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BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is today among the nations of the world that are experiencing the most intensive socio–economic, security and religious challenges in the 21st century. The country has continued to witness raging violent insurgency by armed Islamic fundamentalist groups since the emergence of a president from the Christian south. In this regard, violence and security challenges from the prism of religious fundamentalism are now the single biggest nightmare confronting Nigeria as a nation. Riots in the name of religion are generated by certain elements that have tribal and political grievances to express. In order to achieve such tribal and political goals, demonstrations ironically named religious are staged. The nation has on such unfortunate occasions suffered incalculable human and material losses.

KEYWORDS: Religious Fundamentalism, Interreligious Dialogue, Bible, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The 2011, high profile attack on the United Nations building and the Nigeria Police Force Headquarters in Abuja gave the country a negative image in the international community as one of the countries in the world that is about to go down into the precipice of doom. Relentless bomb attacks unleashed an era of bloody violence in some parts of the country resulting in the killing of many innocent Nigerians mostly made up of vulnerable children, defenseless women and the aged. The revolts in some northern states broke out in the contexts of deprivation, amongst young people, and one of the

recurrent requests has been employment. The impact of the revolt on states in the southern parts of Nigeria, which were also troubled by this crisis, was almost immediate. There was a new intensification of migratory flows, accompanied by tensions. The situation has raised questions that centre on human relations, stability of the social, political, economic and religious fabrics that form Nigeria as a country. The bottom line is that, "the Nigerian citizens who must jointly participate in the process of executing the developmental plans for building their nation profess different religions" (Bidmos 2006:3).

A survey of the situation in Nigeria which is minimally honest and realistic thus excludes the idea that the country can continue with the present religious intolerance. Hence, Onwubiko notes that, "social justice and equity were imperative if peace must be achieved in a society torn apart by tumultuous civil/religious conflicts like in Northern Nigeria" (Onwubiko 2012:67). This is an ethical challenge which cannot be resolved without sincere dialogue and understanding among people, especially in the areas of religious beliefs, practices, and human relations.

Based on the needs of religious understanding and human relations, the objective of the paper is to investigate the biblical basis of inter-religious dialogue in a pluralistic society like Nigeria. The legitimate starting point for the search for religious understanding and better human relations in Nigeria cannot but begin in the Holy Books. As Bidmos observes:

> The books are expected to play a crucial role in the inter-faith discussions by means of providing some hints as to how best to conduct the dialogue. A textual study... brings to the fore the much needed hints to crystallize not only the ideal situation but also how to sustain the situation through the instrumentalization of dialogue (Bidmos 2006:17).

THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, there are obstacles and difficulties to be encountered when dealing with inter-religious dialogue and human relations. The difficulties become obvious particularly if one adheres to the arguments of religious pluralist and the claims to exclusive access to absolute truth characteristics of the Old Testament. Despite this, the Old Testament is fundamental to the discussion of interreligious dialogue. The monotheistic religion of Israel was quite different from that of their neighboring nations. The religions of the other nations were hierophantic in nature. Bosch described the religions of the nations outside Israel as naturalistic. According to him "They express... manifestation of the divine at specific holy places, where the human world can communicate with the divine. This occurs in cults or rituals, in which the threatening powers of chaos and destruction can be neutralized" (1996:17). Bosch brings out the fact that the naturalistic religions, though different from Judaism, is the first sign of the encounter between God and human beings. Adherents of such religions find themselves in a world of grace and sin. The religions are caught up in the cycle of the seasons where times and signs follow each other in a perpetual struggle for supremacy.

The basic content of Israelite religion is the firm conviction that God saved their ancestors from Egypt, led them through the desert and settled them in their own land. To determine their subsequent history, God made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai. Along this line Bosch notes that, "in Israel, history is the arena of God's activity" (Bosch 1996:17). Thus, in Israel's religion, the focus is on what God has done, is doing and is yet to do according to his declared intention. This God is engaged in the active direction of history. It is within this context that one can begin to search for grounds to argue that interreligious dialogue has biblical basis. The Old Testament declares, in the light of interreligious dialogue, that God shows Himself to all peoples and in all religions through His providence. The Psalmist exclaims "There is neither a word nor a discourse whose voice is not heard; through all the earth their voice resounds, and to the ends of their world, their message" (Ps.19:3-4). The Psalmist implies that there is a word that God speaks to the whole earth through the visible world. In tracing the biblical root of interreligious dialogue, one notes the ambivalent attitude Israel exhibited in the practice of dialogue. There were times other religions were seen by Israel as rivals until God himself brought them into Israel's circle of vision. This was confirmed by Bosch when he notes that "Israel.... would not actually go out to the nations, neither would Israel expressly call the nations to faith in Yahweh. If they do come, it is because God is bringing them in" (Bosch 1996:19).

In other words, the interreligious dialogue concretely experienced in the Old Testament has God Himself as the principal initiator. He brought the people of other religions to Jerusalem to worship him there together with his covenant people. To this effect, Seow notes that, "interreligious dialogue is not merely a human initiative. It is truly the call of God to discover him as the only source of all living beings" (2003/1:84). In the light of the above, there are quite a number of positive composite pictures of interreligious encounters in the Old Testament. For instance, there is an eloquent vision in the book of Isaiah, "the nations are waiting for Yahweh and trusting in him" (15.51:5). Again, Isaiah 19:23-25 predicts and provides an admirable basis for interreligious dialogue today. It states:

> On that day there will be a high way from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come to Egypt and the Egyptian into Assyria, and Egyptian will worship with the Assyrian. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyrian, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord has blessed saying, "blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.

These are visible expressions of interreligious relationship; reflecting cessation of hostility and violence in the name of God. The ancestors of Israel were not separated from other people. They coexisted with people of other religious tradition which is the focus of interreligious dialogue in the contemporary time. A clear example that shows that God is interested in all people, thereby providing the Old Testament basis for dialogue seen in the

book of Judges. The book of Judges is the part of the Bible that gives account of how Israel entered the land of Canaan despite the absence of formal and central administration. In this period, God provided for Israel leaders specially gifted in dialogue strategy to "settle disputes among the Israelites themselves" (Carson, France, Matyer & Wenham 1998:261).

Put another way, settling down among different tribes in the hill country around 1225 B.C. required a real dialogue with the already existing people in order to achieve "transformation from the semi-nomadic life of the desert to the sedentary agricultural life of Canaan" (Ellis 1976:189). God's desire for real dialogue and unity during this period is further reinforced in Judges 21:13. It states: "the whole community then sent messengers to offer peace to the Benjamites who were at the Rock of Rimmon." This instance certainly supports dialogue no matter how weak or limited it could be. The interreligious dialogical tendency, which was present in the Old Testament, reached its perfection in Jesus' teaching. The centre of his teaching was his message about God's reign. It was not tied to the people of Israel and that is why one can investigate interreligious dialogue in the New Testament.

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND DIALOGUE

A review of the Old Testament has demonstrated that, among the multi-religious traditions, Israel is to play a role in interreligious dialogue. In the New Testament, the issue received the attention of Jesus Christ and the early church. This was made possible because it was a time of unprecedented economic, social and religious encounters. Nock captured the situation then succinctly thus, "Greek religions and Greek philosophy spread eastward, into Central Asia. At the same time many Eastern religions, particularly those of Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor penetrated into the Greco-Roman world..." (1985: 42). The above captured the period contemporary with Jesus Christ. Sectarian groups such as the Essenes took exclusive stance against people of other religions. "They throw an equally forceful challenge to a sinful world" (2000:86). Other Jewish groups who were more at home with Greek culture, like the Sadducees, took a more favorable attitude to interreligious relationship with the Gentiles. The Alexandrian Jew Philo, during the inter-testamental period, attempted dialogue with non-Jewish contemporaries in their philosophical and religious categories. Some others carried on active interreligious dialogue with the Gentiles with the aim of drawing them into the embrace of Judaism (cf.Mtt 23:15). So, one identifies a deep current of continuity between Old and New Testaments facts in relation to interreligious dialogue. The fact that the atmosphere favored interreligious dialogue made Jesus Christ and the early church to key into the trend.

In the Gospel, Jesus encountered people of other religions which were a significant stamp of approval of dialogue. In Mark 7:24-30 is recorded the encounter Jesus had with the Syro-Phoenician woman. Mathew 8:5-13 recorded the encounter with the centurion. It should be noted that even though Jesus concentrated his mission in Israel, he saw his mission as including interreligious dialogue. To this Bosch notes that, "Jesus turns to all people..." (Bosch 1996: 27) regardless of tribe or religious affiliation. His mission is one of dissolving alienation and breaking down walls of hostility, of crossing boundaries between individuals and religions (Bosch 1996: 28). It was the

reality of his dialogical disposition that made Jesus to be amazed by the centurion from Capernaum. Jesus exclaimed: "truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Mtt.8:10).

In this vein, interreligious dialogue prefigures people from all religions "who go into the kingdom of God" (Mtt.12:31) ahead of the religious establishment of the day. Thus, Jesus sayings, parables and stories very clearly nourished the idea and practice of interreligious dialogue and peaceful coexistence. Hahn confirms this when he submits that: "Jesus was, in fact, a full-fledged missionary to the Gentiles. The reports of his movement through Gentile territory, his open attitude to Gentiles and the universal inter-religious summons to the apostles support this" (Dorr 2000:17-18). The early church's willingness to appreciate interreligious dialogue, therefore, finds root in the teachings of Jesus.

In Acts 17:19-34, Paul involved in interreligious dialogue with the Greeks of Athens. The interreligious dialogue took place at the *Areopagus* which is a Greek term for Mars Hill or council. The episode is an example of brilliant interreligious dialogue in the New Testament. In this instance, Paul seemed to have identified the Christian God as similar to one of the gods worshipped in Athens as the unknown god. Thus, despite the seriousness of the charge of 'preaching foreign gods' brought against Paul, the Athenians were more interested in listening as an aspect of dialogue than in preventing the spread of Paul's teaching. In the light of the foregoing, Dorr explains that: "dialogue between the religions is one of the most powerfully effective ways in which Christians and other religious believers can open themselves to the influence of the Spirit of God" (Dorr 2000:17-18). Biblical scholars note that the Athenian discourse is a good example and model of interreligious dialogue. In this regard, Onwubiko writes:

> From the start of his disclosure the orator speaks of the "cosmos", a term that is found nowhere in the Old Testament. The presentation of God as creator of the world was current in the Greek philosophers.... The heart of the discourses argumentation is formed by verse 28 which refers to two Greek poets... consequently the whole development of the interreligious discourse could be understood by a Greek without any knowledge of the Old Testament (1991:115).

In sum, one sees the urgent need of bringing religious truths before the people of today through the context of interreligious dialogue rather than through aggressive proselytization. The Areopagan method remains relevant as a method that encourages cordial human relations as religions evangelize. Paul at Aeropagus was more of the dialogue of life that leads to the dialogue of religious experience. Dialogue of life is more of sharing common concerns while the dialogue of religious experience centers on sharing the spiritual riches such as ways of praying. For these attempts of interreligious dialogue to succeed, there is need for people to make a serious effort to understand and

respect each other's religious values, convictions and rituals. So, the dialogue of life which Paul demonstrated in Athens leads smoothly to the dialogue of religious experience. According to Dorr, "the ideal is that there should not only be a sharing about each other's faith but an actual sharing of faith to whatever degree is possible, culminating, hopefully, in joint prayer-services where that is feasible" (2000:21). In other words, each faith tradition in Nigeria should offer people a distinctive perspective on the deeper meaning or aspects of life.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN DIALOGUE

The recognition and acceptance of the Holy Spirit in the practice of interreligious dialogue adds vitality to peaceful co-existence. By the finger of God, which may be understood as the Holy Spirit, peoples' hearts are prompted to dialogue. It was in Antioch that this decisive power and presence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of dialogue, manifested. Antioch was the third largest city in the ancient world, after Rome (Bright 1980: 414-415). It became the first great city in which Christian religion gained footing due to open and active pneumatic presence in dialogue. Peaceful coexistence among different races was manifest in Antioch. Luke, the evangelist, mentioned that it was in Antioch that the word "Christians" was first used (Acts. 11:26).

Kim explains the role of the Holy Spirit in interreligious dialogue by highlighting the experience of Stanley J. Samartha. According to him, Samartha, a minister of the church of South India, had a life journey from Mangalore to Bangalore. Mangalore is a provincial town where the daily relationship of people of different faiths provided a model that helped him fashion a vision for interfaith dialogue. Samartha, coming to terms with Hindu philosophy, developed deep respect for Hindus and people of other faith. He rejected the term 'non-Christian', preferring a more positive term 'our neighbors of other faiths.' He came up with a round-table model of dialogue as an alternative to mission. In the light of the above, Kim concludes that: "dialogue is not so much a method or technique, but a mood, a spirit, an attitude of love and respect for our neighbors of other faiths" (2007:73). Put another way, the dynamics of interplay of different faiths cannot but take place in the milieu of the Holy Spirit. Hence, in sincere interreligious dialogue, there is the assurance that the Spirit of God will be with people who search in solidarity with other committed people, for a model of life that respects others and show care for the earth.

Till date, it is the Holy Spirit that acts in the hearts of people of all religions, moving them to dialogue and combined efforts to build up a just society. As noted in the document: "*Dialogue and Proclamation*," the Holy Spirit places on the lips and hearts of people involved in dialogue the words they could not find by themselves. The document states it thus: "the Holy Spirit predisposes the soul to be open and receptive to the Good News and to the truth of dialogue" (1991:185). The Holy Spirit is here confirmed as the force that witnesses through interreligious dialogue. It manifests precisely at the point where parties in dialogue may be helpless and incapable of words. It is indeed the Holy Spirit that brings men and women together in interreligious dialogue.

The presence of the Holy Spirit is therefore, not human achievement but God's own work. Dupuis confirms this fact when he submitted that interreligious dialogue consists "of discovering the active presence and life

giving influence of the Holy Spirit" (1989:152). He went further to argue that because the Holy Spirit gives life to the cosmos, transforming all within it, interreligious encounter cannot be left out in the work of perfecting human relations. As Paul notes, "where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17), there is peaceful coexistence, and dialogue. This is to say that the Holy Spirit is not absent but present and active in the multi-religious society of today's Nigeria. Hence, true dialogue and genuine human relations, where they exist, are marks of the Holy Spirit in the world. This accounts for the reason why the biblical foundations for interreligious dialogue are nonetheless visionary and compelling. Jesus Christ himself demands that we reach out to others in their own conditions of life through the power of the Holy Spirit. It requires truths of religions, openness, and sincerity in dealings with one another.

CONCLUSION

This study offered intellectual intervention to the concept of interreligious dialogue which is very much needed to put to an end the terrible violence currently plaguing different parts of Nigeria. It summarized the Biblical teachings and references to interreligious dialogue. The study argued that Israel served primarily as the center of that which God has spoken in the Old Testament. In that process, God is discovered in interreligious dialogue as one who commits in the present to be involved with his people in the future regardless of religious affiliations. The Old Testament brings to the fore the conviction that God's compassion embraces all the nations of the earth. But as the political and social conditions of people of different nations deteriorated, there increasingly developed the expectation of peaceful coexistence among nations.

In the New Testament is seen increased willingness to freely adapt and interact with nations and religions. Part of the concern of Jesus was to break barriers and mend broken human relationship through dialogue. Jesus words and attitude, therefore gave proper credence to the New Testament foundations of interreligious dialogue. In this light, the exclusivists and inclusivity positions have no grounds for human relations. The challenge is now for adherents of missionary religions in Nigeria to eschew the attitude of do or die missions. Interreligious dialogue has come to stay and it makes room for the active sanctifying role of the Holy Spirit. One's conviction is that Nigerians can relate better despite religious diversity if sincere dialogue is encouraged and religious superiority downplayed in our social, political, economic and otherwise engagements.

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