multi-faceted problems and difficulties, arising from the inability to manage the large population and the resources. There is mutual suspicion of the different ethnic nationalities, power tussle among the political elite, and other socio-economic factors, evidenced particularly in the staggering youth unemployment rate of 17% (i.e., about 28.8 million youth population), infant mortality rate of 96 per 1000 births, 78.6% education and literacy rate and an average of 52.05 years life expectancy at birth.

However, one of the most persistent and contentious problems in Nigeria is religion, the Abrahamic religions (Christianity and Islam) for that matter. As an international delegation of Muslims and Christians that visited Nigeria (2012) succinctly observed, "at least since the Bosnian war of 1993-1995 Nigeria is the country in the world where the most severe inter-communal violence between Christians and Muslims has been experienced".²

Unfortunately, Christianity and Islam are the two major religious groups in Nigeria, with each striving to outweigh the other in numerical strength and to outdo the other in strategizing (canvassing) for converts. Above all, each strives to occupy and control the Central government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria with 36 states and a capital territory. Generally speaking, the country is roughly divided between Muslims, most of whom are Sunni located in the Northern area, and Christians found predominantly in the Middle Belt and Southern parts. It is estimated that the nati-

¹ Nigeria has a total area of 923,768 sq. km. (910,768 sq. km. of land area & 13,000 sq. km of water area), and a population of about 170 million with well over 389 ethnic nationalities and languages. See July 12th 2012 CIA World Factbook estimate.

² The delegation was on fact-finding mission on "the inter-religious tensions and crisis in Nigeria". It was sponsored jointly by the Royal Jordanian Aal Al Bayt Institute (RABIIT) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) between 22nd and 26th May 2012.

on's population is evenly divided between the two religions, although the 2011 Pew survey estimated that Christians were slightly in the majority with 50.8% of the population.³ This contrasts the 50.4% for Muslims in its 2009 study.⁴ With this figure it is no longer possible for any one group of religion, Christianity or Islam, in Nigeria to pretend that the other does not matter.

In spite of their religious differences, Christians and Muslims in Nigeria meet and interact with each other on daily basis. They work and very often live together in the same environment. Their children attend the same public schools and share common national experiences. Therefore, one can understand why many, including some high ranking religious clerics and leaders in Nigeria suppose that "there is no religious conflict in the country," and that "Christians and Muslims are not in war with each other." In a sense, this is correct, for there is no official declaration of war between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. But it has also to be admitted that there is no peace between the two religions. For a great majority of Christians believe that there is an *undeclared* "war" against their religion. The number of organized and coordinated attacks against and killings of innocent Christians, as well as occasional reprisal attacks by Christians, tend to justify this position. It is yet to be proven to the contrary that the present acts of terrorism by the religious terrorist group, Boko Haram⁵, do not primarily have deep religious motif, and that they do not in fact serve the selfish interests and agenda of many Muslims in Nigeria. Granted that the level of poverty in a country supposedly "flowing with milk and honey" is high, it will be diversionary to attempt to ascribe solely the cause of the present conflict to poverty and unemployment of the youth or other socio-political and moral issues.

The crux of the matter is that there is a fresh attempt to revert to the age-long plot to dip the Qur'an into the Atlantic Ocean. Already Boko Haram has begun the process by systematically intimidating Christians out of

³ "Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population" (PDF). Retrieved 2011-08-29. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Nigeria. Accessed 24/11/2012.

⁴ "Mapping out the Global Muslim Population" (PDF). Retrieved 2011-08-29. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Nigeria. Accessed 24/11/2012.

⁵ This is an Islamist religious fundamentalist/terrorist group, which hates everything Western and Christian. Literally, Boko Haram means "Western education is forbidden". The members are called al-Sunna wal Jamma ("Followers of the Prophet's Teachings"). But they refer to themselves as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad ("People committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and Jihad").

existence in some parts of Northern Nigeria, by establishing quasi Muslim states with Sharia legal system and by waging war against an “infidel” (Christian) President at the Central government of Nigeria. Boko Haram sect is still determined to impose even stricter Islamic law in the entire Northern region of Nigeria, a region that is not entirely Muslim. Yet the Constitution of Nigeria makes provision for her citizens to freely embrace the religion of their choice, including the right to change the same.

1. Interreligious Tension in Nigeria is Real

Between February 2009 and June 2013 there have been over 185 terror attacks by Muslims on Christians in Nigeria. That justifies the 2013 World Report of the Human Rights Watch⁶ which shows that Nigeria, like many other countries of the world, is facing security challenges arising from terrorist attacks. The main protagonist in the case of Nigeria is the militant Islamist group Boko Haram. According to the report, the spiral violent attacks, particularly in the Northern and Central states, have claimed over 3,000 lives with Boko Haram responsible for more than 1,600 since 2009 when the group began its campaign. The primary targets of its sustained attacks are Christians and places of worship (Churches), security agents and installations, educational institutions, government officials and institutions, media workers and houses, and even Muslims who appear to collaborate with Christians and the government in promoting peace and security.

Judging from the number of violent attacks of Islamist fundamentalists and their terrorist groups against Christians in Nigeria, one can say that Boko Haram has continued to gain more ground and force in geographical expansion,⁷ and in their organization and international link. For instance, over 18 attacks are said to have been carried out in 2010 against Christians, including the January 17th 2010 rampage in Jos in which 48 Christians were hacked to death outside the Church, leaving 96 wounded, the July 3rd attack in Dogo Nahauwa that left over 500 Christians, mostly women and children, dead with 600 villagers wounded. A series of bomb blasts in Jos on December 24th 2010 that largely targeted Christmas Eve Church services left about 86 Christians dead and 74 wounded, etc.

⁶ The report is issued on 31st January. See <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/nigeria>. Accessed 01/05/2013.

⁷ See <http://www.thereligionofpeace.com/Pages/ChristianAttacks.htm>. Accessed 1/5/2013.

In 2011, the number of violent attacks by Boko Haram increased to 69. They include the suicidal attack in August on the United Nations building in Abuja that killed 25 people and the Damaturu (Yobe state) November bombings that claimed at least 100 lives; the Kaduna 19th April burning of over forty Churches and hacking and burning of over 300 Christians to death; the 4th November Potiskum (Jos) attack on six Churches that also claimed the lives of over 130 Christians; the Christmas day bombing of St. Theresa's Catholic Church, Madalla, slaughtering 41 Christians; etc., etc. The situation was so distressful that Agbo, a columnist with the Nation Newspaper, described it in part thus:

Sadly, it has become increasingly 'normal' to expect death and destruction during festive periods, especially Christian ones... One cannot forget the now countless bombings in Maiduguri (which some have called the headquarters of Boko Haram), the Madalla Christmas Day bombing, the Kano blasts and so the list goes on. Really, the number is staggering; so also the casualties figure.⁸

The Islamist terror groups intensified their violent campaigns against Christians in 2012, totalling well over 73. The attacks include gunning down or bombing worshippers in at least 16 Church services. The 2013 World Report indicates that in the first ten months of 2012 these Islamist terrorists have killed more than 900 people, i.e. over and above the victims of 2010 and 2011 combined.⁹ As expected, most of the attacks were on Churches and Christians. Here one may recall the Peri and Maiduguri violent attacks at Christmas eve and Christmas morning Church services that killed six Christians; the two November 25th suicide bombings in Jaji that killed 15 Christians in a Protestant Church; the Kaduna October 28th suicide bombing in a Catholic Church during Mass that claimed seven lives and left over 100 wounded; the October 2nd shooting of 26 Christian students in Mubi; the Okene August 6th slaughtering of at least 19 Christians in Deeper Life Church; the July 7th Kushen massacre of 80 innocent Christians in Christian villages, including 50 taking refuge in a Church; the Zaria June 17th bombings of two Churches that claimed 34 lives; the June 3rd Bauchi bombings that killed 21 in prayer; the Kano April 29th bombings in a Church which killed 16, including

⁸ See Ngozi Agbo, "Behind failed fathers and children," in <http://www.thenationonline.net/2011/index.php/education/campus-life/42787-behind-failed-fathers-and-children.html>. Accessed 14/04/12.

⁹ "Human Rights Watch World Report 2013" in <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/nigeria>. Accessed 01/05/2013.

professors and doctors; the Kaduna Easter (April 8th) bombings outside a Church, claiming 41 lives; the March 10th bombing of St. Finbarr's Catholic Church Jos, leading to the loss of 14 lives; etc., etc.

The story is not any better in 2013. Between January and 18th June, there have already been over 20 attacks, including the Kano 18th March suicide bombing that brutally killed 41 Christians, the 23rd February killing of 17 Christian workers in Abuja; the 1st February attack on three Churches that claimed the lives of 15 Christians, etc.¹⁰

With this, it is more than evident that interreligious tension is real in Nigeria, the motive for which cannot without further qualifications be said to be economic or/and political. Such overwhelming and persistent attacks on Christians and Churches as demonstrated here can only be fired by religious motive. The members of Boko Haram have always made their religious intentions clear. They want to carve an Islamic state out of Nigeria and fully implement stricter Sharia law; and only a Head of State who is Muslim can accomplish that and not an "infidel". Because they cannot obey a rejecter of their faith they have sustained their violent attacks and carried out religious cleansing of Christians from the Northcentral and Northeastern states of Nigeria. Given the nature of the attacks and the sophistication of weaponry, it is certain that Boko Haram has its links with some local Muslim political and religious leaders as well as foreign terrorist groups who support, protect and sponsor it financially. This too should be of concern to the International Community.

Why the violent attacks have not turned into full-blown interreligious crises is that Christians have not reacted proportionately. They have generally maintained some relative calm, without fully resorting to carrying arms or to terrorism. But how long will they hold their peace, particularly the fundamentalist and evangelical Christian groups?

2. Precursor to Present Interreligious Tension

Many Christians believe that the present interreligious tension can be traced back to the jihad led by Usman Dan Fodio (a Jihadist and social reformer) and his Muslim forces in 1804, which swept all Hausa rulers off their thrones, established the Fulani hegemony in most parts of the present day Northern Nigeria, but failed to have the Qur'an dipped into the Atlantic Ocean as targeted. From the utterances of some leading

¹⁰ "Islamic Terror Attacks on Christians (since 9/11)" <http://www.thereligionofpeace.com/Pages/ChristianAttacks.htm>. Accessed 1/5/2013.

Muslim politicians at various times this project is still considered a task that must be done. For instance, the first generation political leaders of the North are said to have threatened their counterparts in Southern Nigeria that they were waiting for the departure of the colonialists, the British, to continue their march to the sea to 'dip the Qur'an into the Atlantic Ocean'.¹¹ Since the goal was still not met after Nigeria gained her Independence (1960), a Minister of the 1st Republic, Muhammed Ribadu, was quoted as saying: "The Political conquest of the South was a religious obligation that the Northern People's Congress owe the world of Islam, the Qur'an has to be dipped into the Atlantic Ocean before the Jihad could stop."¹² Till today to dip the Qur'an into the Atlantic Ocean, i.e., to get the entire Christian South converted to Islam, remains for many Muslims in the North an unwritten goal that must be attained. At various times the Muslim politicians and military leaders who have most of the time occupied the seat of the Central government have applied excessive force or/and unconstitutional means to get the agenda accomplished. And since politics is almost inseparable from religion, the Muslims in the North have always tried to have their way.

In other words, what we witness of late is the consequence of politics of religion, practised by Muslim religious and political elite. They have maximally utilised their opportunities at the centre to foster the course of Islam. There is no doubt that the first military coup d'état of 1966 was an attempt to foil the Muslim hegemony and religious agenda. The military coup resulted in atrocious massacre of the Southerners, mostly Christians and eventually in the first religious cleansing of Christians that took place in Nigeria. But the world community then remained silent until it led to the declaration of the state of Biafra and the awful Nigeria-Biafra war (1967-70). Forty-three years after the war, only a fragile peace exists between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria as one notices in a series of provocative incidents and religious conflicts that have taken place. For instance, the 1980s witnessed the crises of the Maitatsine, a local "Taliban" sect, which claimed the lives of many Christians and the fraudulent enlisting of Nigeria into the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).

Between 2000 and 2001 at least twelve states in Nigeria have been "Islamised", operating unconstitutionally the Sharia legal system, not taking

¹¹ See Nkem Ekeopara, "Nigeria, Boko Haram and the US War on Terrorism Part 3," <http://www.elombah.com/index.php/articles-mainmenu/15789-nigeria-boko-haram-and-the-us-war-on-terrorism-part-3>. Accessed 12/05/2013.

¹² Cited in Abiodun Alao, "Islamic Radicalisation and Violence in Nigeria," <http://www.securityanddevelopment.org/pdf/ESRC%20Nigeria%20Overview.pdf>. Accessed 12/05/2013.

cognisance of the rights of the Christian population. The overriding ambition of Muslim religious and political leaders is felt in every major decision in Nigeria. It is evident that what has turned into full religious terrorism in the Boko Haram sect is simply the upshot of long standing religious design. Apart from pursuing this design, some other issues like mutual effort at proselytisation agitate the minds of extremist Muslims in Nigeria. Some Christian evangelists make incursions into Muslim strongholds and communities with the hope of getting some of them converted to Christianity. This is not only considered an affront but also a sacrilege.

Similarly, at the international level some issues have continued to fuel the inherent resolve of many Muslims to create Islamic states. They include the so-called “‘international imperialism of money’ and the apparent ascendancy of a monolithic (western) worldview”.¹³ The former is in line with what Pope Francis in May 2013 identified as the “cult of money”. Its insidious impact is felt in the monetary policies of the IMF and World Bank which have continually left the poor countries poorer. Surprisingly, the Western notion of democracy, freedom, morality, etc., is considered ideal and is expected to become a norm for all, notwithstanding the apparent excesses, aberrations and shortcomings. Today, there is a noticeable collapse of moral and family values in the Western societies; and globalisation, particularly via the media, is helping in no small way to spread these harmful values. Many Muslims and Christians in Africa and elsewhere are reacting against such ideologies and the negative impacts of globalisation, because they consider them harmful to their religious beliefs, cultural values and traditions.¹⁴

One or two reactions here may suffice: The Message of the Bishops at the end of the Second African Synod bemoaned the activities of some foreign agencies in relation to aspects of African cultures and values. It viewed with concern “all surreptitious attempts to destroy and undermine the precious African values of family and human life” and stressed the need for vigilance to ensure that “the services being offered to our people ... are good for us.”¹⁵ Not long ago, Obianuju Ekeocha, a Nigerian woman living in England reacted to the programme of the Bill and Me-

¹³ These factors were already pointed out by George Ehusani in his 2004 report in a conference organised by Missio Aachen.

¹⁴ See Paulinus Odozor’s paper, “Evangelizing Locally and Globally: Upholding Christian Moral Standards” at a Symposium on New Evangelisation, Owerri, 8 November 2012, in reference to the synodal intervention of Archbishop Sarah: “L’église et la théorie du genre en Afrique”.

¹⁵ See Nuntius, the final Message of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, 30.

linda Gates Foundation to provide contraceptives to women in 69 poor countries of the world, most of which are in Africa, thus:

I see this \$4.6 billion buying us misery. I see it buying us unfaithful husbands. I see it buying us streets devoid of the innocent chatter of children. I see it buying us disease and untimely death. I see it buying us a retirement without the tender loving care of our children. Please Melinda, listen to the heart-felt cry of an African woman and mercifully channel your funds to pay for what we REALLY need.¹⁶

Obviously, many Muslims, especially their extremist groups in Nigeria, see these excesses as the product of Western civilisation, and by extension Christianity with which it is associated. Hence their resolve to relegate everything Christian and establish a nation governed by Islamic (Sharia) law.

All said, no one can underrate the negative impacts of the deteriorating economic and social conditions of the country on individuals, families and, especially on the young people. It is on record that over 23.9% of able-bodied Nigerians are jobless, and that out of this 71% is made up of the youth. Given the human and material resources of the country nobody, no family, no young person in Nigeria deserves to live in abject poverty as it is now the case. Unfortunately, that is the case because of flagrant and endemic corruption, greed and acts of impunity on the part of successive governments and their collaborators. Such socio-political and economic systems no doubt demand reform and many believe that religion has a role to play. It is the approach toward reform that has in many occasions resulted in religious tension. For Muslim extremists like the Boko Haram, the only way is by establishing an Islamic state under the Sharia law. And this has to be achieved at all costs, even through terrorist and military assaults.

3. Interreligious Dialogue on Trial

With the long history of interreligious conflicts in Nigeria one would have expected to see a more organised and vibrant approach to interreligious

¹⁶ Obianuju Ekeocha, "Nigerian Woman Writes to Melinda Gates: 'We Don't Need Your Contraceptives'," <http://www.catholic.org/nationalstory.php?id=47264>. Accessed 20/8/12; also cited in Odozor, "Evangelizing Locally".

dialogue. The umbrella dialogue group, the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) founded in the year 2000 with 25 Christian and Muslim leaders respectively, has been polarised like every other national issue because of divergent views on procedure and disagreement with positions, and therefore rendered ineffective. Also unsuccessful is the frequent harp on the “dialogue of life” as means of checking violence because neighbours quickly forget their daily mutual interactions in the face of religious tension. But the current interreligious tension has made fresh attempts at dialogue imperative. Several Muslim and Christian leaders and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)¹⁷ have begun to show interest in championing dialogue. In this regard, the inspiring work of the Archbishop of Abuja, His Eminence John Cardinal Onaiyekan in collaboration with the Sultan of Sokoto, His Eminence Sa’ad Abubakar III is noteworthy. So also are the initiatives of His Excellency Ignatius Kaigama, the Archbishop of Jos, which include establishing regular contacts between Christian and Muslim leaders, getting Muslim and Christian youths celebrate together, founding an interfaith vocational Centre to train Muslim and Christian youths in skills as well as in being agents/ambassadors of peace.¹⁸

The department of Mission and Dialogue of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN) sometimes in collaboration with Missio Aachen has created a forum for dialogue between Catholic and Muslim women and initiated dialogue between Catholic and Muslim youths.¹⁹ Some other international communities have also expressed interest in assisting Nigeria combat the current interreligious tension through dialogue. For instance in 2011, the UFUK Foundation²⁰ organised an international conference while in 2012 the Canadian and United State embassies organised or sponsored conferences/meetings towards achieving peaceful coexistence and promoting human dignity in Nigeria.²¹ Also in 2012, the Royal Jor

¹⁷ Prominent among them is the newly established Interfaith Activities and Partners for Peace (IFAPP), a platform for interfaith dialogue among Muslim and Christian clerics and leaders for fostering peaceful coexistence and development in Nigeria, founded in Abuja by Rev. Fr. George Ehusani and Malam Nurudeen Lemu.

¹⁸ These and more are outlined in his unpublished Keynote Address at the 2013 CIWA Theology Week, entitled “The Challenge of Faith (in the upsurge of persecution and insecurity) in Contemporary Africa – the Nigerian Experience”.

¹⁹ See Cornelius A. Omonokhua, “The Need for Inter-religious Dialogue” in <http://carefronting.org/the-need-for-inter-religious-dialogue>. Accessed 12/05/2013. He is Director of department of Mission and Dialogue of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN) Abuja.

²⁰ This is a Turkish Organisation established in 2011 in Nigeria “to foster interfaith and intercultural dialogue, stimulate thinking and exchange of opinions”.

²¹ See Omonokhua, “The Need”.

danian Aal Al Bayt Institute (RABIIT) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) sponsored jointly an international delegation of Muslims and Christians on fact-finding mission on “the inter-religious tensions and crises in Nigeria”.

All these attempts notwithstanding, the future of interreligious dialogue in Nigeria is still in jeopardy because of the damage done by the unrelenting assaults of the Boko Haram terrorists and by their refusal to engage in dialogue with the government. Moreover, most of the actions, utterances and positions of the Boko Haram seem to justify the fear of Archbishop Kaigama that the era when Christians and Muslims lived side by side appears to have come to a sad end not only in Nigeria, but also in some other parts of Africa, unless something is done urgently.²² Thus the persistent polarisation of socio-religious and ethno-political issues in Nigeria and the polemics in the ambience of Christianity and Islam have currently placed the interreligious dialogue on great trial. This is very evident in Boko Haram’s arrogant demand that the president should resign and convert to Islam, their systematic acts of violence against Christians and their sympathisers by terrorising, killing and forcibly displacing Christians and resettling Muslims in their place. Today, the process of Islamisation has intensified through a systematic cleansing of the strongholds of Christian population in the North and establishing pockets of Islamic “states” within existing states.

Given such a situation, further dialogue between the two religions can hardly go on, because the fragile harmonious and peaceful life together has been badly damaged by an atmosphere of fear, distrust and hatred. The resistance limit of many Christians has been overstretched. A good number of Christians for fear of the unforeseen attacks by Boko Haram now change their Christian names and keep away from communal worship. The greatest blow is that many Christians, particularly those from the South have fled the targeted areas/states. According to the report of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) after its NEC meeting on 24th May 2012, over 20,000 Christians have fled Maiduguri to neighbouring states between January and May 2012. The number has definitely increased by this year. This is understandable, given a recent survey which shows that since 2009 “more than 400 Churches in the North have been destroyed or closed, making it impossible for Christians

²² See “Challenge of Faith”.

to exercise their right of freedom of worship” anywhere in Nigeria.²³ For many Christians, especially those in the North, time has run out for the Gospel of “No resistance” and of “turning and offering of another cheek” (Matt 5:39), or even of continuous love for the enemy (Matt 5:44-45). Instead now is the time to sell one’s mantle to buy a sword for self-defence, if one has none (cf. Luke 22:36). This is well-articulated by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) thus: “We fear that in the face of continued unprovoked onslaught, Christians might resort to legitimate self-defence.”²⁴ Much needs to be done to rebuild the trust and rekindle the flame of dialogue, which I suppose is at the core of peaceful coexistence. All hands must be on deck at the national and international levels, if this has to be achieved.

4. The Way Forward

The current situation in Nigeria needs a concerted action of the individual, religious groups and their leaders, the Nigerian government and the International Community to tame the tide. To that effect we recommend the following:

i. Personal Resolve of Individual Muslims and Christians

The desire for peace and harmonious co-existence begins with the individual. One must not only aspire to it, but also do something about it. In this regard, the extremist Muslims and their supporters must each resolve to stop the unprovoked attacks on Christians, realising that the pursuit of the agenda of dipping the Qur’an into the Atlantic Ocean is no longer realistic and achievable in the present-day Nigeria. Christians have to show restraint in the face of provocations and resolve not to engage in reprisal attacks. Such a mutual resolve will enable the two groups to appreciate more what unites their different religions than what divides them and, so, restore the badly damaged “dialogue of life”.

²³ See Nkem Ekeopara, “Nigeria, Boko Haram and the US War on Terrorism Part 3,” published 10 May 2013, in <http://www.elombah.com/index.php/articles-mainmenu/15789-nigeria-boko-haram-and-the-us-war-on-terrorism-part-3>. Accessed 12/05/2013.

²⁴ See the Communiqué issued at the end of the Second Plenary Meeting, held September 8-14, 2012, at Umuahia, Abia State.

ii. Proper Religious Formation

There are non-conformists in every religion. But when eliminating the life of fellow human beings and wilful destruction of property become a consistent and observable trait in a particular religion, another look should be taken at the leadership, teachings and process of indoctrination of such a religion. The Emir of Kazaure has rightly described Boko Haram as extremists who have no proper idea of their religion.²⁵ This supports our view that at the roots of the present tension is religion, albeit false religion and faulty understanding of the tenets of religion and its role in society, it is therefore the responsibility of religious clerics/leaders to ensure that sound religious education is given to their members. In fact, it is their responsibility not only to monitor what is being taught but also the competence of the religious teachers. In this way, false doctrines that may lead to religious extremism and violent attacks will be nipped in the bud. Would that Muslims in Nigeria had a central teaching authority who commanded the respect of all members to achieve this!

iii. Need for Formal Education

Incidentally, the current interreligious tension demands good reorientation that proper and formal education offers. Here Western education bids a great opportunity, whether members of Boko Haram accept it or not. The Almajiri system of education has been a great set-back for many Muslim children and youth. Since good education dispels ignorance and guarantees somewhat future wellbeing in life, Muslim parents and guardians in the North must take advantage of the free primary and basic education and send their children and wards to formal schools. The call to abolish the Almajiri educational system prevalent in the Muslim communities must be taken seriously. The system could continue, if it must, only in a complementary role. However, it will be of greater service to God and humanity, if rich Islamic states and individuals who sponsor or champion extremist movements in and outside Nigeria channel their wealth and resources to the wellbeing of their Muslim brothers and sisters, particularly, towards their education, their health and their environment, to make them less reliant folks.

²⁵ Alhaji Najib Hussaini Adamu was speaking on April 13, 2013 on the topic "Crisis of Leadership as source of conflict in Nigeria: the way forward," the Arewa Media Forum (AMF). See, <http://dailyindependentnig.com/2013/04/emir-blames-northern-leaders-for-poverty-in-the-region>. Accessed 02/06/2013.

iv. Need for Security

The problem of insecurity in Nigeria is multi-dimensional and could be felt in many areas of life – religious, economic, socio-political. It is the prerogative of the government to provide adequate security in all its ramifications. As unemployment tends to become a world-wide threat against global peace, and as unemployed youth become easily susceptible to all kinds of crimes, particular attention must be paid to economic security. Nigerians have no cause to be destitute, particularly those in the 'Muslim North', if actually, according to Senator Ita Enang, "over 83 per cent of oil blocs are owned by northerners".²⁶ The Emir of Kazaure, Alhaji Najib Hussaini Adamu, has also recently indicted the Northern leaders for the acute poverty in the North. In his view, the leaders in that part of the country failed to care for the people and the region because of their selfishness.²⁷ Therefore, the orchestrated disparity between wealth, education, healthcare and employment levels in the 'Muslim North' as against the 'Christian South', which for many is the major factor of the current religious tension, must be put in proper perspective.

v. Need for Legal Reform

Perhaps one of the most contentious factors provoking interreligious tension is the seeming contradiction in sections 10 and 275 of Nigeria Constitution, with the one stating that "the government of the Federation or a state shall not adopt any religion as a state religion" and the other tacitly recognising the Sharia Court of Appeal (subject only to the Supreme Court). One wonders how the constitution that makes Nigeria a secular state will at the same time permit the practice of Sharia legal system. It requires visionary, selfless and prudent leadership to carefully address this anomaly which has permissively allowed 12 out of 36 states of the Federation to operate the Sharia law, oblivious of their Christian population.

²⁶ Senator Enang is the Chairman, Senate Committee on Rules and Business. He made the statement at the floor of the Senate during Debate on the Petroleum Industry Bill on March 6, 2013.

²⁷ See his speech at the Arewa Media Forum (AMF). See, <http://dailyindependentnig.com/2013/04/emir-blames-northern-leaders-for-poverty-in-the-region>. Accessed 02/06/2013.

vi. Time for International Community to Break Silence

Since Boko Haram members and their internal supporters are strengthening their international connections, it is time the international community broke silence. The Nigeria government cannot fight the extremist groups that have assumed a global outlook alone. There is need for global solidarity and cooperation. Already many Christians and Muslims have lost their lives. Many also have their homes, their places of worship, and their means of livelihood destroyed. Christians now operate in hiding in three states (Borno, Adamawa and Yobe), as Boko Haram members have carved out their own states within those states and operate the Sharia laws. Simply put, people are socially and religiously dislocated. Apart from cooperation in areas of good intelligence networking, and financial aid in support of victims, the world community can do more in other areas such as checking:

- Influx of arms
- Financial aid from foreign terrorist groups
- Use of extremist groups and tacit support to topple unfriendly (Muslim) governments.
- The so-called "International imperialism of money", i.e., capitalist monetary policies that have left many countries impoverished.
- "Apparent ascendancy of a monolithic (western) worldview," etc.

Above all, the international community must continue to engage the world Muslims in dialogue to ascertain why there is upsurge of Islamic radicalisation, manifesting itself in suicide missions, bomb blasts, plane hijacks and other acts of wilful destruction. Serious question must also be raised concerning the adamant resolve that power to govern a nation with multi-religious culture and people like Nigeria must reside with Muslims, especially their extremist groups. There is a strong fear (imagined or real) among many Muslims that the future of Islam is in danger. Such fear should be allayed. For what agitates Muslims in relation to their religious belief and tradition counts much in the process of re-establishing peaceful co-existence in the world and putting an end to proliferation of hostility.

5. Conclusion

The current interreligious tension, created by Boko Haram should not be confused or mixed up with other conflicts in Nigeria. The tension, as this paper has demonstrated, is primarily based on religious ideologies, notwithstanding other secondary factors. Both the utterances and actions of this extremist Islamic group leave no one in doubt about its mission. That is why I suppose that solutions should be sought at the realm of religion and not by polarising and polemicising other issues as hitherto has been the case, because of the cultural and religious diversity of the country.

Also rather than end their efforts at interreligious dialogue because of the current tension, Christians and Muslims should see it as opportunity to strengthen those elements the Abrahamic religions share in common and intensify efforts at promoting the much needed moral and ethical values in Nigeria. The government should on its part stand up to its responsibilities for the wellbeing of the citizenry by rehabilitating the social and economic structures, particularly the educational institutions, by providing job opportunities for the teeming youth, and by investing in conflict management rather than resorting to sheer military force.

While we hope that the present setting up of the Amnesty Committee for the Boko Haram and the declaration of the State of Emergency by the Federal Government in the three frontline states (Borno, Adamawa, Yobe) will tame the tide, caution must be taken that “genuine amnesty should mean offering pardon to repentant militants and not appeasing criminals and their sponsors to stay calm.”²⁸

Finally, I pray that the fruit of our discussion today may encourage the International Community to shun politics and act promptly *whenever* and *wherever* interreligious conflicts lead to loss of innocent lives and property. For a stitch in time saves nine. I wish also to thank the leadership and members of the Society FREUNDE ABRAHAMS for taking a leap beyond Europe to make the interreligious tension in Nigeria their own concern and indeed, a theme worthy of international debate.

²⁸ Communiqué of the CBCN issued at the end of the Retreat to mark the Year of Faith (May 11-17, 2013, Abuja) n. 4.