



**Towards Promoting Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria ... (Evanoro & Kayode, 2021)**

## **Towards Promoting Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria through Religious Tolerance and Dialogue**

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### **Abstract**

Religion is indeed a powerful tool that is instrumental to national development and peaceful co-existence if properly used. Religion is one of the recognized factors that can enhance the nation at any given period of history. However, sad to say, religion today rather than been a unifying factor in national development in Nigeria, has been taken in a manner that people unleash attack on one another, which has created an image of incredibility for it. The actions of the adherents of various religions in Nigeria have threatened the peaceful co-existence, stability, and development of the Nigerian nation which has often resulted in the loss of many lives and properties. Thus, the role of religion in addressing national issues has become highly questionable. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to examine the contents of religion and its place in promoting peaceful co-existence through religious tolerance and dialogue among the various religions in Nigeria. The reality of religious crisis in Nigeria over time will be addressed as the beginning of the foundation that a proper integration of values common to all religions in Nigeria is capable of promoting peaceful co-existence as well as ensuring a strong Nigerian nation. This paper concludes that there can be no meaningful development in Nigeria without peaceful co-existence among the adherents of the various religions and made some recommendations.

**Keywords:** Peaceful co-existence, Religious tolerance, Religious dialogue, Inter-religious dialogue.

### **Introduction**



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Religion which is as old as humanity has played a great role in the lives of the people. Religion, a universal feature of human existence, is one of the fascinating varied and complex phenomena in human history. The Oxford Dictionary (1989) defines religion as “recognition on the part of man to some higher unseen power as having control on his destiny and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship. However, religion is relationship between time transcendent and man is perceived as an awesome but fascinating mystery to which man owes total submission and an absolute obedience”. Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things (Durchein cited in Shepard, 1981:343). Similarly, the National Teachers’ Institute (1990:34) described religion as a cultural premise of belief system of the people; this belief system can lead individuals or groups into different forms of worship. The fact that religion constitutes the second nature of the African people cannot be overemphasized. Religion affects everything we do. Mbiti (1985:1) rightly observed:

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people have its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible to always isolate it...Religion is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned.

Religion is a stabilizing force in the society which bound the community or nation as a social force in the social glue. It is a major force for social and moral changes. Religion is a social institution concerned with beliefs, actions and inactions of a society through which the values, norms, ethics, and traditions are defined, embedded and expressed within the cosmology of the people. It is a major factor that influences the activities of human (Adebirigbe & Aiyegboyin, 1997:23).

In Nigeria today, there are two dominant of religion namely Christianity and Islam. Christianity was founded by Jesus Christ in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. Both religions have spread all over the world. In Nigeria, Christianity has a large followership in the Southern and the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. While Islam on the other hand was founded in Arabia by the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. It is the dominant religion in the Northern Nigeria particularly in the core north. However, Islam also has large followership in the Southwest that is among the tribe called the Yoruba’s (Adebirigbe & Aiyegboyin, 1997:23).

The history of Nigeria has been characterized by series of religious crisis that have greatly impeded her peaceful co-existence, nation building, and national security. Rather than exploiting the values in the two main religions in Nigeria towards peaceful co-existence, nation building, and national security, the religious crisis by no small measure promoted disunity and suspicions among Nigerians of diverse religious background. According to Umejesi (2011:91), the dimensions of these crises especially between 1980 Maitatsine religious crisis through the 2000 Kaduna sharia religious crisis and the 2008/2010 Jos religious crisis into the present insurgency show that much is left to be desired from the potentials of religion. These crisis have led to loss of human and material resources needed for a sustainable and viable nation building that would have been a model for developing nations such that it has become a regret on both national and international scenes, and has also called into question the credibility of religion as an agent for promoting peaceful co-existence, nation building, and national security. “The image of the country has been



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battered in the comity of nations, as a crisis ridden place, where the citizens, foreigners, investors and their investments are not safe, indeed, the image of Nigeria is synonymous to religious crisis” (Umejesi, 2011:94). Thus, this paper sees religion as not accomplishing its purpose in ensuring peaceful co-existence, nation building, and national security. For Nigeria to be on a sound footing towards realizing peaceful co-existence, nation building, and national security, there must be a strong and conscious effort to obligate religious values in her system. There must be a promotion of ethical standard and value system which will put the nation on a sound footing for prosperity and good life for the citizenry since religion is ipso facto a way of life. For this to be possible, according to Onimhawo (2011:19), the people (Nigerians of diverse religious backgrounds) must be well schooled in the process of social justice, peaceful co-existence, religious tolerance, etc, which will contradict the anti-social religious values which have become the hallmark of national politics.

**An overview of religious intolerance in Nigeria**

Religion is the most universally potent instrument of peaceful co-existence, but ironically, the most abused, manipulated, and subverted weapon of deceit, deception, political maneuvering, sowing seed of discord, fanning embers of hostility of putting kith and kin asunder (David, 2000). Religious intolerance, according to Fan (2004) is a situation where members of one religious group are not able to accept ways of thinking and behaving which another group may have that are different from theirs. It is clear that the religion question, according to Audu (2000) has remained one of the most sensitive and volatile issues capable of consuming the country. Sometimes when it pops up it creates some level of insecurity among settler communities resulting into exodus of people from crises areas back to their respective state of origin and other safer places, such as camps meant for the internally displaced persons. There has been high degree of intra-sectarian conflicts creating instability and large scale devastation which inhibits meaningful progress and peaceful co-existence in the country. Nigeria in recent times has had a number of religious crises and this crisis is either in form of intolerance within a religion or between one religion and another. There are many factors which causes this intolerance among different religious sects. Doctrinal interpretations may cause conflict. The mode of worship by one sect may be at variance with the practice of the others. Fanaticism may generate violence and intolerance. Causes of religious crisis/intolerance in Nigeria include religions particularly, the claim that one religion is the best, noteworthy, special and the only universal religion that vouchsafes salvation to man. The two organized religions (Christianity and Islam) have tendency to delay national integration because of their negative tendency to create competing social orders and to define the most basic community thereby challenging the national community of Nigeria (Fan. 2004).

Wherever there is more than one religious group in a place there are usually acts of intolerance, which manifest in the following ways:

1. Throwing verbal insults at members of a religious group who may be worshipping or walking past;
2. Attacking with dangerous weapons;
3. Physical fights;
4. Denying some religious groups fundamental social services like provision of land to build worship places;
5. Mutilation in any form of the different religious holy books (Fan, 2004).



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Other causes of religious intolerance in Nigeria include:

1. Religious bigotry.
2. Religious indoctrination.
3. Factionalism within a religious group.
4. Power tussle.
5. Government interference in religious matters.
6. Increasing emphasis on religious fundamentalism which has become a source of disaffection in Nigerian society and if left unchecked, would be at variance with the lesson of love, tolerance and peaceful co-existence which various religions preach.
7. Negative influence of some militant religious leaders on their followers who inculcate in them a dogmatic, narrow-minded, and intolerant attitude in order to achieve their inordinate personal ambition (Fan, 2004).

Cases of religious intolerance have often resulted in religious conflicts, especially when one religious group is unable to accept the beliefs, values, and practices of another religious group. Below is a catalogue of Ethno-Religious Violence and its casualties in Nigeria (2000-2010).

**Table 1** Catalogue of Ethno-Religious Violence and its casualties in Nigeria (2000-2010)

<b>Year (A)</b>	<b>Location (B)</b>	<b>Principal Source (C)</b>	<b>Remarks/Casualties (D)</b>
2000	Northern Nigeria	Opposition to the introduction of Islamic Sharia Law	Thousands killed and properties destroyed
September, 2001	Jos, Plateau State	Christian – Muslim violence, flares after Muslim prayers	Over 1,000 people were killed
November, 2002	Kaduna	Articles of a newspaper considered blasphemous to the Islamic faith during Miss World contest in Abuja	At least 216 lives were lost
May, 2004	Yelwa, Plateau State	Street battles by Muslim Fulanis and Christian militia	630 people were killed
February, 2006	Maiduguri	Muslim protest against Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad resulting in Muslim and Christian mob	At least 157 people died in a week of rioting
November, 2008	Jos, Plateau State	Disputed local government elections triggering clashes between Muslim and Christian gangs	At least 700 people died
February 21, 2009	Bauchi	Religious fanatics	At least 11 people died, churches and mosques were burnt down
July, 2009	Bauchi	Book Haram demand the adoption of Sharia in Northern Nigeria. The Boko Haram suicide bombing still raging on till date	More than 1000 people were killed and over 500 arrested
July 27, 2009	Maiduguri	Security forces killing of sect members	90 people were killed
July 29, 2009	Yobe State	Gun battle near the town of	At least 33 sect members were



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		Potiskum by religious killed fanatics	
December, 2009	Bauchi	Clashes between security forces and members of an Islamic sect armed with machetes	At least 40 people were killed
January, 2010	Jos, Plateau State	Clashes between Muslim and Christian gangs	More than 400 people were killed
March, 2010	Dogo Nahawa, Zot and Rasat in Southern Jos, Plateau State	Clashes between Islamic pastoralists and Christian villagers in mostly Christian villages	More than 300 people died
December 24, 2010	Jos, Plateau State	Bombing by Muslim and Christian youth	At least 80 people were killed

**Source:** Adetoro and Omiyeya, 2012

**Need for religious tolerance in Nigeria**

Religious tolerance which is a situation whereby people of different faiths live together peacefully and accommodate each other's view without violent crisis and respect one another's view without clash is desirable for anybody. Tolerance is willingness to recognize and respect the beliefs or practices of others. It is disposition to allow freedom of choice and behavior. Tolerance keeps people at arm's length in hopes of not offending themselves. However, it is so noteworthy and interesting that a glossary look into the Bible and the *Qur'an* reveals that no religion preaches violence and intolerance, but rather advocates the strong need for tolerance (Romans 12:18; NWT-E). Anything that can tamper with the peaceful co-existence in any community is frowned at by the religions. Enforcement of orderliness and friendliness in the nation is the major function of religion in the nation. The Holy Bible enjoins love, peace, and tranquility (which are qualities that ensure tolerance) as ingredients for peaceful co-existence and unity in the following verses:

Let your love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is wicked; cling to what is good. In brotherly love have tender affection for one another. In showing honor to one another, take the lead...Rejoice in the hope. Endure under tribulation. Persevere in prayer. Share with the holy ones according to their needs. Follow the course of hospitality. Keep on blessing those who persecute; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Have the same attitude towards others as towards yourselves; do not set your mind on lofty things, but be led along with the lowly things. Do not become wise in your own eyes. Return evil for evil to no one. Take into consideration what is fine from the view point of all men. If possible, as far as it depends on you, be peaceable with all men" (Romans 12:9-18; NWT-E).

In his sermon (preaching) on the Mount, Jesus equally advised man to love other human beings when he said: "You heard that it was said: 'You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy'. However, I say to you: Continue to love your enemies and to pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5: 43, 44; NWT-E). In the same vein, the *Holy Qur'an* says: "And not alike are the good and the evil. Repel evil with what is best, when Lo! He between whom and you was enmity would be as if he were a warm friend" (Qur'an 41: 34; Ali, 1975).

The above two scriptural quotations from the Holy Books are vivid testimonies to the endless positive effects that tolerance motivated by love can have on the lives of adherents of the





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two major religions if adhered to strictly and religiously. Apart from enjoining virtues as a means of promoting national unity, such acts as vandalization, violence, theft, prostitution, adultery, false witness, looting, usury, and murder which are bane or hindrances to peaceful co-existence are condemned by both Christianity and Islam.

**Virtues of religious dialogue in Islamic and Christianity**

Dialogue is a form of communication between two or more person. It involves the sharing of ideas among a group of people. The Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1994) defines dialogue as a "discussion between representatives of parties to a conflict that is aimed at resolution". This definition presupposes the aim of dialogue – resolution of conflicts. It means that dialogue is a means of resolving conflicts among human beings. Contextually, dialogue is a sure means of resolving religious differences. Religious dialogue has to do with discussions concerning the views of different religious parties for the sole purpose of understanding each other better (Borrmans, 1990:10). Since religious dialogue concerns different religious parties and in this case between Christians and Muslims, the author will prefer to use the term "inter-religious dialogue" in this paper. According to a document of the Catholic Church (Dialogue & Proclamation, 1991), Inter-religious Dialogue is defined as: "All positive and constructive inter-religious relations with individuals and communities of faith which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment, in obedience to truth and respect for freedom" (Gerard, 2013:7).

This definition tells us that Dialogue is about building constructive relationships with people of faiths. It is about mutual understanding. It is about each partner respecting the religious freedom of the other.

The importance of inter-religious dialogue cannot be over emphasized because it seeks to:

1. Increase mutual understanding, and good relations.
2. Identify causes of tension in Christian-Muslim relations.
3. Build understanding and confidence to overcome or prevent tensions.
4. Break down the barriers and stereotypes which lead to distrust, suspicion and bigotry.

Thus, it therefore goes that inter-religious dialogue is not:

1. About talking away or brushing aside differences. It does not aim at coming to a common belief.
2. A way of converting the other. In dialogue each party remains true to their own faith.
3. A space for arguing, attacking or disapproving the beliefs of the other. It is about increasing mutual understanding and trust.

Inter-religious dialogue is indeed a sure means through which peaceful co-existence among Christian and Muslims can be promoted with the goal of attaining national security. Re-iterating this importance of inter-religious dialogue, Pope Benedict XVI in an address to Ambassadors from Muslim countries in 2006 said: "Inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optimal extra. It is, in fact, a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends" (Gerard, 2013:8). Similarly, a letter signed by 137 Muslim Scholars and Leaders from across the Muslim world and sent to Christian leaders in 2007 says: "Muslims and Christians together make up over half the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians" (Gerard, 2013:8). These statements highlight the urgent need for Muslims and Christians to address the polarization that is



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growing between them which has been fueled by wars, persecutions, and injustices, if they are to co-exist peacefully as one in a united community. Buttrressing this fact are the words of Pope John Paul II in a speech delivered to over 80,000 Muslims in Casablanca in 1985. He said:

We believe in the same God, the one God, the Living God who created the world...In a world which desires unity and peace, but experiences a thousand tensions and conflicts, should not believers favor friendship between the men and the peoples from one single community on earth?...Dialogue between Christians and Muslims is today more urgent than ever 'if peaceful co-existence in a country and globally is to be achieved'. It flows from fidelity to God...We must respect each other and we must stimulate each other in good works on the path of righteousness (Gerard, 2013:9).

Interestingly, both Islam and Christianity call for dialogue, tolerance, peaceful co-existence, and cooperation between Muslims and Christians.

Christianity and its Holy Book strongly support promoting peaceful co-existence through inter-religious dialogue on the part of its adherents. The Gospels (that is, the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and especially the Parable of the Good Samaritan teach that the call to love our neighbor does not just mean loving the person next door or a member of our own particular group or community. Reflecting this Gospel message, Church teaching regarding inter-religious dialogue is very positive. The Second Vatican Council, *lumen Gentium* 16 says:

The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator; in the first place among them are the Muslims: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day (Gerard, 2013:11).

The Second Vatican Council's Statement on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, commonly called *Nostra Aetate*, portrays the positive attitude towards dialogue that is reflected in most Christian denomination. The *Nostra Aetate* states:

The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God...In addition, they await the Day of Judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting (Gerard, 2013:11).

This document "urges" Christians and Muslims "to strive sincerely for mutual understanding" and "to make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom."

Unlike in the past, there is now, among most Christian denominations, a wish to promote mutual respect, understanding, cooperation, peaceful co-existence, and tolerance between Muslims and Christians. This openness to interaction, cooperation, peaceful co-existence, and tolerance reflects the Gospel call to "Love one another." All Christians therefore, have a part to



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play in creating a just and religiously tolerant society in which they can, faithful to their beliefs, live as good neighbors with people of other religions.

Islam along with its Holy Book on the other hand, and from a number of verses in the *Holy Qur'an* have stressed the need for peaceful co-existence with those of the other faith through dialogue. The *Holy Qur'an*, when referring to the attitude that Muslims should have towards Christians and Jews, says: "argue with them in ways that are best" (Qur'an 16: 125; Ali, 1975) and calls on Muslims to "compete in good works". The existence of different religious communities is recognized in the Qur'an: "Had thy Lord willed, He would have made mankind one nation" (Qur'an 5: 48, Ali, 1975). To promote peaceful co-existence, Muslims are also called on to be patient in dialogue: "Bear, then, with patience, all that they say, and celebrate the praises of thy Lord, before the rising of the sun and before (its) setting" (Qur'an 50; 39; Ali, 1975). There are many instances in the life example (the Sunna) of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that give guidance to Muslims on how to engage with Christians towards promoting peaceful co-existence.

One such example is the Charter of Najran in which the rights of Christians are protected and guaranteed.

The Charter of Najran says:

This is the message from Muhammad Ibn Abdullah as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity near and far we are with them. Verily, I the servant the helpers and my followers defend them because Christians are my citizens and by Allah I hold out against anything that displeases them. No compulsion in religions is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs, nor their monks from their monasteries. No one is to destroy a house of their religion or to damage it or to carry anything from it to the Muslim houses. Should anyone take any of these he will spoil God's covenant and disobey his Prophet. Verily, these are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate. No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them. No one Muslim nation is to disobey this covenant till the last day (Gerard, 2013:13).

A basic principle in dialogue is that we do not have to sacrifice, change or dilute our own beliefs. In fact doing this would be disservice to our dialogue partner. Dialogue is primarily about people meeting to gain a true appreciation of each other's faith. Dialogue does not entail engaging in contentious debate or arguing about religion. It does however, call for a willingness to be open, to listen, and to respect the other. A willingness to set aside our own sense of religious superiority will also help us to see what is good and positive in the faith of the other. Speaking at a recent Muslim Christian workshop in Limerick, Sheikh Umar Al-Qadri said:

According to our divine texts and your divine texts, our way to get closer to God is to care for humanity. Interfaith (inter-religious) dialogue is not about preaching, it is about sharing. It is not about converting, it is about serving. It is not about winning, it is about loving. It is not about becoming religious, it is about becoming spiritual. It is not about proving, it is about understanding. It is not about why, it is about why not and the possibilities. It is not about confrontation, it is about cooperation. It is not about becoming superior, in fact it is all about becoming human (Gerard, 2013:19).





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Sheikh Umar Al-Qadri further emphasize that dialogue, in all its forms, involves a certain amount of patience and humility. Differences exist between us, but we share a common humanity and a wish to serve the God who made us. Both Islam and Christians see serving our fellow man as being a way to serve God. Both faiths call on us to love our neighbor. Dialogue is living our faith in the presence of the people of other faiths. It is a means of loving neighbors who are not of my faith by reaching out to them in a spirit of openness and tolerance. In doing this, we do not have to engage in deep theological debate or depart from what we hold true. We do however, have to respect, cooperate and live in peace with each other.

In harmony with the foregoing, it has been observed in Nigeria that inter-religious dialogue has to be appreciated by all – young and old, literate and illiterate, the poor and the rich, Christians and Muslims. It should be a daily activity based on our commonalities and respect for our differences. The talk about inter-religious dialogue, especially between Christianity and Islam in Nigeria is very crucial because both religions have some things in common. The teachings and practices of Christianity and Islam are similar in many respects. Thus, due to these similarities in teachings and practices, peaceful co-existence can surely and indeed be promoted through religious tolerance and dialogue.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen the dynamism of religion as replicated in the history of Nigeria. While religion has created a lot of ill feeling among Nigerians especially when it has been manipulated, it has also been asserted that there is a lot religion has to offer to the peaceful co-existence, nation building and national security of Nigeria through religious dialogue. By mean of this healthy and sound dialogue, human relationship and national development will be enhanced. Nigeria is a heterogeneous society, with the two dominant religions – Islam and Christianity – enjoying the loyalty of most Nigerians. This paper has highlighted some of the causes of religious intolerance in Nigeria as well as the need to embrace the culture of religious tolerance as preached in the Holy Books of Islam and Christianity. It should be borne in mind that a peaceful environment ensures the progress of a nation. Peace is what every human person desires. Both Muslims and Christians should work towards peaceful co-existence, as this is the only way we can show that we are worshippers of a God who is full of love, a God who does not encourage killing of one's neighbor. It is high time for true dialogue to be embraced. Religion should be a uniting factor in Nigeria and not a means of division. It must be borne in mind that for there to be any meaningful development in Nigeria, there has to be peace, tolerance, and harmony among different religions in the country.

### **Recommendations**

1. Since all religious bodies preach love as a virtue, religious leaders should ensure that they emphasize this. Where love exists, there must, of necessity, be the absence of suspicion, religious discrimination, rivalry and competition, strife and tension
2. Secularism should not just be concerned as the withdrawal of the Nigerian State from religious affairs but as a guarantee of religious freedom to every Nigerian.
3. Introduction of Comparative Religious Studies in primary and secondary schools since one of the major causes of religious intolerance is ignorance. This subject, when introduced, will help to reduce the tension usually experienced between Christians and Muslims. The curriculum of the subject will deal with the objective views of both religions. It will ensure mutual



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relationship. If this subject is introduced, it will take care of the problem of fanaticism and the likes. Pupils will be taught from early childhood the importance of religious tolerance in promoting peaceful co-existence. This will positively change the thinking patterns of our people which will ensure national development.

4. Establishing occasions at which Muslims and Christians can meet and focus on areas of common interest such as community safety, neighborhood concerns, or simply to exchange information about customs or religious occasions. These events will help to break down barriers, overcome stereotypes and create relationships. This will allow trust to grow and will, in time, allow tensions or contentious issues to be addressed in a constructive and non-polemical way.
5. Making use of existing cultural, arts, sporting, social and local community events as occasions where mutual understanding, appreciation and trust can grow, and where Muslims and Christians can experience “we” rather than “us” and “them.” Muslims should be invited to participate and also be willing to do so.
6. Faith groups should make better use of the local media positively to promote inter-religious understanding and respect. Journalists should be provided with information, thus making it easy for them to publish good news stories about Muslims and Christians. The media could also be used to publicize inter-religious activities or events. In addition, inaccurate or biased reporting should be challenged.
7. Strict adherence to the teaching of various religions especially as they border on the need for tolerance and love for one another will be an advantage.
8. There is the need for the adherents of various religions in the country to exhibit the attitude of religious tolerance in dealing with people of other religion, this is very necessary for achieving religious peace and harmony in the country.
9. There is need for continued dialogue among the various religious bodies for the purpose of ensuring peace and stability in the country. Inter-religious dialogue is a meeting of hearts and minds across religious frontiers. Inter-religious group dialogue can promote mutual enrichment from the religious point of view and also enhance peaceful co-existence among the people of different religion.

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