

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE: A SINE QUA NON FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The thrust of this work is on the necessity of peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims to enhance and strengthen sustainable development in Nigeria. Christianity and Islam are the two major and decisive religions in Nigeria. Deplorably, the two religions that should teach and promote love, tolerance, and unity as enshrined in both the Bible and al-Qur'an, have been subtly used as an indicator of political and social identity in a way that rouse conflicts over resources, land, political and economic power. This has led to the upsurge in religious intolerance and bigotry, unbridled and aggressive action of the fundamentalists, wrong religious orientations, mindless selfishness among some religious leaders, and low level of religious literacy among some adherents, which is currently posing a crucial threat to sustainable development in Nigeria. Therefore, this study critically examines the interplay of peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims through dialogue for the transformation and sustainable development of Nigeria. The study employed a descriptive research method, purely based on written sources comprised of books, journals, and websites. The study, among other things, revealed that peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims is crucial for the economic, political, and social development of Nigeria. It was discovered that through dialogue, the intolerance and conflict situation in Nigeria can be transformed into a culture of peace characterized by respect, trust, liberty, tolerance, equality, and brotherliness that will foster sustainable development. The study, therefore, concluded with the recommendation that since religious isolation and bigotry are not conducive to sustainable progress and development, individual and religious institutions should embrace and proclaim dialogue reflecting brotherhood, peace, solidarity, unity, and love, which will play a vital role in shaping and establishing a better prosperous future for the nation.

Keywords: Religion, Christianity, Islam, Nigeria, Sustainable Development, and Peaceful Coexistence.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the challenge of religious conflict and violence poses a devastating threat to the sustainable development of the nation. Peaceful coexistence is an indispensable pillar for sustainable development in any given time and context. In this context, peaceful coexistence connotes possible and practicable mutual relationships between people of different faiths in society. This relationship is birthed through togetherness, dialogue, tolerance, and acceptance of one another differences among others. While Nigeria is constitutionally regarded as a secular state, it is no surprise that religion takes a prominent place in the affairs of the nation. With her multiple religious statuses, comprising Christianity, Islam, and African Religion as the major ones, the country has suffered from many and feeling the biting effects of ethno-religious conflicts and acts of violence. The problem has resulted in friction and tensions, expressed in fanaticism, bigotry, antagonism, exclusivism, clash, hostility, and intolerance, among others.

The United Nations officially unveiled the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development on January 1, 2016, with the aim of achieving socioeconomic and human development that meets current demands without endangering the ability of future generations to meet their own. ([United Nations, 2015](#)). Economic growth, equal opportunity, sustainable peace, social and environmental preservation, ethical leadership, and an implied future valuation aligned with investment and development are all aspects of this development. None of these, however, would be possible without the peaceful coexistence of people of different faiths, such as Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, given the ongoing realities of suspicion, tension, intolerance, distrust, extremism, religious particularity, and bigotry, as well as the struggle for supremacy fueled by historical colonial experiences, socio-ethnic, political, and economic divides. This struggle has manifested itself in various forms of violence, including physical, emotional, psychological, cultural, and structural conflicts over power struggles and situations of supremacy. It has severely harmed the nation's development and advancement. This paper makes the case that Nigeria cannot attain

sustained growth without lasting peace between its Muslim and Christian populations. Because peaceful cohabitation is a prerequisite for any society's advancement and development, it follows that peaceful coexistence is unavoidably necessary for sustainable development.

Therefore, this study qualitatively and comparatively aims to examine peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims as a sine qua non for sustainable development in Nigeria. The study employed a descriptive method in carrying out the research. According to [Daleen \(1985\)](#), studying social contexts and facets of human conduct is frequently best done using the descriptive method. In this case, the descriptive method is employed to elucidate the salient features of the study concerning the nature of peaceful coexistence between individuals of diverse religious beliefs and to explain how it can furnish a feasible and workable reciprocal relationship between Muslims and Christians for sustainable development in Nigeria and across the globe.

Research Questions

This study aims to provide practicable discourse on the following questions:

- a. What is the concept of Peaceful Coexistence in a multi-religious society?
- b. What is the interplay of Peaceful Coexistence and Sustainable Development?
- c. What are the critical factors for peaceful coexistent

Research Objectives

1. To explain the concept of peaceful coexistence in a multi-religious society
2. To examine the interplay between peaceful coexistence and sustainable development
3. To provide practicable factors that will promote Christian -Muslims peaceful coexistence in Nigeria

Significant of the Research

This research is significant because it provides a practicable meaning of peaceful coexistence in a multi-religious context. It reveals the crucial necessities of peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims for sustainable development in Nigeria. The research also presents

practical factors by which peaceful coexistence can be achieved for sustainable development in Nigeria. Many categories of people will benefit from this study, including Christians, Muslims, religious leaders and institutions, students, educators, and researchers in the field of comparative studies and sociology, among a host of others.

Concept Deconstruction

To set the basis of this research, it is critical and apposite to define and explain the basic concept underlying this work. Therefore, the operative terms, namely, peaceful coexistence and sustainable development, are conceptualized for a better understanding of their meaning in the context of this study.

Peaceful Coexistence:

The term peace, according to [Ifatokun \(2022\)](#), incorporates the idea that all is well in all aspects of life, including rest of mind, the well-being of an individual, harmony and unity of a society. The contextual perspective of peace is aptly explained in the definition of [Alao \(2019\)](#), who explained peace as the idea of harmony and the lack of animosity. According to him, the absence of conflict and the absence of fear of violence between members of different social groups and people constitute peace. Peace in this context refers to complete soundness and widespread prosperity in all spheres of life. Coexistence, on the other hand, is the state in which two or more groups of people coexist while respecting one another's differences and resolving disputes amicably. According to [Adesokan \(2015\)](#), The ability to live in harmony, in the exact location and time, with tolerance and mutual understanding across groups with disparate backgrounds, ideologies, and religious beliefs is known as coexistence. There are two common categories into which coexistence can be divided: active and passive. Equitable access to resources and opportunities, equity in all facets of life for both persons and communities and respect for and acceptance of diversity and differences are all characteristics of partnerships that are known as active coexistence ([Khaminwa, 2003](#)). When viewed in the context of equality, inclusion, justice, and fairness, this

kind of coexistence illustrates social peace. This framework maintains institutional growth, integration, and national progress.

Conversely, in passive coexistence, people and communities just put up with other groups having unequal relationships with authority, low equity, and unequal access to opportunities and resources (14). Within this framework, national unity, peace, and growth are impeded; nevertheless, because violence is rare, individuals can still be considered to coexist peacefully. Therefore, regardless of one's religious membership, peaceful coexistence is the capacity to coexist harmoniously with one another without conflict (Akande & Olawale, 2023). A state of peaceful coexistence is one in which people and groups who are different from one another in many ways—such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and so on—live together, actively embracing their differences with justice and equal access to opportunities, power, and resources, and resolving conflicts with tolerance and understanding for one another. However, other than that, no group that shares a space and time with another, whether it be ethnic, religious, cultural, or occupational, is motivated to obliterate the other. Instead, each group wants an appealing and peaceful location to live and conduct business (Izueke, E.M.C., Okoli, F.C. & Nzekwe, I., 2014). Therefore, peaceful coexistence is relevant, apposite, and makes massive sense for the promotion and achievement of sustainable development.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a process of change in which the utilization of resources, the direction of investment, the orientation of technological innovation and exchange, and institutional change reflect both present and future needs (Sing and Titi, 1992). It alludes to development that promotes social justice, economic success, and environmental protection. It seeks to meet the demands of the country, attain long-term fair living circumstances, eradicate poverty, and preserve the natural and human environments for the country's current and future generations of citizens (Izueke, E.M.C., Nzekwe, I., & Okoli, F.C. 2014). Within this framework, sustainable development entails the maintenance of the environment and the ongoing advancement of peace amongst people and communities, irrespective of their religious beliefs, ethnicity, race, or tribe, at any particular time

([Odudele, 2018](#)). Therefore, in order to promote sustainable development, it is necessary to uphold people's fundamental human rights as well as their freedom to engage in political, religious, and social life within their communities, all without jeopardizing the likelihood that future generations will reap similar rewards. In other words, the utilization of resources, the process of economic prosperity, access to power, social justice, and the direction of investment do not exploit equity and equal access among the populace and limit mutual understanding and tolerance, thus compromising the peaceful coexistence of the present and future generations. This is because a lack of peace or peaceful coexistence remains inimical to sustainable development in a nation.

The Interplay of Peaceful Coexistence and Sustainable Development

Peaceful coexistence is a veritable tool or vehicle for building a progressive, sustainable, and peaceful nation. The imperative of peaceful coexistence for viable and sustainable development cannot be overemphasized. This is because religious crises, interpersonal skirmishes, and ethnic conflicts are capable of wounding the psyche of the citizenry and undisputedly slowed the pace of development in all spheres of a nation. In other words, the creative management of differences, especially among people of different faiths, is at the core of sustainable development in any given society. The priceless qualities of mutual understanding, tolerance, contentment, and selfless service to humanity appear to be essential and critical for building a sustainable, progressive, and peaceful nation. Thus, the complex interdependencies of socioeconomic growth, social equity, security, happiness, a good life, peace, justice, job opportunities, and peaceful coexistence are all included in sustainable development, along with the implicit assessment of the future in terms of current decisions made regarding consumption, development, and investment. Sustainable development and peaceful coexistence are closely interconnected, and they are fundamentally linked to the viability of social transformation and socioeconomic advancement. In this condition, [Hassan et al. \(2019\)](#) confirm that the sustainable development goals (SDGs) revolve around the idea of peace. According to them, "If we do not address peace effectively, then we jeopardize all other goals." This is one implication of the strong interconnectivity of peace with all other sustainable development goals. In other words, since sustainable development cannot be

accomplished in an environment characterized by instability, conflicts, violence, and unrest, peace is the cornerstone of the goals of sustainable development. Therefore, achieving peaceful coexistence is crucial to achieving national development.

Given Nigeria's history of religious conflicts, peaceful coexistence is essential for sustainable development. The country has seen and continues to witness violent conflicts resulting from ethno-religious intolerance and bigotry, particularly between Christians and Muslims. These conflicts have a variety of adverse effects on national integration and sustainable development. The religious crisis has been with the country since the advent of Islam and Christianity, and their negative impacts remain with the society till the present time. The incidence of religious violence has recently become a daily ritual, often leading to the destruction of lives and property ([Odudele, 2018](#)). Peaceful coexistence and sustainable development are continuous processes that require constant cultivation and necessitate massive effort before their benefits are realized.

An atmosphere of peaceful cooperation makes it possible for local and foreign investors to make safe and secure investments that support economic expansion. Investors are more inclined to make investments in a society where there is harmony and an absence of religious conflict, enabling individuals of many religious beliefs to live in harmony and work together on a variety of economic projects. By boosting economic development, it also encourages trade both domestically and internationally, tourism, draws in foreign investors, and gives access to worldwide markets. Additionally, it promotes political stability that is marked by fairness, equality, harmony, and cooperation, all of which contribute to national progress and economic growth. In addition to strengthening national identity and cohesiveness and fostering a sense of belonging and unity, peaceful coexistence aids the nation's citizens.

A Brief Survey of Christian-Muslim Relationships in Nigeria

African religion and Islam were the two main religions practiced in Nigeria before the arrival of Christianity. The country saw the beginning of missionary activity as early as 1472 and the 1620s; however, the story of modern missions in Nigeria began in 1841 and was further shaped by the arrival of multiple mission agencies and indigenous church movements, which helped the religion

flourish and become one of the country's major religions. ([Galadima and Turaki, 2001](#)). As of late 2022, the United States government has estimated the number of people living in Nigeria to be 225.1 million. As of 2015, there were 48.1% Christians and 50% Muslims in the nation; just 2% of persons identified as neither religious nor nonreligious ([U.S. Department of State, 2022](#)).

Through Nigeria's pre- and post-independence periods, Christians and Muslims have interacted with one another. However, relationships are not always friendly between the two. Nigeria has had multiple religious crises after gaining independence in 1960. Between the two groups, there have been disagreements and crises. Continuous clashes in the relationship have resulted in a staggering loss of life and property. Contrary to expectations, religion has become a source of division rather than a unifying and cohesive force. In this condition, [Ahmadu \(1996\)](#) remarks that religion, which in many countries has grown to be a unifying factor, has proven to be incredibly polarizing in Nigeria. Nigerians have turned to prejudice, intolerance, and local hostility in their hunt for religious groups, which only serves to foster instability and mayhem. It has impeded Nigeria's economic growth, deterred foreign investment, prevented the country from fully utilizing its resources, weakened the country's unity, increased insecurity, and fostered violence that endangers political stability and democracy.

Furthermore, it has impeded Nigeria's successful political development and unification, as well as the social fabric and foundation for mutual respect and trust. The violence has repeatedly resulted in large-scale casualties as well as wanton destruction of property valued at billions of Naira, looting, and arson. Numerous homes and other assets are destroyed. ([Usman, 1987](#)). Many factors contribute to the tense relationship between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, such as socio-ethnic, political, and economic divisions; historical experiences of colonialism; and the manipulation of religious sentiments that have reinforced and heightened religious particularity and bigotry, confrontational preaching, intolerance, and the quest for supremacy. Violence has resulted from this country's continuing religious, political, and ethnic division. Inevitable confrontations may have political or ethnic roots. However, they can take the form of religious assaults that result in fatalities as well as the burning and destruction of places of worship. This includes the power struggle in politics, which has made the exploitation of religious sentiments

worse ([Ibid](#)). In Nigeria, there are frequent incidents of violence and interreligious conflicts that reinforce one another. All of the factors mentioned above have shaped Christians and Muslims' relationship in modern-day Nigeria.

Towards Christian- Muslim Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria

The tense ties between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria prompted the demand for dialogue that would result in everyone living in harmony. For individuals of diverse religious beliefs to live in peace with one another, dialogue is essential as a means of building communal ties. Hans Kung confirms this further when he says that there cannot be world peace without peace among different religions, nor can there be peace between different religions without interfaith dialogue, nor can there be interfaith dialogue without proper knowledge of one another. ([Kung, 1992](#)). Significant positive change can result when dialogue goes well, allowing participants to engage with other perspectives and reach more mutual respect and understanding. In view of the above, interfaith dialogue, as a crucial factor in promoting peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, provides interfaith meetings and forums that enable people of different religions to interact and learn from each other to foster peaceful coexistence. The objectives of religious dialogue include a deeper understanding of other religions and fostering better human relationships. There have been several efforts by individuals, associations, and institutions to organize platforms for peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria through dialogue in various spheres of life. Christians and Muslims have developed joint organizations working for peace. Notable examples include:

1. Individual level

The individual level deals with the dialogue that occurs in the local communities among various practitioners. It is the most expressed dialogue in Nigeria. The Catholic Church sponsored several dialogue meetings with Muslims in Nigeria between 1962 and 1978 with a focus on the areas of similarities between Christianity and Islam and the joint struggle against materialism. They had several experts on dialogue and Islam, such as Joseph Kenny, who organized meetings of dialogue

with Muslim participants ([Kenny, 1979](#)). The “Interfaith Mediation Centre” (IMC), situated in Kaduna, Northwest Nigeria, is another platform for Christian-Muslim dialogue. Muhammad Ashafa, a Muslim imam, and James Wuye, a Christian pastor, founded the center. The two collaborate to encourage dialogue, peacemaking, and peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians ([Ashafa & Wuye, 1999](#)).

Similarly, Rev. Dr F.T. Lateju is a great scholar and promoter of interfaith dialogue. He published works on dialogue with Muslims, and his ardent love for interfaith dialogue made him establish the Center for Interfaith Relations and Cross-Cultural Outreach (CIRCO) in Ogbomoso, Oyo state. The organizations, among other things, promote peaceful coexistence among people of diverse faiths through education and awareness programs that are essential for promoting peaceful coexistence. Dialogue at this level is essential to reach the grassroots and help in shaping a unique identity, promoting unity, and ensuring peaceful coexistence, social stability, and economic growth.

2. Associational Level

Dialogue at the associational level occurs in academic settings where scholars gather periodically to examine ideal ways of relating in a religious plural society. The Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) promotes such interfaith dialogue. The project was started in 1959 with the intention of helping the church engage Islam through training programs, conferences, and seminars to increase public awareness of the beliefs and practices of the two religions ([Ojo & Lateju, 2010](#)). More so, association like the National Association for the Study of Religions (NASR) is also engaging in interfaith dialogue by bringing scholars from various religious group on an annual basis at its conference ([Umaru, 2013](#)). Similarly, the African Society for the Study of Sociology and Ethics of Religions (ASSOSSER), established in 2015, also engages in religious interactions through conferences, workshops, and seminars for appropriating the relevance of religions to society. This dialogue fosters interfaith coexistence among Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Another association worth mentioning is the Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum (MCDF); based in Northern Nigeria, the forum uses workshops, seminars, and symposia

as part of its educational process to promote and spread the principles and qualities of religious harmony and peaceful coexistence throughout the region. Through dialogue, it also aims to encourage tolerance for one another and an open mind toward historical, cultural, and religious diversity among communities. The targeted groups are faith communities, youth, and women ([Ibid](#)). Another organization is the Association for Christian-Muslim Mutual Relations in Nigeria (ACMMRN). The association organizes dialogue conferences that encourage Christians and Muslims to make every effort to reach out to each other ([Ibid](#)). Dialogue at this level promotes religious tolerance, respect, and value for others, enhances the social fabric of a society, provides the ability for people to acquire knowledge safely and peacefully, and leads to economic growth and development.

3. Institutional Level

Dialogue at the institutional level is found in the Nigeria Interreligious Council (NIREC). This structured interreligious dialogue enjoyed the official recognition of the government and its agencies. This organization provides an opportunity to understand the role of religious interaction in nation-building. The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) was established on September 29, 1999, by the representative of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria to foster interreligious peace, interaction, and coexistence ([Olorunnisola, 2019](#)). The association comprises 50 members based on an equal Christian and Muslim membership ratio. Alhaji Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar, the Sultan of Sokoto and President-General of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), and Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), jointly serve as the co-chairs of the NIREC. The executive secretary and national coordinator of the association is Professor Is-haq Oloyede ([Toki, Gambari & Hadi, 2015](#)). As a mouthpiece for dialogue and peaceful coexistence, the NIREC advocates regular interfaith meetings to check recurring ethno-religious crises in Nigeria. Dialogue at this level fosters understanding, unity, cooperation, reduces religious tensions, and encourages exposure to varied cultural perspectives, and helps develop a more tolerant and peaceful interfaith coexistence in society.

The individual, associational, and institutional religious dialogues have all contributed to the peaceful coexistence enjoyed in Nigeria so far. They also educate people about the importance of peaceful coexistence and its benefits to society. It is necessary to note here that the hope for Christian-Muslim peaceful coexistence in Nigeria depends mainly on the willingness of the two faith communities to admit sincerely that the love and providence of God extends to all human beings equally, regardless of religious, ethnic, cultural, and identity differences. Both must strive to recognize that there is truth in both al-Qur'an and the Bible. The explanation for this is that in order to promote growth and improved understanding, a sustained peaceful coexistence process needs to make a good connection with the salient experiences and feelings towards the other.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study has examined Christian-Muslim peaceful coexistence as essential for sustainable development in Nigeria. It has been established that peaceful coexistence is paramount for achieving sustainable development. Likewise, it was discovered that sustained interreligious dialogue is paramount for peaceful coexistence. Hans Kung confirms this further when he says that there cannot be world peace without peace among different religions, nor can there be peace between different religions without interfaith dialogue, nor can there be interfaith dialogue without proper knowledge of one another ([Kung, 1992](#)). Through dialogue, the intolerance and conflict situation in Nigeria can be transformed into a culture of peace characterized by respect, trust, liberty, tolerance, equality, and brotherliness that will foster sustainable development. In this way, Simon Kolawole remarks that it is necessary to have better Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. Such improved relationships will create a more conducive environment in the nation, enhance peaceful coexistence and unity, reduce wanton destruction of lives and properties, and promote the growth and development of the nation ([Kolawole, 2018](#)). This can be accomplished by the two faith groups' constant dialogue, understanding, and cooperation. Respect, self-worth, and the bravery to extend a hand as neighbors will be significantly enhanced by a dialogue between Christians and Muslims about daily life. Through peaceful coexistence, Nigeria can enjoy

sustainable development and overall prosperity. However, to effectively achieve Christian-Muslim peaceful coexistence in Nigeria, the following recommendations are imperative:

1. Regular interfaith dialogues and interactions between Christians and Muslims should be encouraged in order to strengthen open and respectful conversations, promote balanced and unbiased teachings, prevent misconceptions, and foster understanding.
2. Government at all levels should invest in grassroots dialogue that will promote tolerance, social integration, and community development.
3. Religious leaders and preachers in Nigeria who identify as Christian and Muslim are to uphold peaceful coexistence by developing a genuine willingness to interact and cooperate as peace agents. As individuals, Christians and Muslims can deeply and significantly contribute to peaceful coexistence in Nigeria by becoming examples of peace in their communities.
4. Non-government organizations and institutions can make significant contributions to peaceful coexistence in Nigeria by strengthening channels of communication and interaction between faith communities.

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