

RELIGION AS A UNIFYING FACTOR IN KWARA STATE OF NIGERIA: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE¹

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Introduction

It is important to pigeonhole major concepts in this topic. The terms which are relevant for clarification and introduction are religions, unifying factor, Kwara State and Islam.

The term religion has root in the Latin word "religare" which means to bind fast. Religion is literally defined as the belief in the existence of God or gods. It also encompasses the actions, inactions, and activities with such belief. It is an institution with a recognized body of communicants based on organized sets of beliefs which shape the attitude of believers towards the essence of reality. It should be underscored however, that in Islam, religion is seen as the holistic existence of a Muslim, that is, submission to the will of the Creator who has scheduled a total way of life, where there is no bifurcation between daily activities and spiritual worship, rather every act, whether considered mundane or not is worship. Generally, in Nigeria there are three distinct religions: Islam, Christianity and traditional religions.

Religion is an important and fundamental aspect of human existence. It is to be noted that while Social Sciences, Human Sciences, or Natural Sciences focus on interaction between humanity and society, other human beings and nature respectively; Theological or Religious Sciences transcend the interaction of human beings with their Creator as the interaction shapes the relationship between them and the environment which includes; Nature, other beings and the society. Religious Sciences are thus the art and science of living a purposeful and ultimately rewarding life. This probably explains the dominance in most human beings of religion, despite its being just one of the numerous identities.

The compound concept "unifying factor" refers to one of the things that cause or influence

the unity of a given society. These are things that bind or make for unity in a multi-religious society like ours. Thus, the focus of this paper is how our beliefs as Muslims, Christians or Traditionalists can be a unifying factor rather than a divisive factor for the growth and development of the state; Kwara State of Nigeria.

The State was created on the 27th May, 1967 as one of the initial twelve states of the Federation.² It comprised of old Ilorin and Kabba Provinces of the old Northern Region of Nigeria. It was initially known as the West Central State and later renamed Kwara State. On 3rd of February, 1975, the Igala speaking area of the then eastern part of Kwara State was carved out and merged with part of the Borgu Local Government Area was transferred to Niger State, while five other local government areas, i.e. Oyi, Okene, Okehi and Kogi were merged with the Igala speaking part of the former Benue State to form the present Kogi State. Asa, Baruten, Edu, Ekiti, Ifelodun, Ilorin East, Ilorin West, Irepodun, Kaiama, Moro, Offa, Oyun, Ilorin South, Isin, Oke-Ero and Patigi are the sixteen Local Government Areas of the State.

Official statistics provided by the Kwara State Ministry of Information, Youth, Sports and Social Development as at 1984 puts the religious distribution of the State as 87% Muslims, 6% Christians, and 7% others. The transfer of five predominantly Christian Local Government Areas to Kogi and one predominantly Muslim Local Government to Niger must have altered significantly the religious distribution of the State. The State is largely made up of three major ethnic groups, i.e. the Yoruba, Nupe and Baruba. Islam on the other hand is the way of life of Muslims (those who submit unconditionally to the will of Allah) who constitute about 21% of the world population and are distributed as at 1996 as contained in table I below.

Table I. Distribution of Muslims

Africa	308,660,000	27.4%
Asia	778,362,000	69.1%
Europe	32,032,000	2.8%
Latin America	1,356,000	0.1%
North America	5,530,000	0.5%
Oceania	385,000	0.0%
World	1,126,325,000	100%

Source: Britannica Yearbook, 1997

Nigeria as could be seen from table II is the 8th country with the largest number of Muslims in the World as at 1996. Contrary to popular

assumption, fewer than 15% of Muslims are Arabs.

Table II

Country	Number in millions
Indonesia	182.2m
Pakistan	136.9m
Bangladesh	115.0m
India	108.6m
Iran	63.9m
Turkey	61.0m
Egypt	51.6m
Nigeria	40.2m
Algeria	29.1m
China*	29.1m
Morocco	29.1m
Iraq	21.4m
Sudan	20.4m
Ethiopia	18.3m
Afghanistan	18.0m
Yemen	16.1m
Saudi Arabia	16.0m
Uzbekistan	15.9m
Malaysia	10.5m
Mali	9.4m
Tunisia	9.0m
Somalia	8.5m
Senegal	7.7m
Niger	7.5m
Kazakhstan	6.9m
Guinea	6.5m
Azerbaijan	6.1m
Cote d'Ivoire	5.9m
Libya	5.2m
Tajikistan	5.2m
Burkina Faso	5.0m
Jordan	3.6m
Syria	3.5m
Cameroon	3.1m

Turkmenistan	3.1m
Chad	2.9m
Ghana	2.8m
Kyrgyzstan	2.8m
Israel (Palestine)	2.4m
Mauritania	2.3m
Mozambique	2.3m
Sierra Leone	2.0m
Bosnia	1.8m
Serbia	1.8m
United Arab Emirates	1.8m
Lebanon	1.7m
Oman	1.7m
Malawi	1.5m
Tanzania	1.5m
Albania	1.4m
Bulgaria	1.3m
Brunei	1.2m
Kuwait	1.2m
Benin	0.95m
Gambia	0.94m
Togo	0.85m
Macedonia	0.59m
Bahrain	0.51m
Comoros	0.51m
Guinea Bissau	0.49m
Qatar	0.47m
Djibouti	0.45m
Singapore	0.44m
Liberia	0.40m
Maldives	0.25m
Mauritius	0.19m
Sahara	0.13m
Suriname	0.10m
Cyprus	0.04m
Gibraltar	0.03m

*Muslims in China represent 2.4% of the population.

Source: www.islam.about.com/library/weekly/aal120298.htm

See also: www.adherents.com data base

Religion and Unity in Human History

Ideally from the Latin root of the term religion one can see that religion is meant to be a thing that makes for unity and brotherhood, it is supposed to unite people. Multiplicity of faith is not supposed to disunite but to serve as strength. Allah had noted in several Quranic verses that if He had willed He would have made human beings into a single community. That is, homogeneity would have been established in terms of colour, race, religion, etc. Allah in His wisdom created people as "male and female, an made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another..." (Quran 49 verse 13). He also emphasized "Certainly, your efforts and deeds are diverse (different in aims and purposes)" (Quran 92 verse 4).

History is replete with information on how Islam served as a bond for diverse people in the world. For instance, before the advent of Islam the Bedouin Arabs were valiant warriors against one another. The families in Medina were competing for leadership before Islam. Islam came and united the diverse groups for the service of Allah. The Jews in Medina and the Christians in Egypt has better deals under the rule of the Muslims. Islam created a multi-ethnic, multi-national, multi-racial, multi-social religious society that was the envy of other societies. A Christian, King Najjash, was one of the benefactors of Islam in its infancy. This explains the immediate cause for the revelation of Qur'an Chapter 3 verse 199 wherein Allah asserts the preparedness of All to reward goodness and sincerity irrespective of whether or not the doer proclaims that he/she is a Muslim.³

However, in recent history, religion has served as source of friction and enmity in several parts of the world. This has engendered the wrong notion that religion is the opium of the people. History has revealed several inter-religious conflicts (Muslims against Christians, Jews against Christians, Muslim against Hindus, etc) and sectarian intra-religious wars (Muslims against Muslims, Christians against Christians, Hindus against Hindus, etc). In fact, one of the longest wars in human history, the fifteen-year-war was fought between people of the same religious faith in Europe. The question then may be; can religious ever be a unifying factor? This is important in view of the sectional religious conflicts which had been witnessed in several parts of the world, even in Nigeria.

It must be emphasized that religion, when practiced as expected, is a veritable tool for unity in a heterogeneous society. Islam as a way of life literally means peace and submission to

the will of Allah. That is, peace in submission to laws and commands of Allah, the Creator and Sustainer; peace with other human beings, peace with non-human beings and other objects created by Allah. Islam as a religion preaches morality, justice, equity, and service to humanity. These are sublime virtues which are important for the unity and peace of any given society. The goal of Islam is to make life pure and beautiful. Islam encourages the stretching of hands to other religions or other people who are sincere and in sympathy with Islamic ideal of a morally safe world. That is to establish a united society, where love is shared, hatred is detested, and cooperation is established.

Religion a Veritable Tool for Unity

Disunity on the basis of religion stems from intolerance, ignorance of the beliefs of others, unhealthy competition, etc. In order to promote unity through religion, Islam prescribed certain code of conducts for his adherents in their dealings with people of other faiths. Every Muslim had been made responsible to employ good manners in dealing with all human beings, whether Muslims or non-Muslims. It is incumbent for Muslim to be truthful in dealing with non-Muslims. Some of these are enunciated as follows.

First, a Muslim should have compassion and general mercy for Muslims and non-Muslims. A Muslim should feed others if they are hungry, provide them with drink if they are thirsty, treat them if they are sick and as if to save them from destruction, and protect them against harm. The Prophet noted "be compassionate to those who are on earth, so that Who is in heaven will be merciful to you".⁴ Muslims are encouraged to share in the joy or sorrow of the people of the other faiths. The Prophet was noted to have stood up while the corpse of a Jew was being taken for burial as a sign of respect and commiseration with the family who had lost a member.

Second, a Muslim is not to hurt people of other religions in their property, blood or honour, if they do not attack Muslims. The Prophet noted "Whoever hurts a Dhima (a non-Muslim under the reign of Muslims) I will be his opponent on the day of judgment".⁵

Third, Muslims are permitted to offer food or drinks to non-Muslims, while the Muslims are permitted to eat the food of the people of the book (Christians and Jews) "The food of the people of book is lawful unto you"⁶ (Quran 5 verse 6). The Prophet used to be called for the Jewish food in Medina and he answered such invitations. Christian guests of the Prophets and

his successors (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali) were taken care of by the Muslims.

Fourthly, Muslims are to greet people of other faith when they sneeze asking for Allah's mercy on them, and to assist them in other ways. Their places of worship are not to be desecrated or destroyed. The Christians from Najran were accommodated in the mosque by the Prophet.

Fifth, Muslims are commanded by Allah not to abuse the Gods or faith of others. "And insult no those they worship besides Allah, lest they insult Allah wrongly without knowledge. Thus, we have made fair-seeming to each people its own doings, then to their Lord is their return..."⁷

Sixth, the Quran commands Muslims not to induce such debates with Jews and the Christians that may encourage mutual enmity clashes and quarrels. "And do not indulge in disputation with the people of the book except in a refined way unless with those of them who inflict wrong..."⁸ (Quran 29 verse 46).

Seventh, People of other faith are not to be forced into the religion of Islam "No compulsion in religion, guidance is distinct from falsehood" (Quran 2 verse 256). Muslim men who marry Christians cannot even force them to join the religion of Islam. Acceptance of Islam is borne out of conviction and readiness to submit to the command of Allah⁹.

Eight, a Muslim is not to maltreat those with whom the Muslim has ideological religious differences. Islam insists on treating the followers of other religions kindly. The Prophet said "The prayer of the oppressed is considered even if the oppressed person is an infidel; there is no barrier between his prayer and its answer."¹⁰

The aforementioned, though not exhaustive are glittering Islamic ethics for Muslims on how to relate with non-Muslims, particularly the people of the book (Christians and Jews). It is the design of Allah to create a forest of religion and not a reserve of religion. If Allah had willed or wanted every individual would have subscribed to a single faith like the Angels. Allah proclaimed: "Mankind were but one community, then they differed (later) and had it not been for a word that went forth before from our Lord, it would have been settled between them regarding what they differed".¹¹

Islam encourages and promotes understanding of other people's points; it tolerates and accommodates their feelings and behaviours. This is aimed at ensuring harmonious relation within the human society. Islam recognizes that no nation, tribe, race, or religious group can live as an Island, thus, Islam creates ways of ensuring unity in the society.¹²

Monotheism as Bedrock for Good Citizenship and Inter-Religious Harmony.

An article "Islam: The Religion based on God's unity (TAWHID)"¹³ has beautifully highlighted some unique qualities which belief in absolute unity of God inculcates in believer and which are essential for fostering unity, understanding and love among humanity.

Tawhid (belief in Allah) ensures that a true believer

- is not narrow minded in outlook. He/She looks at every person and thing as emanating and belonging to the only and one Allah and so does not regard anything on earth as a lien.
- Commands the highest degree of self respect and self esteem. He never bows in homage to any of Allah's creatures be it material or spiritual.
- Never debase humanity by being subservient to any pleasure or dispensary of pleasure.
- For-sees no other means of success and salvation except from the purity of soul and righteousness of behaviour. He is conscious of the fact that unless he lives right and acts justly, he is heading for perdition.
- Does not become hopeless, frustrated and disappointed under any circumstance. His trust in Allah imparts on him extra ordinary confidence in the grace of Allah.
- Is not engaged in an unnecessary fear of death or love of safety for he knows that Allah can provide both. No life can be taken except by Allah's wish.
- Is endowed with peace and contentment which pursues his mind of inordinate passions and jealousy, envy and greed and keeps away the ideas of resorting to unfair means of achieving success.
- Obeys and observes the Divine Law. He knows that Allah knows both the open and secret and thus would not hide under anonymity to perpetuate evil.

From the foregoing, it should be clear that most of what

Manifest in religious disturbances and riots are actually indicative of hypocrisy and payment of lip-service to religion, particularly Islam. All does not love a person who propagates hatred and enmity among His creatures but an evil mind continuously and tirelessly search for avenues to commit atrocities and religion which in itself is meant for harmony is often paradoxically

employed to vent such irreligious prejudices and manifestations.

Examples of Faith-Based Unifying Initiatives in Kwara State

The Department of Religions, University of Ilorin published in 1987, a book, (co-edited by the present writer) entitled "The place of Religion in the Development of Nigeria".¹⁴ The book is a resource material for the records of the significant roles which religion has played or could play in the development of Nigeria in general and Kwara State in particular. The present writer¹⁵ establishes that about 20% of Post primary institutions in Kwara State were, as at 1987, being sponsored and established by religious bodies apart from about 35% of the institutions which were sponsored in the name of communities by both Christians and Muslims. The feat is an example of faith-inspired development efforts. We have also elsewhere¹⁶ emphasized the centrality of fairness and justice to the sustenance of a peaceful society of Nigeria.

Furthermore, the present Federal administration in Nigeria facilitated the establishment of a national forum called Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) to promote inter-religious peace and harmony in Nigeria. Through the Council, which comprises of twenty five representatives of each of Islam and Christianity, a number of significant inter-religious projects and activities have been executed. The faith-based campaign against HIV/AIDS is but only one of such initiatives. The Kwara State Inter-Religious Board plays for Kwara State, the role of NIREC at the Federal level.

In addition, residents of Kwara State have continued to utilize the opportunities of religious festivals such as Idel-fitri and Christmas to extend inter-religious goodwill and solidarity among adherents of each of the two major religions in the State through exchange of visits and gifts. Religious rites such as funeral, marriages, naming ceremonies, graduation ceremonies are also constant avenues for silent but effective promotion of religious interaction and understanding in the State.

Kwara State, being a heterogeneous state, has a number of ethnic and social groups which Islam and Christianity have effectively checkmated and through instrumentality of religious brotherhood whittled down and made secondary to the two major religious blocks. One point which is often over-looked about religion (particularly Islam and Christianity) is that it reduces primordial affinity and promotes inter-communal integration. Islam for instance, through the Kwara State branch of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs promotes interaction among Muslims of different ethnic groups in the State thereby reducing ethnic prejudices and bias which could hinder social

integration in the State. For Example, the Barubas in Kwara State could have felt more alienated as a minority in the state than they appear today, were it not for inter-ethnic religious interaction which engenders Islamic brotherhood among the three major ethnic groups in the State. Similarly, a critical observer would not the role Islam has played in reducing mutual suspicion and age-long prejudice and fixations between the Yorubas of the Central and Southern Senatorial districts of Kwara State. The sense of religious brotherhood among the Christians in Kwara State is also noticeable and helps in the promotion of inter-ethnic harmony in the State.

One major agent of inter-religious understanding in Kwara State which appears not so recognized is the Kwara State College of Arabic and Islamic Legal Studies (CAILS). The college through its establishment of secular courses such as in Legal Studies, Languages Studies, Mass Communication etc. has wiped away the myth and prejudice which the mention of Arabic or Islamic Studies hitherto invoked in non-Muslims circles. It is my candid observation that the apparent failure of Arabic and Christian Teachers Colleges which were established by the State, is traceable to poor implementation rather than to the conceptualization of the project.

Finally, the effect of the Department of Religious, University of Ilorin in the promotion of religious harmony and understanding in the State requires further studies and analysis. The marvelous role of the Department can not be over emphasized. The philosophy of the Department and the integrative nature of its curricula have engendered in its products, many of whom serve in various capacities in both the public and private sectors of the State, a sense of mission in the promotion of scholarship and harmony in the graduates. It is my conviction that the Kwara State Inter-Religious Board is poised to tap the talent resources of the Department in the discharge of its onerous responsibility. It is also advisable that the Department reach out to the Board with a view to creating a partnership that would be of mutual benefit to both the society and the Department. The Department, after the recent excision of Arabic Language from it, currently offers three distinct degrees of Christian Studies, Islamic Studies and Comparative Religious Studies.

Conclusion

Islam as a way of life encourages dialogue as a way of ensuring understanding within a given society. Groups in a multi-religious society are likely to have differences in perception of issues. However, differences in perception should not degenerate to conflict or misunderstanding. The Islamic call for morality, accountability, justice, equity, etc., which are shared with people of other faiths should bring us together to establish a better society. We should

stand together to fight against corruption, prostitution, armed robbery, etc. This is the real challenge to religious communities.

Notes and References

1. I am indebted to Dr. M. Yusuf of the Dept. of Science Education of the University of Ilorin for his assistance in data collection and production of this paper. 24/11/05.
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3. Qur'an Chapter 3 verse 199
4. Hadith
5. Hadith
6. Qur'an Chapter 5 verse 6
7. Qur'an Chapter 9 verse 111
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