

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL **RELIGION** AND CHRISTIANITY IN 21ST CENTURY NIGERIA



ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF

VENERABLE PROF. W.O. WOTOGBE- WENKA

Editors

**G. I. K. Tasié
Ben O. Onu**

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The many authors, numbering well over forty, whose works appear in this festchrift, are related to Venerable Professor Wellington Ornyezinuchimm Wotogbe-Weneka, in one way or the other. Many, are Wotogbe-Weneka's former students who have drank generously from his fountain of knowledge and benefited immensely from his incisive mind, and others, are his colleagues and co-travellers in the academia. The promptness with which they responded to our call for chapter contribution, that we were able to receive over forty papers in a space of few months, demonstrates the acclaim, far and wide, of the guest of this festchrift. For Wotogbe-Weneka remains an extremely outstanding personality whose contributions to the study of religion is remarkable as it is encompassing.

It is against this background, therefore, that we most sincerely thank the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Port Harcourt, for conceiving the idea of this festchrift. In much the vein, our heartfelt gratitude, goes to the members of the Committee on Professor Wotogbe-Weneka's Festchrift, for their contributions, especially in the design of the flyer and banner, calling for chapter contributions, which generated the volume we now have in this festchrift. To the contributors, you have not only demonstrated your love and friendship to the guest of this festchrift but have also shown solidarity and commitment to this noble cause.

Professor G. I. K. Tasie
Dr. Ben Onu.
Editors

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INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE ON MEDIA: A STUDY OF *ISOKAN* ON O' FM RADIO STATION, ILORIN

Abdulwahab Danladi Shittu
&
Muhammad-Busayri, Sulyman

Introduction

Heterogeneity is a life phenomenon that encroaches religion. This fact is not alien to Islam as Allah informs the Muslims that religious diversity is His design (Q.2:213) and therefore, religious tolerance remains an obligation (Q.5:48). Allah enjoins Muslims to engage people of revealed books in religious dialogue (Q.3:64) so that harmony will be the atmosphere of the society. In adherence to this, Muslims explore diverse means of preaching religious tolerance sometimes in collaboration with Christians who share the same idea and interest with them. In the contemporary period, radio stations are used for information dissemination on religious tolerance and the need for peaceful coexistence.

As at July, 2021, Kwara state of Nigeria has about twelve (12) radio stations broadcasting variety of programs on religion, social, politics, and business with 'O' FM (92.5) as one of these stations. *Isokan Musulumi ati Kiristeni* (Unity among Muslims and Christians) is an inter-religious dialogue program relayed on 'O' FM (92.5) every Thursday of the week between 12:30pm and 1:30pm. The program is anchored by Tajudeen Muhammad Thani Alasela, The chief imam of Alasela Central Mosque, Adewole Area, Ilorin and Ojo Kolawole a Pastor at UMCA Church, Oyun Branch, Oyun- Ilorin, Kwara State.

The program airs at a time when religious diversity is not appreciated by members of diverse religions, hence religious conflict takes control over the harmonious environment of Ilorin, Kwara State. To this end, this chapter studies the *Isokan* Radio Program with a view to examining the relevance of the program to conflict management in the society.

Inter-Religious Dialogue in Islam

Religious dialogue is a mutual exchange of idea and understanding between people of diverse faith to prevent and manage conflict among people so that peace would reign in the community and development would be facilitated (Ruhul Amin, 2019). Religious dialogue is a concept preached by every religion with the objective of actualising peaceful relation among people and supporting mutual interaction which would promote harmonious cohabitation among people with diverse faith as enjoined by Allah in Qur'an 49:13. Christian-Muslim dialogue is an effective mode of societal reconciliation the world ever recorded because the Christians and the Muslims occupy almost half of the world's population and they are dynamic in approach to deepening their mutual understanding (Kimball, n.d., para.2). This is not withstanding the hot debate on the need for it between the conservative and the orthodox scholars. Al-Fawzān (1999C.E./1411H.,232-235) for example, does not see

any cause for Muslims to relate with non-Muslims in a friendly atmosphere because the Christians, in his perception, disbelieve in Allah and so, they are enemies of Allah and Allah has warned against relating with His enemies. Al-Fawzān supports his notion with several verses of the Qur'an among which is the verse:

O you who believe, do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies. They are allies of one another. Whoever of you allies himself with them is indeed one of them. God does not bestow His guidance on the wrongdoers. (Q.5:51)

Supporting the position of Al-Fawzān in a mild manner, As-Salmiy (1431A.H.) argues that what Islam recognises as inter-religious dialogue is the invitation of the people of the book to the fold of Islam (*da'wah*).

Despite the genuineness of the reference of Al-Fawzān and his allies, Arikewuyo (2016:176) dissociates with the position and argued that Al-Fawzān must have interpreted the verse in the context of his own environment that is dominated by Muslims. He submitted that the human nation is one and religion should not be seen as an instrument of division. Similarly, Kurucan & Erol (2012:34) debunk every argument against inter-faith dialogue and consider such stand to be an arbitration against the wish of Allah for the creation. A number of verses categorically encourage dialogue with people of the book mainly to establish friendly relation with them. Shittu (2012) argues that inter-faith dialogue is a major instrument for peaceful coexistence and any attempt to eschew interfaith dialogue is an attempt to retard the progress of the society. Interpreting Q.3:64, Az-Zuhayli (1418H.) postulates that inter-faith dialogue is an Islamic approach to having enlightenment between the Muslims and people of the book on their areas of common ground with the objective of moving the society forward.

Instrumentality of Media in inter-faith Dialogue

The term "media" refers to channels of disseminating and receiving information through printing or broadcasting with the aim of updating the receiver. (National Teachers' Institute, Kaduna, n.d., p.34). Raji (2016, p.8) views radio as a means of disseminating, receiving, and imparting ideas to thousands of audience through airing machinery with utility of bandwidths. The efficiency of the broadcast media could never be overestimated not only because it has been in vogue since the beginning of the 20th century and being globally reckoned with but that it has also been wonderfully successful in reaching every nook and cranny of human society. Television and radio are considered to be the major channels through which people receive information with internet gradually taking over the relevance of the two.

In the view of Neumaier and Klinkhammer (2020) regarding the shortfall of media, they argued that the efficacy of media in inter-religious dialogue is enormous as it could have a large coverage but then, the domination of a religious group and unwell researched discourse could turn down the expected result of harmonising the society.

A Glimpse of *Isokan Musulumi ati Kristiani* Program on O' FM Radio, Ilorin
Isokan Musulumi ati Kristiani, a weekly inter-religious dialogue program on O' FM Radio in Ilorin, started on 06/09/2018. A number of topics have been aired from the perspectives of Islam and Christianity. These topics include; the significance of unity between Muslims and Christians, murder, bribery and corruption in the lenses of Islam and Christianity, indecent dress, tax collection and payment, religious tolerance, drug abuse, valentine, fasting and its significance all from the perspective of Islam and Christianity (Ojo, an interview conducted, March 22, 2021).

One of the issues discussed on the program aired on Thursday, 27/08/2020 @ O' FM between 12:30pm and 1:30pm is the importance of unity between Muslims and Christians. Mrs. Arikewuyo (Ameerah of FOMWAN, Kwara Chapter) and Mrs. Mary Oyebinpe (Women Leader, CAN, Kwara Chapter) were invited to talk on the topic from the perspectives of Islam and Christianity. The two guests agree that unity among adherents of the two religions is a requisite for development in the society. The position of the two guests is that love and tolerance are major teachings of the two religions. To substantiate her submission, Mrs. Oyebinpe referred to the portion of the bible that reads:

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same things, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgement. (1 Corinthians 1:10).

Other portions cited by the guest include; Johan 3:16, Rome 12:9 and 1 Corinthians 1:13.

Mrs. Arikewuyo discussed how Prophet Muhammad (SAW) related harmoniously with his contemporary non-Muslims and how he made a written pact for peaceful coexistence with the Jews in Madinah. She substantiates her discussion with the verses of the Qur'an among which is;

Say: People of earlier revelations. Let us come to an agreement which is equitable between you and us: that we shall worship none but God, that shall associate no partners with Him, and that we shall not take one another for lords beside God." And if they turn away, then say: "Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves to God. (Q.3:64)

Imam Alasela and Iya Holy Ghost, hosts of the program, emphasised that God essentially called Himself "Love", hence the adherents of Islam and Christianity who are true worshipers of this God must show mutual love and respect between themselves regardless of their religious and socio-political affiliation. It was unanimously agreed by the guests and the hosts that the revealed books preach and advocate mutual understanding and unity among adherents of the two prominent religions and therefore, any contrary to that is not the will of God. The guests and the hosts requested that government at all levels should abstain from being religiously biased in their administration so that the governed would achieve the purpose of creation on earth. Similarly, a discussion on murder was anchored on the program. Producers of the program vehemently condemned the acts of murder,

infanticide, manslaughter and suicide. Dr. AbdulWahab Danladi Shittu, a lecturer with the Department of Religions in the University of Ilorin, was invited as a guest to have a talk on the issue from Islamic perspectives while Pastor Ojo Kolawole (an anchor of the program) addressed it from the Christian perspectives. The concept was discussed for a whole month because of the importance attached to it and because of the incessant killings in the country as at the time the program was anchored, (January, 7th to February 4th 2021).

The guest speaker in a program aired on 14th January, 2021 maintained that the Glorious Qur'an emphasises on the sanctity of life and more specifically, the soul of every man is considered an exclusive property of Allah that must not be tampered with injuriously by even the custodian of the soul as contained in Q17:85. The guest further explained that the Qur'an equates the destruction of a soul to the destruction of the entire universe (Q5:32) and implication, the gravity of the offence for destroying a soul is as heavy as that of destroying the entire universe. The guest stated in conclusion that both suicide and homicide are ungodly acts which Allah frowns at.

It was also affirmed that there are series of Biblical references to the prohibition of the act of killing people unjustly. Pastor Ojo ascertained that God declared the sanctity of man's soul in various portions of the bible. The pastor referred to portions such as:

You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and *whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court. (Matthew 5:21) and, Then he said to Him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not commit murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not commit steal; you shall not bear false witness..." (Matthew 19:18)*

The speakers agreed that termination of a soul is an exclusive right of God, the creator of the soul. The speakers concluded by condemning the incessant killing in the country and called on the government to be more pro-active in handling the situation because none of the religions support unjust killing and therefore, no any justification for hiding under any religion to kill others.

The significance attached to the fasting of the month of Ramadan in Islam and that fasting of lent in Christianity are among the topics discussed in the program. Pastor Ojo emphasised that fasting is a divine service to God and must be observed with full devotion to the creator but for a Christian to achieve the reward therein, he must observe the rules surrounding it among which is sincerity of purpose. He quoted the biblical verse that reads:

Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face. So that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. (Matt. 6:16-18)

Discussing the topic from Islamic perspective, Imam Alasela posited that piety and being conscientious of Allah in every act are the essence of the Islamic fasting. He

stressed that Ramadan is designed to reform individuals and mould his lifestyle. The Imam argued that fasting in Islam requires patience and endurance as signs of being God conscious. He supported his assertion with verses of the Qur'an among which

O you who believe, fasting is decreed for you as it was decreed for those before you, so that you may be God-fearing. (Q.2:183).

Prospects of Iskan (Unity) Program

A structured interview with ten questions was conducted among twenty listeners of the program and the following information was gathered:
In the first question: the anchors of the program are professionally qualified to present a program and religious dialogue. Nineteen out of the twenty respondents strongly agree to the statement while only one respondent disagree. The response confirms the competence of the Imam and the Pastor that anchor the program on radio.

The second interview was on the non-sentimental attribute of the anchors. The nineteen respondents that agree to the professionalism of the anchor also agree on the non-sentimental attributes of the anchor while one respondent disagree with the statement. One of the respondents who responded in affirmation posited that the Imam and the Pastor sometimes discuss as if they are of the same faith. He mentioned that he had never heard them disagreeing over an issue despite their difference of religion.

The third question was on the professional competence of those that are invited as guests from the two religions. Twelve out of the fifteen respondents agree that the guests invited on different occasions are professionally competent to handle issues of religious dialogue while the remaining eight disagree. The implication is that non-professionals are sometimes invited but, on the average, 60% of those invited understand the objective of the program and are not religiously bias.

On the fourth structured interview question on the academic excellence of those invited as guests to speak on the program, seventeen out of the twenty respondents agree that they are academically excellent. Seven out of the seventeen respondents praised the versatility of the guests invited while just three have reservation for the excellence of the guests.

When questioned whether the program is focused on the fifth question, thirteen out of the twenty respondents agree that the program is focused while the remaining seven made comments that sometimes, issues discussed are general in nature and therefore, the program on such day do not look like a program on religious dialogue. One of those interviewed made an observation that sometimes, the program is on currents affairs, on the welfare of the people or on political issues which are sharp discussions from the purpose for which the program is staged.

The sixth question on the interview list is on the relevance of the program to the people of the community. Eighteen out of the twenty respondents observed that the program provides an avenue for people to present their personal issues of concern for counselling. This in turn, made the anchors to be public counsellors to the populace on both religious and mundane issues. A respondent who was a beneficiary of the social importance of the program observes that the anchors of the program

were sometimes invited by some listeners to reconcile between conflicting Muslims and Christians in communities. An example was given of a reconciliatory role played by the anchors on the 5th of April, 2021 regarding the playing of music that was causing nuisance to the community. The intervention of the anchors of the program which constitutes of an Imam and a Pastor was able to put the issue to a manageable level. The remaining two respondents were reluctant in responding to the question on the social importance of the program.

The seventh question was on the relevance of the program to curtailment of crime in the society. Sixteen respondents out twenty observed that the program is beyond having just a social importance. A respondent mentioned that the day when Dr. Shittu, one of the guests on the program, discussed the prohibition of murder and suicide from Islamic perspective, a woman told him that if not for the discussion, she was determined to go and commit suicide by hanging for an issue that burdened her mind.

The eight question was on the economic importance of the program. Nineteen out of the twenty respondents observed that the program covers the position of Islam on commerce. A respondent commented that the prohibition of usury and fraudulence were once discussed and he was opportune to listen. He posited that the discussion of that day would have undoubtedly impacted positively on the attitude of traders who listened to it.

On the ninth question which asked about the relevance of the program to governance. All the twenty respondents agree that the program is not politicised and so, the fault of the government in the situation of the country is always pointed. Six out of the respondents observed that the relevance of most of the issues discussed to the government are mentioned. A respondent argued that the program is not a correction of the masses alone but of the government and he concluded that the program has the power to reform the society.

The tenth and the last question was on whether the program should be discontinued. All the respondents agreed that the program should not be discontinued rather, more of its type should be aired on other radio stations in order to get the populace enlightened convincingly.

It was generally observed that the program is an inter-religious dialogue anchored on mutual and voluntary ground by spiritual leaders of both Islam and Christianity to sensitise the public on areas of similarity between Islam and Christianity. The anchors display a very high sense of maturity in handling issues without allowing themselves to be carried away by sentiment or emotion. Guests invited to speak are also peaked by selection and are made to know that the objective of the program is to discuss areas of similarities between the two religions even though there could be some fundamental differences. Each time the program is to commence, the Muslim anchor will quote Q.60:8-9 which enjoins Muslims to be tolerant while the Christian anchor will quote; "you shall love your neighbour as yourself" and interpret it to have been an encompassing statement that enjoins the Christians to be friendly with generality of mankind regardless of their faith, tribe, and any other things.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The efficiency of inter-religious dialogue cannot be undermined when leaders of the religions amplify their efforts towards realising round-table dialogue on the differences and similarities of their religions and transmitting their conclusion to their acolytes truthfully. In essence, such step will contribute immensely to serenity of society and security of lives and properties of every member randomly. The essentiality of any inter-religious dialogue could only be ascertained when dialogists portray the spirit of maturity, tolerance, and truthfulness, when they don't allow emotion to seize the fruit of success from them and when they understand that dialogue is not about winning a heart to a religion. The essence of inter faith dialogue is achievable under a government that cares for as evidenced the policy of the second Khalifah, Umar bin Al-Khattāb who treated every citizen equal in the freedom of choice of faith and practice of its rites as pedagogically practised by the Prophet, Muhammad.

So far, attempt has been made to delve into *Isokan* (Unity) radio program which is weekly anchored by Imam Alasela and Pastor Ojo on O' FM discussing scheduled topics in accordance with the Qur'an and Bible injunctions. In essence, the program remains local that needs to be reckoned with at national and international levels. In conclusion, the paper recommends that:

1. For the fact that the program is capable of contributing to the peaceful relation among adherents of the major religions in Nigeria, its sponsorship should be given a worthwhile attention by individuals and government.
2. The period allotted to the period is too short. Considering the time when the two anchors will be available and two or more guests will be invited. The four participants will make contributions within just one hour. The period may be short for them to do justice to the topic of discussion.
3. The public should consider it as a peace-making media program that is capable of preventing inter-religious conflict among Nigerians, hence necessary feedbacks should be given to its anchors to tone up their morale.
4. It should be perceived as an epitome that is worthy of emulation by several peace advocates and experts, in doing such, not only inter-religious relation would improve for better but national integration would be realistic to some extent.

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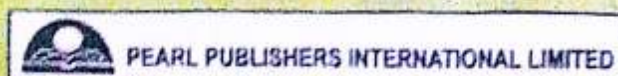
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