

IGNORANCE - THE BANE OF INTERRELIGIOUS CRISIS IN NIGERIA: AN EXPOSITION

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Abstract

The dimension of religious ignorance as an essential issue of enquiry has not received much desired attention in the Interreligious discourse in Africa and Nigeria as a case study; this is the gap this study intends to fill with the aim of providing wider perspective at which the concept of ignorance, given its content, context and intent has tendency to aggravate or has aggravated interreligious conflicts in Nigeria. Using analytical method of approached to interpret information generated through unstructured interview, the paper demonstrates that a large number of Christians and Muslims are ignorant of their religions on the one hand and the religions different from the one they practice on the other hand and this account for unhealthy religious relations among Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. The paper, therefore, recommends among other things that scholars of Religious studies in both secular and non secular educational institutions should take the lead in educating religious practitioners in schools and public places with support from the press and the government. It is believe of this paper that this orientation would help stem the tide of interreligious conflicts arisen from ignorance

Introduction

Debate about interreligious conflict in Nigeria with attention paid to its remote and immediate causes and effects is no longer new in Conflict and Peace Scholarship Studies. However, this does not in any way suggest that the whole discussion is exhaustible given the fact that interreligious conflict is a recurrent issue now and then in the history of religiously polarized Nigerian society .For instance the dimension of religious ignorance as an essential issue of enquiry has not been essentially considered in

some of the outstanding causes of interreligious conflicts specifically between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. In other words, the concept and its manifestation in the debate have not received much of the desired attention perhaps, as a fundamental factor underlying overall factors precipitating interreligious conflict in Nigeria. This is the gap this study intends to fill so as to provide wider perspective at which the concept of ignorance, given its content, context and intent could be explored to the maximum in the debate. Given an example of expression of religious ignorance and implications for interreligious conflict in Nigeria and perhaps in the world, David Barrett writes:

There are 270 large religious traditions, and many smaller ones, in the world. Many people believe that: their own religious tradition is unique. It is divinely inspired, free of error. Some consider their faith's holy text to be the unique Word of God, humans without the inspiration of God created other religions. They are very human documents, mistaken in parts, limited by the scientific knowledge and cultural outlook of the authors. Humans created their God or pantheon of deities. Religiously based conflict is facilitated when believers from different religions come in contact with each other, each believing that they alone have the complete "truth" and each believing that the others are in serious error¹

The above is a claim to religious truth on the one hand and falsehood on the other hand. It is perceived as truth in the sense that each religious person commenting on the reality and the essence of religion he/she practices is fond of claiming to be practicing religion of truth as against others whose religions are based on falsehood on the ground that the two of them belong to different and perhaps unparallel religious faiths. Ironically, the person whose religion is being described as false will not only dispute the allegation but would rather submit that his religion is the only one placed on the truth while the religion of his friend based on falsehood; therefore allegations, bickering, squabbles remain unending. Debates about the statement become an unending one. If care is not

taken, it would degenerate into conflicts. Here, it appears that each of the two religious practitioners used in the illustration is ignorant of other religions different from the one he/she practices.

Religious ignorance and its nature

Religious ignorance in the context of our discussion refers to lack of knowledge or information about particular doctrinal religious beliefs and practices. It could be lack of sufficient knowledge or information about religion we ourselves practice by another person belonging to a religious faith different from our own. . The meeting point between the two is lack of sufficient knowledge about a particular religion in terms of its cardinal beliefs and practices at one point or the other. . For example, an average Nigerian Christian/Muslim does not have sufficient knowledge of what Christianity or Islam stands for. This happens because majority of them either rely on their pastors, Imams or Sunday school teachers for the little they know about the religion as most of them hardly create time to read the Bible or the Qur'an on their own. The over dependence on the religious leaders probably heightens the degree of religious ignorance among Nigerian religious practitioners. Besides, a few of them are religious converts who are probably yet to have firm root in the new religion. Even the old converts, especially the first generation who got converted from African traditional religions to either Islam or Christianity also still know little about the religions because some of them were blackmailed to become Christians or Muslims not that they willingly changed their religions. This is evident in some of the words used by Christian and Islamic missionaries when they had contact with the traditional religious practitioners. For example, the

traditional religious practitioners were called names such as *ajebo* - ritual eater, *elebo*-ritual maker. This got to the climax when the Western anthropologists who studied African Traditional Religions used derogatory words such as paganism, fetishism, juju, and idolatry (to mention but a few) to describe them².

Ironically, it is interesting to note that most of the first generation of Christian converts especially in Abeokuta, the town through which Christianity got to Yoruba land, are practicing Christianity today because Christianity got to their land before Islam, while most of the Muslims today especially in places like Iwo in Osun State are Muslims today because Islam got to their land before Christianity. In other words, most Christians today, especially the first generation ones could have been Muslims if Islam had been the first of the foreign religions to get to their land, while the early adherents of Islam could have been Christians today if Christianity had got to their land before Islam.

Two issues emerge from the foregoing illustrations. One, an average Christian and Muslim hardly knows up to 50% of the content and intent of Christianity and Islam respectively especially on some doctrinal issues and the sacred languages of his/her religion. During a casual discussion with some Muslims regarding the level of their understanding of Arabic the language with which they say their prayers, they confessed to me that they only memorized it not that they actually knew the context and the content of the Arabic words used in their liturgical activities. The same could be said of some Christians who use some Latin words in their liturgical activities. Alluding to this experience in religious circles, Stephen Prothero gives a pertinent illustration of his personal experience resulting from his interaction with his students which runs as follows:

In a religious quiz I give my Boston University students every year, I am told that Paul bound Isaac and Abraham was blinded on the road to Damascus. Catholic students are unable to name even one of the seven sacraments of their faith. Protestant students think 'God helps those who help themselves' is a Bible quote story. And Hindu students cannot tell me even one Hindu scripture³

The above shows the magnitude of ignorance among religious practitioners on issues related to their religions. It is no wonder why some of them make erroneous claims about the tenets of their religions at public debates. As Stephen Prothero equally affirms, this religious ignorance absents millions of Americans from religiously inflected political debates about abortion, capital punishment, and the environment⁴. The second issue is that, the same set of people who are ignorant about many things regarding their religions are the ones who pass erroneous comments about religions different from their own. This ignorance is manifested in misquoting the scriptures, quoting scriptures and interpreting them out of context, intent and content, quoting the scriptures contemptuously and stereotype interpretation of the scriptures among others.

Out of the two ways by which Nigerian Christians and Muslims manifest religious ignorance, the second type is the worst because it deals with commenting on religions of the other. The expression of ignorance in this regard is often interpreted as a calculated attempt to denigrate, malign, belittle and undermine the religions of other people hence the degree of bickering, wrangling, internal strife and backbiting often accompanying the act. The ignorance expressed in the listed forms do generate interreligious conflict especially when they pertain to doctrinal issues such as God and godhead, salvation, eschatology, angelology, worship, prayer and fellowship and the use of religious language such as the Arabic, Greek and Hebrew and also the practice of speaking in tongues among Christians as an example among others.

Perhaps it is in the light of this that, Unity Movement for Reforming Society in Lahore / Pakistan made this special prayer towards peace and religious tolerance in Lahore/Pakistan:

Merciful God, You made all of the people of the world in your own image and placed before us the pathway of salvation through different Preachers who claimed to have been Your Saints and Prophets. But, the contradictions in their teachings and interpretations of them have resulted in creating divisions, hatreds and bloodshed in the world community. Millions of innocent men, women and children have so far been brutally killed by the militants of several religions who have been committing horrifying crimes against humanity, and millions more would be butchered by them in the future, if You do not help us find ways to reunite peacefully⁵.

Research Methods

We used many methods in gathering and analyzing information regarding the issue of ignorance in religious circle or better put among religious practitioners. These range from experiential, interview to analytical methods. Experientially, I relied much on the first hand information about some expressions made by the pastors or evangelists regarding Islam especially in their sermons. As a church worker and a religious scholar as well as some one trained in Conflict management and Resolution mechanisms and peace practice, what any religious person says about religion/s different from his/her own always catch my attention and provoke research work of this nature. Apart from the comments passed in the Church, some one also made during the Islamic call to worship is also interesting. For instance in the village where I reside, Muslims have the tradition of using drum-size loud speakers so that everybody in the village is always awake especially in the morning during the call to worship. A lot of information is disseminated through the channel not only to Muslims but also to other religious practitioners resident in the

village. From this, we were able together relevant information, which is germane to the work.

Concretely, we interviewed a number of Muslims and Christians in Ibadan. Those interviewed on random basis transcend different ethnic groups such as Yoruba, Ibo, Hausa, Edu, Ebira, Urhobo, Efik, Ijaw, Ibiobio, Itsekiri, and Tiv as well as people of different nationalities⁶. Interestingly, Ibadan, apart from being a heterogeneous community also represents a meeting point of the three major religions in Nigeria viz: traditional religion, Islam and Christianity among other ones such as Guru Maharaji, Hare Krishna, Eckankar, Grail Message, Mashad Power, and Bahai Faith⁷.

The information generated through our research tools, reveal that an average Muslim and Christian do misunderstand one another's religion on a number of issues such as God and God head, methods and procedures of prayer, the concept of salvation, the personalities of Jesus Christ and Prophet Mohammad, Begging and Muslim festivals among others. We shall discuss these thematically as they occur in the two religions. Immediately after this, each of the issues shall be re-examined regarding their proper meanings but in the light of the Bible and Christian tradition on the one hand and in the context of the Qur'an and Hadith on the other hand as they relate to Christianity and Islam respectively. In other words, without sounding judgmental and uncritical, we may need to contest by a way of illustration the erroneous beliefs made by Christians and Muslims against one another's religion on the basis of information obtain from the Qur'an, the Bible and related traditions. This would give us ample opportunity to know what the issues are in their proper senses.

Some ignorant claims Muslims make about Christianity

Many Muslims make ignorant claims about Christianity with reference to some issues. We use the word “ignorant” objectively because what they say are not true reflection of what Christian beliefs and practices actually represent. The issues are discussed as follows.

Monotheistic debate

Many Muslims believe that Christianity is a polytheistic religion on the ground of its belief in Trinity; that is God the father, Son and Holy Spirit. This apparently suggests to an average Muslim we interviewed that Christians do not have a clear concept of God. The impression such Muslims have is that it is difficult if not impossible to reconcile trinity with Christian conception of monotheism⁸. Their argument is premised on the Qur’anic injunction about God saying: Say He is God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; and there is none like unto Him⁹. Put in a broader perspective, Christianity is a monotheistic religion judging from its doctrinal teachings which are captioned in the Jewish Shema –Hear Oh Israel, the Lord your God is one, Pauline declaration in Corinthians—One Faith, One Lord, One Baptism One God and Father of all; who is above all and finally the Nicene creed¹⁰.

Personality of Jesus Christ

Arising from the Muslim debate and position on the concept of God and Godhead, it appears that they always disagree with Christian’s description of Jesus as the Son of God, the savior, the one who died on the cross, the final judge of the world on the last day and the intermediary between God and humanity. For example, some Muslims we interviewed contested the concept of Christ Crucifixion by saying that if truly Jesus is the Son of God and that there is genuine intimacy between them how could God then allow

His only son to bear ignominy to the extent of dying on the cross without such father bailing him out of his agony. In essence, the personality of Jesus as elucidated by Christian teachings both in the Bible and the church traditions is always dismissed by devoted Muslims on the ground that those teachings are contrary to Qur'anic teaching which reduces the personality of Jesus Christ to a mere prophet of equal status with Islamic prophets. This perhaps explains why Muslims according to our Muslim informants, interpret the Christian concept of the Sonship of Christ as pejorative and, which invariably suggests that Jesus is a biological Son of God. This candid position of the Muslim echoes in an anonymous pamphlet with the title-The God that Never Was which partly reads:

According to the quotations of the Bible... we find that Jesus did neither share the nature of God nor is he in every way like God. He is therefore, definitely not God! ... Preachers in Christ will never succeed in convincing the Muslims that Jesus was anything other than a natural man and prophet of God sent unto the house of Israel to bear the good news of the coming of the Kingdom of God, which prophecy was fulfilled with the advent of the Holy Prophet Mohammad¹¹

Without sounding proselytizing or taking sides, but, with appeal to logical reason and reference the Bible one can argue that Christians use the Sonship of Christ in a metaphoric way to depict the relationship between God and Jesus. Such relationship presupposes intimacy upon which the messiahship and the intermediary nature of Christ between God and man in addition to other attributes of Jesus are based¹².

Tied to this are issues of Salvation and the concept of Born again. Christians relying on the Bible and perhaps the church traditions do say that Christians whoever wants to have good relationship with God and get saved must be born again by professing

Christ as the Lord and Savior. To illustrating the assertion graphically, some Christian groups in the University of Ibadan campus, Nigeria, placed a small size billboard on a tree along one of the roads leading to the University Central Mosque saying ‘every body irrespective religion he/she professes must be born again to get saved’. Perhaps in a swift reaction to the board, an Islamic religious group placed another billboard just a stone’s throw from it reading, “You can be born many times, but don’t die except a Muslim”. Whereas in actual sense, the nucleus of Christian teaching zeroes in on the concept of born again, which according to the Bible and Christian traditions presupposes spiritual rebirth, renewal of faith, re-proclamation of faith and repentance; it also means to be a new person¹³. In essence interpreting the expression ‘born again’ outside the content and context of the Bible is wrong and such interpretation would be based on ignorant and fallacious premise. Such, therefore has tendency to spark up interreligious conflicts

Mode of Prayer

Another area where Muslims make negative remark about Christianity is that of Prayer. For example, some Muslims are of the opinion that Christians, especially members of the Christ Apostolic Churches (CAC) do not know how to say solemn prayers rather they shout on God. This accusation is made on the ground that most contemporary Christians are fond of praying in loud voices and somewhat commanding God to do one thing or the other for them. They add that Muslims sit down quietly on their mats and pray to God solemnly. Reacting to this, Christians disagree with the Muslim position; they rather claim that Christian’s mode of prayer is in consonance with the Bible and the Church traditions. They do emphasize that Bible, among other

characteristics of prayer it listed encourage tenacity and persistence (Luke 18:1-14)). In addition, it does not state specific and rigid posture of prayer. For example, a praying person can pray silently (I Sam 1:13) or loudly (Ezek 11:13), standing (Jer 18:20), sitting (2Sam 7:18), kneeling (1Kings 8:54), prostrating (Matt 26:39) in the open (Gen24: 11-12), at the riverside (Acts 16:23), everywhere (1Tim 2;8), and pray with hands uplifted (1Kings 8:22; Psalm 28:2:134; 2; 1Tim 28). Whichever way Christians choose to pray, what is important to God is the right attitude in prayer¹⁴.

Areas in which Christians make ignorant claims about Islam

The Concept of a God

Christians say many things particularly out of ignorance among other related factors about Islamic concept of God. Starting with the name of God, many of them erroneously believe that the word Allah refers to small god or a divinity, which is of low status compared with the Christian concept of God. My informant upon probe could not say with certitude from where the thesis or theory is derived. He only said that the belief is a popular one among Christians. Ordinarily, one would have expected Him to justify the claim based on his knowledge of Arabic from where the word is derived. . In the light of this, we guess that the informant though illiterate must have got the idea from a widely circulated book titled “Who is this Allah” written by of G.J.O. Moshay. The book says: Is Allah God? Is He ‘the father of our Lord Jesus Christ? And “If he is God and the Koran is true, the Christian can be sure he is lost – no matter how zealous he may be¹⁵.

It is important to note that the Qur’an devotes more than 43 chapters and 3000 verses to describe who Allah is and who is not. In the first instance, the word Allah is

derived from the Arabic word *allahu* meaning God. And the God is real because as the Qur'an puts it, He is the Living, The Self-Subsisting, Supporter of all, The Eternal, Absolute, The Most High and the Supreme among other attributes which total 99 (Surah 2:225; 112:1-4). With the above describing Allah, we can then argue without being judgmental that Christians claim about the meaning and personality of Allah is borne out of ignorance. The claim is baseless because it is made without reference to the Qur'an, which contains the truth about Islam (Surah 3:3) and indeed, which is authoritative as far as Islam is concerned in terms of its doctrines and practices (Surah 13:37)

Another related area where Christians cast aspersion against Islam pertains to the Yoruba Muslims' usage of the word "Eru Olorun" meaning Slave of God in describing their relationship with Allah-God. In my church, Pastors are fond of saying to the congregation that "you the congregation are children of God and not slave of God as the Muslim claims". Another one often says "*Omo lawa awa kii s'eru*". It means: "we are children and not slaves"¹⁶. Quoting the Bible he says Christians are children of God by their faith and proclamation of Jesus Christ as their Lord and savior. To them, they thought that the Muslims use the word literally, whereas to take this position or to assume so is to suggest that God –Allah is a slave owner while the Muslims are slaves. According to our Muslim informant, the word "slave" is used metaphorically suggesting an act of submission to Allah as the slaves used to submit to their owners during the slave trade era in history¹⁷. Still on God and His relationship with the Muslims, some Christians erroneously claim that there is no intimate love between Allah and Muslims because of the Qur'anic injunction, which says that God is to be feared, and obeyed and not loved¹⁸. Comparatively, they argue quoting the Bible that whereas; God

demonstrates His own love towards us primarily by giving His only begotten son to humanity (John 3:16, Roman 5: 8)

Some logical and fundamental questions arising from the Christians position are to what extents can one push the Christian claim forward? Is it possible for someone to worship a God who doesn't love His adherents? Contrary to the Christian position, it is important to note that the Qur'an is replete with passages describing God Himself as an embodiment of love, His condition for loving His adherents and recommendations towards mutual love among Muslims. For the purpose of emphasis, the Qur'an says Allah loves those who are firm and steadfast (Surah 3:146) and recommends that Muslims should love their kins, orphans, the wayfarers and even the slaves (Surah 2:177).

Muslim Festival

It is important to note that one of Islamic festivals is 'Id al -Adha or 'Id al – Kabir otherwise called festival of Sacrifice or the great Sacrifice. While celebrating this festival, Muslims do kill rams in commemoration of the Qur'anic story of how Prophet Ibrahim wanted to sacrifice his son Ismail as a demonstration of his submission to God upon God's instruction¹⁹. Regarding this, some Christians raise issues of idolatry regarding killing of ram associated with one of the Islamic festivals especially stating that such ritual worship according to them has been liquidated in Christianity, following Jesus Christ's shedding of his blood on the cross. They argue that the singular act of Christ is enough a ransom for the sin of humanity and hence there is no need for any sacrifice again. Consequently, they warn Christians not eat the ram which Muslims do kill during the festival, which according to them is tantamount to ritualistic sacrifice.

From Islamic point of view, the assumption of the Christian in this regard is erroneous because Islam forbids ritual sacrifice noting that the practice is itself idolatry and anti Islamic concept of monotheism. In our estimation, the Qur'an, perhaps clarifies Islamic position on this issue when it says: 'And if they argue with you as regards the slaughtering of ram Say "Allah knows best of what you do), After all, it is not meat of the animals that reaches Allah except piety (Surah 22:68, 22: 37).

Prayer and Mode of Prayer

Christians regard the five-time prayer in Islam as ritualistic judging from their religious belief that there is no limit to prayer. In addition to this insinuation, Christians mock the Muslim as regarding the act of bowing and standing, which always involves their heads touching ground during prayer. Those who are good in saying the five prayers ended up in having black mark on their foreheads. The act is dubbed as "*Kikan Ori mole*"- meaning knocking their heads on the ground. Besides this, Christians are fond of describing or calling the Muslim by name *Imole* that is, some ones with rigid faith or someone whose religious faith is difficult to be comprehended. According to the informants, Muslims are so described because of rigorous Qur'anic studying and training, which is written in Arabic involving memorization and cramming and which Muslims have to undergo before becoming faithful Muslims. They claim that Christianity is a religion, which simplifies prayer procedures and which does not involve something rhythmical.

Looking at the theology of prayer in Islam, one notes that all the so-called prayer postures, which the Christians detest, are symbolical and their symbolisms are only

known and meaningful to practicing Muslims. This fact could be hidden to someone outside the Islamic faith. Shedding light on this subject matter, Noibi remarks that:

The physical erection symbolizes mental erection and attention. The facing of the Qiblah means turning away from all other directions and symbolizes the gathering of your scattered thoughts from all other affairs....

The worshippers should keep his head slightly bowed thus symbolizing humility, as one does while standing before a human king or judge or general before whom one can not afford not to be physically humble and mentally attentive²⁰.

Matrimonial matters

Some Christians also say that Muslims are unfaithful in matrimonial matter—*meee lolorun wi*; that is Allah allows marrying many wives without exception for monogamy. On this note, they conclude that Islam generally advocates polygamy as against monogamy. Apparently they forget the Qur’anic injunction, which makes polygamy and monogamy optional and, especially a clause stating that a man is only qualified to marry more than one wife or marry up to four wives provided he could take care of all of them, justly. But if the man fears that he will not be able to do what the Qur’an recommends, he is expected to marry only one wife²¹

Status of the Qur’an

Christians pick holes in Muslim claims the Qur’an came from heaven on a given night- *Lailatul kadri*. They claim that it is not possible and could not be true that the Qur’an descended from the Heaven and on this ground cast aspersion on the Qur’an regarding seriousness and authenticity of its content, intent and context. We suspect that it is against this background that Moshay judges that the Qur’an was not a book of

revelation but a document put together by the Caliphs who succeeded Prophet Mohammad out of his curious and inordinate desire to have a sacred book like the Christians²². The question to address now is: does the Muslim use the word descended literally or metaphorically? Basically the word is used metaphorically and not otherwise even though a few illiterate Muslims believe that the Qur'an actually dropped down from heaven whereas the Qur'an speaks for itself saying it originated from Allah (Surah 4:82,26:192,36:5), revealed to lead man out of darkness to light (Surah 14:2), revealed in piecemeal (Surah 17: 82/106), revealed through holy spirit (Surah 16: 102) and revealed in the month of Ramadan (Surah 2:185).

Salvation

Many Christians especially those we interacted with are of the erroneous opinion, that Islam does not lead its adherents to salvation because, according to them, Islam does not have any clear-cut injunction of equal status with the Bible which portrays Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation. It is no wonder why some Yoruba pastors do say *Musulumi ni esin sugbon won koni igbala* meaning that Muslims have religion but they do not have salvation. Upon enquiry from our informants, we discover that this set of Christians rest their argument on the basis of Biblical injunction stating that nobody gets to the Father (God) except through the Son (Jesus). And, therefore, calling the name of Jesus Christ and believing him gives Christians license for salvation. Thus, Christian soteriology is built upon accepting Christ as the door through which man could reach God. The claim by the Christians that Islam has no clear-cut concept of soteriology perhaps makes Jinadu who converted from Islam to Christianity to jump into the conclusion that:

No Muslim is able to talk about God in the personal way that we born again Christian can. The way Mohammad points does not lead to a definite saving knowledge of God. It is a case of fulfilling the requirements of the five pillars of Islam and hoping for the best. There is no assurance of salvation .Nor can there be, since salvation is not found in any other Only Jesus is the way, the Truth and the Life

Still on Mohammad, some Christians claim that the name of prophet Mohammad so venerated in Islam cannot be called upon to effect miracle as the name of Jesus could be called upon (we need to know that Islam has never placed Muhammad in the position of intermediary as Christians do. On this note some of them conclude that since Mohammed is not taken as intermediary between Allah and Muslims it implies that he could not be taken as a serious personality.

It is important to react to this insinuation by saying that beyond reasonable doubt, salvation is sacrosanct in every religion among which is Islam. The belief in God is not a concept that exists independent of the concept of Salvation. Ordinarily, looking at the history and origin of religion, belief in God is not only about here and now but also about the future; the future here, which is futuristic, is also eschatological. On account of this, Islamic concept of salvation is evident in the Islamic eschatological teaching which summarily stands for the day of judgment during which the just would be saved and the unjust punished .For example, the just or righteous people are sent to *al-janna* and the bad persons are sent *al-jahannam* or the fire .As argued elsewhere, the concept of salvation is not a monopoly of Christianity alone but it is also a cardinal virtue in other religions²³. This singular belief has implication for moral conducts of religious practitioners in Nigeria. Thus in the words of Habib, it is the fear of God and the fact that man is answerable to God for his actions that make him a moral being²⁴

Begging and Nuisance

In the Northern part of Nigeria begging for alms is very common. Incidentally, the Northerners are predominantly Muslims. In addition, most of the Hausa beggars who reside in the Southern parts or any other parts of the country are Muslims. Given this coincidence, many Christians take for granted that Muslims are beggars and that suggestively, Islam itself encourages begging. This position of Christians arising from their assumption is not true if what the Hadith says about begging is taken and interpreted to the letter. For the purpose of clarification, the Hadith says that Allah hates three things in you; useless talk and wasting o wealth, asking or begging (su'al) frequently²⁵. Thus, to a question of begging, the stance of the Hadith is that:

*Do not beg unless absolutely compelled, then only from the virtuous...Verily it is better for any of you to take your rope and bring a bundle of wood upon your back and sell it, in which case God guardeth your honour than to beg of people, whether they give or not ...*²⁶

What we can infer from Christians insinuation regarding begging is that they seem to confuse begging with Zakat or better put, charity or almsgiving, which constitutes part of Islamic pillars of faith. Doing so is erroneous and it calls for a better understanding of a phenomenon before one makes any pronouncement about it.

Matters arising

Two fundamental issues among other possible ones arise from our exposition of ignorant claims Christians and Muslims make against each other's religion, which to our mind deserves clarification. One, the use or making of ignorant claims or statements about religions different from our own is tantamount to treating or approaching the

religions of others with irreverence. This is dangerous because every religious practitioner always places his/her religion in high esteem and would not be happy if anybody of any status notwithstanding treats his religion irreverently. On this note all ignorant claims highlighted above are contemptuous and annoying. Religion is such a sacred thing to religious practitioners so much that a religious person is always ready to defend his religion and possibly die for it if the need arises. This perhaps explains why many religious practitioners always engage in interreligious conflicts in the name of defending one religion at one time or the other. This is so because the claim is a product of attitude; in other words, an expression of religious ignorance is attitudinal and has capacity to provoke interreligious conflict. The attitude falls within the periscope of the variables of what Galtung labels as ABC Triangle, which is an analytical model that views conflict as a triangle with variables such as attitude, behavior and contradiction²⁷. Attitudes in this regard manifest in perceptions and misconceptions and emotions/feelings; behavior manifests in hostility, fear, threats, coercion and destructive efforts; while, contradiction manifests in actual or perceived incompatibility of goals. Each of the variables has implications for interreligious conflict.

Secondly, it can be deduced that some Christians and Muslims have little and possibly narrow view of what religion is and what it is not. Thus on the account of this narrow view, each religious believer sees his/her own religion as the only religion or as the only belief system worth to be described as religion while other or others different from their religion is/are not. This calls for a revisit of what religion is towards giving good orientation to every stakeholder in religious matter so that henceforth they can live in the spirit of mutual respect for one another's religion/religions.

On the question of what is Religion, it is imperative to note that to provide universally approved definition of Religion is by no means an easy task. This development is not unrelated with the fact that religion involves many beliefs and many ways of holding and expressing the beliefs. The various definitions that have been attempted by various writers are valuable to man's conception of what religion is or should be. Some define religion from sociological, psychological, ethical and phenomenological perspectives. While we cannot discuss all these now, a few of them are worth mentioning. For example, Émile Durkheim in his popular book "The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life" defines religion as a united system of beliefs and practices that are related to sacred things that is, things that are set apart and forbidden... He posits that, the distinguishing mark of religion in its most basic form is not belief in divinity or in the supernatural but the existence of objects considered to be sacred by a group of people²⁸. According to him, sacredness is a value that a given society places on objects. Such objects shape and generate the religious feelings of its members, and religiousness is therefore a function of social belonging. On account of this assertion, Durkheim notes that the holiest things in the world to one group—its gods, saviors, scriptures, or sacraments—are not necessarily seen as sacred absolutes by another group. The sociological way by which Durkheim defines religion aptly tells us how different people can interpret what is religious or not. Still on the subject matter of the sacred, Eliade argues that believing in the divine foundations of life transforms the significance of natural objects and activities. He believes that for religious man, time, space, the earth, the sky, and the human body can all come to have a symbolic, religious meaning.²⁹

From experiential point of view, Otto argues that the experience of the numinous-“spiritual power” is the distinctive core of religiousness. Such experience is marked by a sense of awe in the face of the mysterious other reality that dramatically intersects our limited, vulnerable existence. According to Otto, it is this reality that religious traditions symbolized by concepts such as God. The numinous can be experienced as something fearful and alienating, but also as something comforting with which one feels a certain communion or continuity. He adds that religious ideas such as the wrath of God or the peace of God express these different aspects of numinous experience. In his view, the capacity for such awareness lies within each person, and it is the purpose of religious language and observance to shape and elicit this awareness³⁰. Perhaps from the definitions above couple with other ones, Joseph Kenny defines religion as any system which relates man to ultimate values, whether God or something else, and which embodies a creed, a code, a cult and a communion. To him all the four features manifest in all religion³¹.

What we can generate from the above and which has implications for religious understanding is that each of the definitions is associated with theories or origin of Religion. It implies that religion involves belief in a Supreme Being; hence, religion is that which brings or expresses the intimate relationship between the creator and his creatures. There is awareness in man that there is something in him reaching out for close examination with a power, which is the source of real life. Man is so constituted and so conditioned that he must be dependent upon God if his life is to be meaningful and harmonious. It is in religion that man and God communicate. Religion is something resulting in the relationship, which God established, from the beginning of human life

between Himself and man. In light of this, Charles K. Kegley remarkably classifies essential features of Religion into three such as belief, feeling and action and adds that central to religion is beliefs in God or gods, the nature and destiny of man, the meaning of history and hope for the future. From this, it becomes clear that no individual has or group of individuals have monopoly of truth as regarding what is religion or what is not.

With this submission, we can agree that every man or every group has the right to define and regard what he/she considers as religion as religion in as much he/she is convinced about what he/she is doing and in much as he/she does not interfere in the affairs of other people who equally have right to religious conviction. In conclusion, religion could be likened to a football field where we have many players from both ends of the field. The ultimate desire of every player is to make a score mainly through the goal post. A shot that passes through the goal post and makes a score can come from different directions of the field. By analogy, God could be likened to the goal post, while all the players in the field who attempt the shots, which come from every direction, could be likened to diverse religions of the world. This is an important point for all stakeholders in religion to note.

Solution to Problem of ignorance

One basic, though multifaceted solution to the problem of religious expression is religious education. By this we mean holistic education of the mind, intelligence, intellect, position and attitude of religious practitioners regarding their understanding and expected attitude and disposition to religions different from the one/s they practice. We suggest that departments of religious studies in Nigerian universities should take the lead

in this effort geared towards promotion of religious understanding. This should be done theoretically and practically. Theoretically, each department should float religious education oriented courses that would outline the following issues: basic tenets of the world religions, comparative religion, religious rights and freedom, religious secularism, religion and respect and mutual respect in religions. Practically, a lecturer of religious studies is not expected to indoctrinate the students who as a matter of fact are mature enough to separate the wheat from the chaff. Perhaps it is the recognition of this fact that Bruce Lincoln says that reverence is a religious and not a scholarly virtue³², Because of the sensitivity of this matter, a scholar of Religious Studies should equip him/her self with at least four factual statements and somewhat teaching principles (which are outstanding and germane to our paper outlined) by Michael Pye as criteria to study religion in pluralistic religious world. These are:

- (1) The study of religions (Religionswissenschaft- that is scientific study of religion) is not concerned with the search for religious truth, but rather with the description and scientific investigation of religious phenomenon from a “meta-level” that is from the standpoint of independent reflection. This does not imply a claim to be superior to religious truth in any way
- (2) It cannot be the task of the study of religions, therefore to substantiate or disprove truths, which may be contained in religious doctrine.
- (3) One’s own personal religious experience is not a prerequisite for working in the study of religions and neither is there any obligation to maintain an anti religious attitude (as in the traditions critical of religion deriving from Feuerbach, Durkheim and others)

(4) Since the study of religions does not serve the interests of any religion, it should be distinguished, for example from missiology and apologetics or a theology of religion³³

At this juncture, we can then argue that the teaching of Religious Studies should not be persuasive, sympathetic, apologetic or dogmatic, rather it should be critical, analytical, objective, interpretative and explanatory (to borrow the words of J S Jensen and L .H Martin in their description of principles underlying scientific study of religion)³⁴. This to our mind can be called ethics of sound teaching and faith detachment.

For instance, a rational attitude is to be adopted during the course of research. By being rational we mean being objective and open in research enterprise so that a researcher does not allow his personal religious experience, emotion and sentiment to influence his research observation, report and publication. In this sense, scholars like Helmut Gollwitzer and Rudolf Bultman and later Ninian Smart have proposed such terminologies such as “methodological atheism”, “dogmatic atheism” and “methodological neutrality³⁵

The above suggests that researchers in religious matters should be faith neutral whenever they are carrying out research because according to Pye again, religious scholarship seeks to maintain an unbiased and value –free attitude. The attainment of this calls for openness and objectivity, which in fact intertwine.

It is equally of immense importance to bestow some responsibility on the part of the government more importantly that Nigerian government engages in religious matters regardless of the fact that the nation is a secular one constitutionally. What the government needs to do is to allow for the incorporation of religious studies into the

curriculum of public schools from nursery school to tertiary level. Further to this, religious subjects /courses should be made compulsory for every student. This time around, each student should be encouraged to enroll/register for religious courses different from the one he/she practices. That is, students who are Christians by religious affiliation should do courses in Islam and traditional religion and vice versa. At tertiary level religious course should be incorporated into the categories of general studies courses to enable all categories of students to be exposed to religious knowledge. With this put in place, the public would be better informed about religion especially as this relates to its tenets and doctrinal issues. Thus knowledge and understanding of individuals and group of individuals about religion would increase and those that are already literate in the matter of religion would have their horizon widened.

The Media generally too as the mouthpiece of the nation has a role to play in fostering public awareness about religious education. This time, the Press particularly should do it with caution noting the fact that the press too had at one time or the other provoked religious crisis. For example, we remember the controversial editorial comment of a daily paper in respect of Miss World Beauty Contest in 2002 and the publication in Denmark about the caricature of Prophet Mohammad in 2006. At this juncture, professionalism and strict adherence to media professional ethics are required in the press reporting of religious information.

On the part of religious leaders, there is a moral obligation for them to promote and actualize by leading by example the practical application of various religious documents at their disposal, which emphasize religious right and freedom. The case is not that there is no documents emphasizing the issues mentioned above but the problems lie

in the implementation. For example, apart from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the Nigerian constitution emphasizing religious right and freedom, we also have religious induced documents such as Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights of 19th September, 1981, The Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam dated 5th August, 1990 for Islam and Religious Liberty of the Catholic Church. We are also familiar with collectively produced religious document such as Universal Declaration of Human Rights By the World Religions dated 10th December, 1998 and the United Religions Initiative Charte 1996 to mention a few³⁶.

Concluding remarks

From our discussions so far, it is obvious that religious ignorance is a factor with much weight in the debates about sources and causes of interreligious conflicts in Nigeria. Its implications for social and interreligious relations are always negative and without being pessimistic are likely to continue provoking anger, animosity, and quarrel and if not checked on time such would escalate to violent situation. But what every stakeholder in religion should note is that nobody practices any religion that does not have belief in God and the ultimate salvation of mankind as its nucleus. A Muslim would not be engaging in five time prayers daily along with other liturgical and Islamic practices if he/she is not convinced religiously that he/she is doing the right thing. In the same vein, all the practices in which Christians involve themselves is borne out of religious conviction that they are doing the right thing. Whether such religious activities make sense or are meaningful judging with our religion sentiment does not invalidate the practices as long as long as people who participate in them are religiously convinced that

they are on right course. It is on this note that we want to argue that judging Christianity with the Qur'an or judging Islam with the Bible would not always produce logical results because the Bible is for Christianity while the Qur'an is for Islam. Putting it the other way round is antithetical. The two religions could be likened to parallel lines, which can never meet. No matter what Muslims say about Christianity, Christians would remain Christians as long they have conviction in Christian doctrinal beliefs and no matter what Christians say about Islam, Muslims would remain Muslims as long as Muslims are convinced about Islamic religious doctrines.

What we are advocating on a final note is that religious practitioners should not say what they do not know about religions different from theirs because such may be contemptuous, blasphemous and disrespectful. In as much as we revere our religion and place it on high esteem, it will be morally wrong to speak evil about other religions. This is important because as our religion is important to us, we should honestly accept that the religions of other people are equally important to them. The need to promote religious education people who are literate on religious matters should educate those who are religiously ignorant. All should join hands to promote mutual respect as this relates to religion noting that respect begets respect. From ages to the present, religion remains sacrosanct in Nigerian life. Therefore, the practice of saying contemptuous things about religions different from ours shall continue to generate conflicts in which there will never be a winner or a loser. This is a poser for all stakeholders in the promotion of interreligious relation and peace building in Nigeria and Africa where interreligious conflicts have been an endemic problem.

Endnotes

¹ Copied from *Microsoft Encarta* (2004 Edition)

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³ Stephen Prothero, “*Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn’t*” Posted on the Internet, on March 10, 2007

⁴ Ibid

⁵ <http://www.religioustolerance.org/wicrade.htm>

⁶ Lloyds, et al *The City of Ibadan*, London: Cambridge University press, 1967, pp. 59 - 152.

⁷ E. B. Idowu “Religion in Ibadan: Tradition Religion and Christianity” *The City of Ibadan* (ed.) Lloyd et al pp 235 - 247 and F. H. El-Masri, “Religion in Ibadan”. “Islam” *The City of Ibadan*, op cit., pp. 249 – 257

⁸ Personal interview with Chief Imam of Muslim Community, Aho Area, Ajibode, Ibadan

⁹ Qur’an 112:1-4

¹⁰ See Deuteronomy, 6:4, Ephesians 2:12 and Ayantayo J.K., *Monotheism: Christian – Muslim Views in Comparison*, M.A. Dissertation submitted to the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 1990

¹¹ *The God that Never Was* (An anonymous pamphlet p15 and quoted from Falola, T., *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1998, pp 249-250

¹² For more information about this one can consult New Testament theology regarding the personality and essence of Christ Jesus Christ

¹³ *Life Application Study Bible*, (New Living Translation) Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 2004, p. 2310

¹⁴ J.D. Douglas and M.C. Tenny, *Bible Dictionary*, Michigan: Zondervan, 1987 p819

¹⁵ G.J.O. Moshay, *Who is this Allah*” Ibadan; Fireliners, 1990, p5

¹⁶ Pastor Faloye of Christ Apostolic Church (C.A.C.) Agbowo made this assertion in one of his sermons on a Sunday

¹⁷ I got this information from Alhaji Azeez, Ajibode Village, Ibadan, May 2 2007

¹⁸ Paul Jinadu, *I have seen the Lord Ibadan*: Christian Growth Books, 19885, p5

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- ¹⁹ Adeleye, M.O., *A Hand book of Islam for Schools and Colleges*, Lagos: Macmillan Nigeria Publishers Ltd, 1985,p10
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- ²¹ Surah 4:3
- ²² Ibid, p.v
- ²³ J.K., Ayantayo, “A Comparative Study of Eschatology in the Bible and Qur’an from the Moral Perspective and its Relevance for Today” in *Ado Journal of Religions* Department of Religious Studies, University of Ado-, Ekiti, Vol. 1, No. 1 July, 2002pp. 29 – 41
- ²⁴ M.Habib “*The Existence of God*” Tahrik-Jadid, Pakistan: Malik Bashrat Ahmad, pp-5, p11
- ²⁵ J.O.Ojesina, ‘*The Problem of Begging and Destitution in the Urban City of Ibadan*’ quoted from M.I. Okunola, *A Handbook For Nigerian social Workers*, Ibadan; Daybis Limited, 2002, p120
- ²⁶ Ibid
- ²⁷ *A Toolkit: Peace Practice in Nigeria*, Abuja; Published by Institute for Democracy in South Africa, (IDASA) 2004 p13
- ²⁸ Copied from Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia, 2006 edition
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- ³⁰ Ibid
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- ³² B. Lincoln, “Reflections on Theses on Method” in J S Jensen and L .H Martin (ed) *Secular Theories on Religion: Current Perspectives*, University of Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000,pp117-136, p118
- ³³ M: Pye “The Study of Religions and Its Contribution to Problem – Solving in a Plural World”, in *Marburg Journal of Religion*, 2004, pp 22

³⁴ J S Jensen and L .H Martin (ed) *Rationality and the study of Religion*, Aarhus, 1997, (Acta Jutlandica LXXII: i. Theo.Set 19 but quoted in Kurt Rudolph Some Reflections on Approaches and Methodologies in the Study of Religions, pp231-247

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Gerrie ter Harr and J.S Busutil, *Religion and Visions for Peace*, Boston; Brill Leiden, 2005pp299-67