

## **Ecumenism: A Sociological Approach to Religious Harmony in Contemporary Nigeria**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper attempts to reveal the crucial role of ecumenism as a sociological mechanism towards religious harmony in Nigeria. The work shows the sociological concern for ecumenism and obstacles to ecumenism in our country. Factors that led to the formation of modern ecumenism and Christian contribution to religious harmony were also considered. This is necessary at this point in time because of the conflicts, crises and miseries which have come to dampen every attempt towards establishing global harmony today. In other words, the greatest single quest of the world in contemporary society is that of harmony. It is painful that we live in the age of anxiety, fear and uncertainty where mankind is crying for guidance, for comfort, for peace and harmony; but we are constantly confronted by war. The study employed inter-disciplinary method in the gathering of information. Findings from the research revealed that almost all the religions of the world talk about harmony, peace and inter-relationships between God and man which are yet to be achieved. The focus of this article is to make Christianity our reference point in hazarding an opinion that*

*ecumenism could provide a sociological approach to religious harmony in contemporary Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Ecumenism, Sociological approach, Religious harmony, Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

By the term “ecumenism” one is referring to Christian unity in different churches.<sup>1</sup> It means the coming together of different Christian bodies or denominations to work hand in hand in order to have things in common. The word ecumenism is derived from the Greek word *oikoumene*<sup>2</sup> which means the inhabited world. It originally refers to all Greek territories and later came to the Roman world. The word *oikoumene* is derived from its root *oikos*, which means home or house.<sup>3</sup> We would get a very clear picture of the word ecumenism, if we recall our various experiences in our homes. In any ideal home, there is intimacy, confidence, fellowship, mutual trust, understanding, solidarity, order, love, discipline, friendship, affection, loyalty, cohesion, etc. These are qualities generated within a house setting and lavish upon both residents and visitors. Thus, outside one’s home it is possible to feel a sense of loss and isolation. In other words, one may speak of a common identity, a common source, a common purpose, a sense of belonging, togetherness and inter-relationships.

Viewed from the above perspectives, we can describe ecumenism as coming together of Christians all over the world to form one formidable body for the propagation of the gospel.<sup>4</sup> This body is centered upon Jesus and it is guided by love, intimacy, understanding, discipline and responsibility. One of the assumptions in our search for religious harmony is that there are bound to be various approaches, and ecumenism which now gradually gaining ground within Christendom is one of such sociological approaches.

Religious harmony is a state of peaceful co-existence and agreement among various religious groups in the society. Religion as a social phenomenon, exercises a strong influence in human activity from time immemorial. Idowu observes that religion is always used at every stage of human life.<sup>5</sup> Mbiti also posits that religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not always easy or possible to isolate it.<sup>6</sup> The above submission attests to the fact that religion influences every aspect of the society. As noted by Udefi, given the diverse and complex state of Nigeria, one does not need to travel the length and breadth of this country to ascertain the validity of her multi-ethnic, multi-linguistics, multi-cultural and multi-religious structure.<sup>7</sup> This corroborates Nwaoga's view that Nigeria is a pluralistic and multi-religious nation with most of her citizens being Christians, Muslims or adherents of traditional religion.<sup>8</sup> It is the belief of most Nigerians that the country's diversity should not necessarily constitute or pose any obstacles to its stability, democratization and national unity. However, this optimism is threatened by the high level of unhealthy religious relations and ethnic hostility in the country.

Nigeria as a modern nation came into existence as a result of the British amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that Islam and Christianity co-existed before the birth of modern Nigeria. The competition between the two religions was slow and peaceful since both of them could tolerate and accommodate each other believing that family solidarity was much more important than religious affiliation.<sup>10</sup> The provision of the Nigerian constitution to guarantee freedom of religion has been a subject of debate. According to Kenny, religious liberty varies from culture to culture. He is of the view that the right to religious freedom has its foundation not in the individual but in the nature of the religion itself.<sup>11</sup> In spite of this reality, relations among adherents of the three major religions in Nigeria cannot be underestimated.

### **Sociological Concern for Ecumenism**

There are several ways in which ecumenism are of paramount concern to the contemporary Nigerians. First, there was sociological use of imagery by Jesus in the Bible. He made use of words such as “shepherd”, “bridegroom” or “householder” to describe himself or his father as part of a whole process of infusing the idea of mutual-understanding and interrelationship into believers.<sup>12</sup> Hence, Jesus was describing a future heavenly association or present situation in terms of understandable human referents sociologically. He was concerned about bringing his audience to see the line of connection between the world and God, and so between God and man.<sup>13</sup>

Besides, in the Acts of Apostles, the appointment of the seven (Acts 6:1-4) deacons was a step forward in correcting an imbalance in inter-relationships among Jewish and Hellenist Christians.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the early church, reached a turning point when at the Council of Jerusalem it was decided that the Jews should not be imposed on Hellenists. Both Paul and Cyprian in their letters roundly condemned schisms and encouraged religious harmony.<sup>15</sup>

In the same vein, by the middle of the second century, church synods met to condemn or suppress Monasticism. As a result, the church was getting used to the idea of synod or ecumenical meetings.<sup>16</sup> It was however the intention of these councils acting on behalf of the Church to exterminate heretical teachings as a pre-requisite for restoring amity and religious harmony.<sup>17</sup> Thus, by the very nature of ecumenical councils, as gatherings of fathers of the church who are regarded as the bearers of the faith under supervision and control of the Holy Spirit, Councils’ decision were infallible, and resultant decrees have universal sanction.<sup>18</sup>

In modern times, two ecumenical councils stand out clearly: the Council of Trent and the Vatican Council. Nevertheless, these were

meetings of bishops with the Pope representing the interest of the church as usual; the church was no longer one in Faith and Empire.<sup>19</sup> However, in spite of this short-coming, there were renewed attempts at restoring religious harmony to the church and her people. For over the past half century, successive governments have had distractions from unhealthy religious relations, hence, leading to the formation of Nigeria Interreligious Council (NIREC) to dialogue and strengthen the cooperation among the adherents of various religions.<sup>20</sup>

### **Obstacles to Ecumenism in Nigeria**

It is sad to note that the shameful quarrels of divided Christians have shed more blood than political contentions in our society. The long history of the church had been a sad story of divisions.<sup>21</sup> All these had led to disunity among Christians. We shall highlight some of these problems, which are considered as obstacles to ecumenism in Nigeria.

#### **Doctrinal Differences**

It has been observed that sectionalism in the church in Nigeria is an obstacle to ecumenism. The various denominations held different doctrines, trainings and orientations. Each denomination was influenced by the mother church, which was either in Europe or America.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Proliferation of Churches**

In Nigeria today, we have many churches and church founders. This is as a result of the inordinate ambition of many church leaders who are looking for titles, power, fame, influence and affluence.<sup>23</sup> There are many innovators who break away to establish their own churches for commercial reasons. That is why we now have many churches, but social evils are increasing geometrically in our society. Thus, multiplication of churches creates the problem further and unending divisions instead of fighting to be one.<sup>24</sup>

### **Ambivalence**

This is Africanisation of Christianity. It is the mixture of African additional religious practices with Christianity; many African Christians are born between Christianity and African traditional religious practices. Such Christians make use of charms and amulet. There are those who belong to secret cults. These practices discourage true Christians from associating with ambivalent Christians.<sup>25</sup> Ambivalence therefore is an obstacle to ecumenical cooperation and church unity in Nigeria.

### **Sentiments**

This is another problem to ecumenical movement in Nigeria which has led to unhealthy rivalry and competition in churches. The Christian church came to Nigeria through missionaries from Europe and America. It was brought in different shades and learning. As a result of these, adherents had to belong to different denominations. These denominations did not come as one body of Christ hence division in the church in Nigeria is an imported phenomenon from Europe and America. Thus, church sentiments and biases had its origin from the missionaries.<sup>26</sup> That is why up till today, competition for converts and rivalry among denominations are contributing tremendously to church disunity in Nigeria.

### **Cultural Barriers**

Another considerable obstacle to ecumenism in Nigeria is the culture of the Africans. Some of the customs of the people are against the tenets and teachings of the imported religion. Some denominations fanatically accepted these tenets while some Africanized it. The differences in culture of the Africans made some African Christians to accept polygamy, drumming, wearing of shoes, certain dress codes, etc. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and a multi-religious nation. A-country-with different cultural background and practices.<sup>27</sup>

### **Ignorance and Illiteracy**

As a result of ignorance, there was the emergence of WCC in 1948 as an instrument whereby the churches may bear witness together to their common allegiance to Jesus Christ and cooperation in matters requiring united action.<sup>28</sup> It is a fact that not all church members and religious leaders are educated and able to read or write. Understanding and unity starts from effective communication and exchange of ideas. Language barrier also contribute to this problem.

### **Poverty**

There is no doubt that Africans are relatively poor when compared to the Europeans. The income per head is low and there is low standard of living in Africa. As a result of high cost of living, some Africans Christian leaders are extremely crazy for money and injustice at the expense of Christian unity. This often leads to insensitivity and lack of full support from church members.<sup>29</sup>

### **Factors that led to the Formation of Modern Ecumenism**

A casual observer in Nigeria would easily notice the myriad and forms of holy places, religious vehicles, religious programmes on the streets, on radio and television and would most likely conclude that religion enjoys a great amount of freedom in the country. This might give a false impression that religious harmony is a reality among Christian group in Nigeria. According to Shittu (2016),<sup>30</sup> Smock (2002),<sup>31</sup> Ajamu (2000),<sup>32</sup> Umar (2000),<sup>33</sup> Carrier (2002),<sup>34</sup> and Wakili (2009),<sup>35</sup> there are some notable factors responsible for the formation of modern ecumenism.

### **Early Evangelical Ecumenism**

One of the pertinent factors that led to the formation of modern ecumenism was the unity that existed among the early church. Reference

could be made to the first evangelical ecumenism, which provided the basis for other evangelical and Pentecostal ecumenism in the world.

### **Youth Association**

The 19th century was the great age of voluntary Christian societies. As a result of the evangelical revival, we had missionary societies and such corporate efforts as the British and foreign Bible Society. The young men Christian Association and the young Women Christian Association brought Christians together for a variety of specific purposes, programmes and activities. Loyalty to Christ was felt to be so important that differences of denominational loyalty were not an inhibition to.

### **Leadership Problem**

There were a lot of problems arising within the church such as separations, quarrels and misunderstandings as a result of the leadership style. Members of churches were not in agreement with the ways and doctrines of the church. It was said that only the leader of the church that has every right to speak or dictate.

### **No Unity and Peace**

Lack of faith in Christ, unity and peace is another factor that gave birth to modern ecumenism. Christians of the early ages were not moving accordingly to improve the well-being and welfare of the entire fold. Hence, the ecumenical movement arises through spirit inspired bodies from different denominations to look upon the Christian folds. They called for workshops, seminars, and conferences to reform the Christian folds.

### **Regular Religious Conflict**

In recent times, Christianity and Islam had been on each other's nerves. Conflicts between these two religions had brought about wanton

destruction of life and property. In the words of Babs Mala, the violent religious conflicts in the Northern part of Nigeria make nonsense of the claim that Nigerians are God-fearing.<sup>36</sup> These conflicts betray the intolerance of the various religious adherents and their inability to accommodate other religious views. This calls for formation of modern ecumenical movement.

### **Christian Contribution to Religious Harmony**

This is about the gains of ecumenism towards having religious harmony and peaceful co-existence in the society. The ecumenical interest of the post-reformation period started to show itself in the Evangelical Awakening prevalent at the time.<sup>37</sup> Despite the persecutions which the Church of the first three centuries suffered under Rome for causing a disruption of the ecumenical movement, it later came to be regarded not only as *religio licita* but also with favour which allowed the Church the opportunity of playing very pertinent role in the state.<sup>38</sup>

Besides, in post medieval period, Christian teaching was also applied to social problems with a view to providing lasting solutions. For instance, in Britain, the Quakers and the other non-conformists followed by the Evangelicals under William Wilberforce spearheaded the struggle for the abolition of slave trade.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the American Anti-Slavery Society founded in 1833, was inter-denominational. The prison reform of John Howard in the 18<sup>th</sup> century received applause from Protestants and Catholics alike outside England. Also at this time many government sponsored reforms received the active support of the Church.<sup>40</sup> Of paramount importance in this regard is the Factory Acts passed into law by the British Parliament, and the repeal of the Corn Laws (and other related matters) on the other side of the Atlantic. In most of these agitations the support given by Churches and Christians to varying extent had far reaching effects.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, at the turn of last century, interests in the Churches especially in Europe centred on global religious harmony. This was more so because of the developments between Britain and Germany and the fact that the whole of Europe was thrown into jeopardy.<sup>42</sup> Christian leaders felt uneasy and pressed for a concerted effort to avert danger, or, at least, alleviate the situation. The World Peace Conference held in Lucerne, Switzerland in 1905 was the beginning of exchange visits by Churchmen from Britain and Germany to foster mutual and better understanding across national frontiers. Despite the hazards of war, Church leaders continued their search for religious harmony through the formation of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 1914.<sup>43</sup> Thus, it would be seen from events around this period that the Church, for its own part, was struggling to grasp and unravel the issues of the day. The church in Europe, at least, entered the scene with a view to providing answers to social, moral, political, economic and religious problems which were biting deep into the fabric of society.<sup>44</sup>

### **Towards Unity in Diversity in Contemporary Nigeria**

Nigeria is a country of many tribes, languages and religions. Despite this pluralistic feature of the Nigerian society, each tribe has a strong community life, in which all strive not only for their welfare but also for the welfare of others.<sup>45</sup> This awareness and compassionate concern for each other in the traditional Nigerian life cannot be overlooked. It is not an exaggeration that the major religions in Nigeria are not united neither in their beliefs nor their practices.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps, the other crucial issue is the claim of universality. Can Christianity and Islam, for example, present Christ or Mohammed without falling into the false religious universality which would encourage forms of intolerance and domination that generate tension within community?

Obviously speaking, this awareness of the historical peculiarities of all religions and the cultural realities force us to re-examine the issue of

universality more critically. For one thing, general experience tends to indicate that human beings take their culture and its ideals as the standard that determines themselves and others.<sup>47</sup> Certainly, such ideas and values are idiosyncratic.

The Bible affirms that God is the Father of all men. In spite of efforts by the Gospel writers to confine Jesus to his Jewish environment, we still find powerful traces of his liberating activities to people of other races (Luke 7: 1-10; Mk 7:24-30 etc.) The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) presents the behavior of one who was despised in Israel as an example to follow.<sup>48</sup> In the last judgement parable (Mt.25:31-46) Christian tradition took this universal element in the message of Jesus, that salvation can be found outside an explicit relationship to Christ and the Church and gave it wider expression in a radical and impressive way that has never been surpassed. Godliness is also good neighbourliness.<sup>49</sup>

Jesus himself lived out this unrestricted brotherliness by caring particularly for those who were objects of religious and social discriminations. The parable of the Father who accepts and the brother who rejects (Luke 15:11-32), not only demonstrated that Jesus was opposed to the exclusive way in which the religious people in Israel understood salvation, with their rejection of sinners, but also indicates the new image of God that Jesus presents.<sup>50</sup> The particularism of the Jewish view of salvation was called into question by the universal dimension of the Kingdom of God as it was proclaimed by Jesus who himself mediated God's saving rule to men without distinction.

In addition, admittedly Jesus was not a nationalist, but he shared the critical prophetic stance of John the Baptist who said to the self-righteous Jews: "Bear fruit that befit repentance .... do not begin to say ... we have Abraham as our father ..... (Luke 3: 8). It is not being a descendant of Abraham in a racial sense that guarantees entry into the Kingdom of God;

what is decisive is the faith which produces the fruits of Metanoia. (cf Mt.5: 20). Religion is about human relationships both among themselves and with God.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, this is a form of existence that considers with humility and honesty, the pluralistic nature of our world. The unifying function of religion will only be credible if the various religions will generate such human interest and values that can lead to common goal, common involvement and common welfare, irrespective of petty religious differences which are historically conditioned and primarily man-made. Perhaps our major religions in Nigeria should rethink their various evangelical strategies within the context of divine intention and our historical realities. In the absence of this, religion cannot be looked upon as having any positive role to fulfill in societal unity. For one thing, universality of religions must be tied to the liberation of the poor and oppressed and the creation of humane society. All religions should be allowed to preach their messages as long as these are within the law and respect the rights of others.<sup>52</sup> Hence, there will be unity in diversity in contemporary Nigeria as long as no religion is openly persecuted or supported.

### **Sociological Observation and Evaluation**

First, in this paper, we have concentrated more on the sociological overview of Protestant tradition, in general, for reasons of choice and knowledge. This will mean that there are still vast areas of explorations, especially in the Catholic tradition, in the consideration of ecumenism as a sociological approach to religious harmony in contemporary Nigeria.

Secondly, it is presumed that societal problems often out span the church and most times catch the church unawares. Unless direction and power are to be sought from the Holy Spirit, the church might be making a mockery of all her noble intentions and consecrated natural talents and

abilities that are not geared to respecting God's sovereign will.<sup>53</sup> The obvious reason for saying this is because the issues of our society are perennial and multifarious, delicate and intricate, and as such there is need for caution. Besides, where greater emphasis is placed on human programmes in the search for religious harmony, church leaders might run the risk of adopting diplomatic notions in conducting their businesses. Also, the evangelist or missionary might be hopefully mistaken for the diplomat or politician.

Nevertheless, of all these challenges, the picture is not altogether bleak. The fact remains that ecumenism implies dialogue, interaction and intercommunion.<sup>54</sup> The Christian story has been one of gruesomeness overcome by patience, steadfastness, boldness, endurance and faith in the One who matters.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, the Good News has continually been disseminated to the world to bring salvation, joy, peace and religious harmony.<sup>56</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the consideration of ecumenism as a sociological approach to religious harmony in contemporary Nigeria, we find the whole exercise exploratory and one of the problems in the study is that a strong appeal is made to spirituality which may not be too acceptable to a good number of people. Yet as a concept which is as old as the Christian Church itself, ecumenism holds some importance in the re-examination of church unity and it is hoped to make a tremendous contribution to the search for religious harmony. Thus, because ecumenism is about the coming together of various people, the concept is of paramount importance for any global discussion on peaceful co-existence and therefore desirable in the search for effective and meaningful religious harmony especially in contemporary Nigeria.

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