

# The God Phenomenon in Nigeria: The Logic, the Religion and the Politics of Tolerance

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## INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian society of today is torn between the jealousies of Christianity and Islam, and to a little extent, the distinct, but more accommodating values and customs of the indigenous religions of the well over 250 ethnic nationalities. As it were, Nigerians still find themselves involved together in social, economic and political relationships. However, there is the crisis identity and the rights of these different cultural groups, and or orientations, of preserving their distinct ways of life, and yet working together in jointly constructing a society that enhances their self-worth, self-esteem and self-realization at their deepest level of existence. Our paper acknowledges the spate of global interaction in this new world in the making which spirit has forced or fused the coexistence of individuals of different ideological political, religious and moral persuasions. The paper argues on this score that the resultant agitations of these religious groups are what counts as the tensions of the present polity. that, the manipulation of religion or religious practices as a form of discrimination as is evident in the prosecution of the Sharia project violates the rights of other citizens. The paper argues on a second count that, religious pluralism is not contrary to the values and customs of the Nigerian social system, and that, the different religious persuasions, which outlook and practices sometimes contradicts each other; apparently diverse and opposed, are simply expressions from different viewpoints and by different method of one ultimate truth which has the capacity for national integration, social harmony and sustainable human development. The paper advances a philosophy of religious tolerance as an institutional frame and atmosphere in which humanity shares in the richness of its different traditions for a better and more humanized world.

## DECONSTRUCTING OF THE GOD PHENOMENON

The being of man is wholly and perennially dominated by the problem of God. Unhesitating, man is constrained to silence and reduced to affirming paradoxically though, that God is knowable no less than he cannot be known. Notwithstanding this paradox, the reality of God remains unquestionable, which is why Leibnitz (1969:543) says “try as we may, we cannot do without God.” It is thus no exaggeration to assert that the history of world cultures and philosophies is strictly speaking the history of religions.

From Thales to contemporary times, the dominant discussion has always been the problem of God. Human thought is either affirming or denying His existence. The renaissance period for instance witnessed the separation of philosophy from theology, and hence human reason was substituted for revelation. The likes of Martin Luther, Zwingli, Melancthon and Calvin combined reason and faith in reforming the understanding of religious faith. They redefined God as the absolute, infinite, divine and sovereign reality. Thus, the universe was intuited as an expression of divine infinity; Life too is both one and many, it is nothing than the unique and eternal substance, the living principle of being, the supreme monad, spirit and God, infinitely present to all things and more intimate to each than it is so itself. (Glordana, 1969:543).

Modern thinkers recoiled back to reason as a basis and the object of reflection though, still held tenaciously to belief in religious faith. Rene Descartes in very much at hand in reasoning on this core that, “God has within himself the principle of causality to an absolute degree – God is *causa sui*, not in the sense that is an effect but rather that He is a being *esse a se*” (Copleston). The problem of God similarly captured

the mind set of contemporary period is characterized by three great currents, the idealist, thought of God as a logical, mathematical or metaphysical essence i.e. a form of solipsism; an affirmation of God who is a “possible” within man and from man.

The spiritualist current on the other hand makes a return to moderate realism and rejects pure determinism and affirms a rational possibility of a religious order. The existentialists thought views the problem of God in two ways, namely, theistic and atheistic. Theistic existentialists such as S. Kierkegaard, G. Marcel, L. Chestov and N. Berdiaev, all argue that God is discovered or encountered by the individual as he strives for the free realization of his true self rather than as the term of impersonal objective reasoning. Atheistic existentialists such as J.P. Sartre, A. Camus and Nietzsche amongst others consider the idea of God as contradictory. Martin Heidegger, and K. Jaspers, the two main representatives of German existentialism, resent the charge of atheism, but they at the same time, developed as system in which there seems to be no room for the God of traditional philosophy. Heidegger’s “Being” and Jasper’s “transcendent” are such vague and ambiguous terms that they inevitably perplex the reader as to their real meaning.

Inadequate as it is, existentialism under all its forms has served at least one purpose: it has proved beyond doubt that God is at the centre of all solutions to the problem of human existence. With God, life has meaning and a purpose; without God, life and the world itself become meaningless as well as absurd. The implication of these varied understanding of the nature of the Supreme Being is what comes down to us today in form of religious intolerance. While Christianity and Islam do not find in these senses of belief in God itself any ground of unbelief in Him, they are all the same dramatically opposed to each other, in social, economic, political and religious values. Torn between their jealousies though, there is no fundamental opposition in their dogmas as to dialogue, neither is there any question as to the fact that the two groups acknowledge the divine essence and worship the only true, and one God; ‘the creator and controller of the universe.’ Such is why the Quran, the revealed word of Allah urges Muslims to enter into dialogue with Christian: *call thou to the way of the lord with wisdom and good admonition, and dispute with them in a better way. Surely thy Lord knows very well those who have gone astray from his way, and he knows very well those who are guided.* (Q. 16, 125)

The Glorious Quran similarly admonishes Christians as believers in the one supreme deity and calls them for collaborative understanding with Muslims: *Dispute not with people of the book, save in the fairer manner, except for those of them that do wrong: and say, we believe in what has been sent down to us, and what has been sent down to you; our God and your God is one, and to Him we have surrendered* (Q. 29:46) The obvious point of attraction here is the fact that both Christianity and Islam are not only theistic religious, but that the duo lay claim to the same God, who as it were “knows very well those who have gone astray from His way, and... those who are guided”. The problem of the problem of God in Christianity and Islam is that, rather than acknowledge, as is found in the dogmas of the two religions that *it is only God who knows who truly worships Him*, adherents of these religions are buried in the jealousies of their different faiths and constrained to argue though that, the two world religions harbour rock-like contradictions and exclusions. Religious jealousies as used and applied here mean those points in every religion concerning which the believers are inwardly compelled to claim a universal significance and finality. Such strictly irreducible convictions like “the Holy Quran is not the Christian conviction that “in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, God acted decisively for all mankind” and the Jewish conviction that “Israel’s covenant and her attachment to the Holy land has a critical significance in the determinate purpose of God”, all count as examples of the jealousies of the different faiths.

While not totally overlooking such and other irreducible convictions, they serve the relevant purpose in reflecting the naked fact that every profoundly convincing encounter with God is with a jealous God. Suffice it to say however that, interfaith relations between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria leave much to

be desired. Thus argued, the nature of God (Allah) forms the borne of division. Here the Muslim would ask, how can God be called *Father* and *Son* and the *Holy spirit* and still be one God? Are you really monotheists? Do you believe in three gods? A true Muslim is not unaware of the status of true Christians as “people of the Book” though, he is bewildered as to whether the “many” gods which the Christians “believes” in does qualify them as monotheists (Q. 2:62; 3:110-115;4:55; 5:69-82) or unbelievers (Q 5:17, 72-73; 9:30) or apostates (Q 5:31-72).

Christianity reflects this problem of God in what has come to be accepted as the *Trinitarian Dogma* which theomathical formula is expressed as God the Father plus, God the Son plus, God the Holy Spirit equal to God i.e.  $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$ . This theomathical formula given by the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council (1215) states unambiguously that the divine nature of God is one, but that it is possessed equally by three “person”, the father as the unoriginated origin, the son as the one deriving his origin from the father from all eternity, the spirit proceeding from both, all three being equally consubstantial. it is perhaps this clear understanding that informs the thought of Abdelziz Kamel (1974) a Muslim himself, to admit that Christianity is truly a form of monotheism. The words *Father*, *Son* used metaphorically, are often more respectful of the divine mystery than philosophical explanations, he says. The Holy Bible itself is full of God’s “Jealousy” towards false gods and idols, Jesus does not think differently [cf Mk 12:32; Jn. 17:3; see also 1 Cor. 8:4; Gal. 3:20; Eph. 4:5; 1 Tim. 1:17;2:5 etc] These differences in beliefs and religious practice are what had agitated the clamour for sharia for Muslims on the one hand, and its opposition by Christians as the creeping Islamization of the country on the other hand. The question here is neither what the Sharia is nor where the Sharia should be, but how the sharia should be implemented; for who and how. More importantly, does the advent of the Sharia legal system in Nigeria portend boom or doom?

## THE LOGIC AND POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The religious practice in Nigeria predates the Nigerian nation. Our forebears had a system of worship that predates Islam and Christianity. The advent of Islam in the country dates back to 1085 through Kanem-Borno. It is on record that the Sharia Islamic legal system was in full practice in the Hausa North having been reinforced in the reign of Mai Idris Alooma. In Southern Nigeria, there are reliable indications that sharia was palpably present in Yorubaland. Is-haq Akintola (2000:36) aptly reports that, ‘Oba Abibu Olagunju, the first Muslim monarch of Ede accorded sharia official recognition in the second half of the nineteenth century. His sharia Court was at Agbeni, presided over by Qadi Sindiku. Sharia was also practiced in Iwo under Oba Momodu Lamuye and Kirun under Oba Oyewole where Mallam Bako from Ilorin presided’.

It thus argues here that, the Islamic sharia legal system like the customary and common laws are part and parcel of the making of the Nigerian nation. In northern Nigeria where the Islamic legal code predominates, the colonial policy of indirect rule sought to interfere as little as possible with the pre-existing system, retained with minimal modification the sharia legal code until the eve of the independence when the, the Islamic legal code experienced far-reaching changes and restriction to include only matters of personal status. Before then in 1956 the native courts in the north had its jurisdiction elongated to incorporate a single shaira court of appeal for the entire region. Since then the journey to the comprehensive implementation of sharia in Nigeria has been rough with accusations and counter-accusations between Christians and Muslims especially during every constitutional making process. Suffice it so say however that, every constitution we have had right from independence has made provision for Sharia. The independence constitution of 1960 finds placement for sharia in section 112.

The 1963 Republican Constitution is no different as it upholds the same provisions under section 119. Similarly, sections 242 of the 1979 Constitution, 261 of 1989, Decree No. 50 of 1991 Section 281 of 1995 Draft Constitution, Decree No. 22 of 1997 and Decree No. 3 of 1999 as amended by Decree No. 4 of 1999

all acknowledge the right of Muslims for Sharia Court of Appeal.

The Informing philosophy behind these reflections is perhaps what the federal constitution of Nigeria 1999 has captured under section 38 that:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, and free (either alone or in association with others, and in public or private) to manifest and propagate his religious or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

For the Muslim freedom of thought, conscience and religious practices means only that, his entire life should be governed by the Sharia which meaning in Arabic is “path to be followed”, a complete scheme of life, and an all embracing order where nothing is lacking. In Islam and for Muslims, life without sharia is life of ignorance, and any claim to knowledge amounts to great sin and evil (Ihuah 2001:315) The Quran itself says: *Then we set you on a plain way of our commandments (sharia) so follow you that, and follow not the desire of those who know not. For they can in no way protect you from the wrath of Allah (Q. 45:18).* What this means is that in Islam, all spheres of life, social, political, economic legal are conditioned upon unflinching submission to Sharia judgment. As acknowledged by the holy book of Islam, “But no, by your lord they can have no faith until they make you (O Mohammad) judge in all disputes between them and find in themselves no resistance against your decisions and they will submit entirely” (Q. 4:65). Zealous Muslim theologians have gone as far as interpreting the spirit of John 14:15-16 *If you love me keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father and He shall give you another comforter that he may abide with you forever*, to suppose that another comforters is Mohammed, the messenger of Allah; and him to abide forever means the perpetuity of his laws and way of life (sharia) and the Book (Qur’an) which was revealed to him<sup>[1]</sup>

Taken on these counts, a good Muslim is not unaware of the ocular fact that his being is in, and from sharia; that everything, from cradle to grave has been provided for, adequately and comprehensively under the sharia. In Islam and for Muslims, submission to sharia judgment is a right and a must, and not a privilege. Such right is what the 1999 Nigerian constitution claims for the Muslim under section 6(5), but in particular section 227(1) as follows:

The Sharia Court of Appeal of a state shall in addition to such jurisdiction as may be conferred upon it by law of the state, exercise such appellate and supervisory jurisdiction in civil proceeding involving questions of Islamic personal law to decide in accordance with the provisions of subsection (2) of this section.

Relying on the above section in addition to section 4(7), 6(4) & (5), 38, 278, realizing that freedom of religion is guaranteed, satisfied that the Assembly has legislative competence to establish other courts in addition to existing ones; convinced that Muslims in the state have expressed their overwhelming desire to submit to the sharia beyond the “personal law” confines, and desirous of curbing crime wave, Zamfara have submitted to sharia judgment to protect themselves from the wrath of Allah. Since the Zamfara spark, other northern state like Sokoto, Kano, Bauchi, Borno, Kebbi, Jigawa, Gombe and Adamawa among others have followed suit. It should be understood that this did not sit down well with a section of the Nigerian Public. In a sharp reaction, Professor Awalu HamisuYadudu calls it a “misunderstanding, mischief and campaign of calumny...against the sharia” that is borne out of ignorance. As the popular cliché goes, one could cure ignorance with knowledge, and sharpen the blunt edges of propagandist mischief with plain and truthful information. Our proceeding attempt shall be in this regard.

But before undertaking this all important task, it may suffice to browse through the perceptions, images and symbols surrounding the shaira debate in Nigeria. Unarguably, no single issue has galvanized the Muslims of Nigeria into a cohesive and vocal force as the sharia. No other issues has evoked the hostility of, compounded and left bewildered non-Muslims in the country, yet, as Professor AwaluYadudu

(1999:8) intelligently asserts, “the *sharia* is the least understood aspect of Islam as a complete way of life, regrettably, by an overwhelming majority of Muslims and not surprisingly, by non-muslims alike.”

The symbols and images conjured in the minds of actors engaged in the debate over the *sharia* are divergent as there are interest or pressure groups in the country. Yadudu (1999:8) chronicles his observations on this issue as follows

- To a Muslim who, desirous of living a life which is truly Islamic, yearns to submit totally to the commands of Allah, the debate is about whether or not the religious freedom guaranteed to all citizens in Nigeria would be extended to him/her in any meaningful way. Such a Muslim views the debate as part of the design to trivialize Islam and ridicule Muslims.
- To the spokesman of the emerging Christian organizations in the country, it conjures up images of what they have come to perceive as the creeping “islamization” of the country. It provides this category of Nigerians quite an ample and credible opportunity to pick a quarrel with Muslims.
- To ordinary Muslim folks, it amounts to no more than a struggle for a judicial forum which has the word *sharia* in its application.
- To the opportunistic politicians of various ideological colouration, the debate is about a judicial bone of contention which provides a golden opportunity for building a credible political reputation and an occasion to make political investments preparatory to partisan politics which the constitutional debate are always a prelude to.
- To the Christian Northerner who hides behind the veil of either serving as a shepherd of a flock or an elected representative, he rants and raves against the *sharia* either to appease his constituency or elate his parish.
- The self proclaimed leftist or progressive adopts an aloof, hypocritically neutral and agnostic posture over the debate. To this group, the debate is much ado about nothing. If only the masses were enlightened, liberated or the capitalist ploy is demystified, they argue, there would not be any need for the debate.
- The progressive have their unprincipled greedy cousins: politicians who are keen on capturing power and intent on doing whatever it takes to achieve this objective. Christians or Muslims, this category would trade their conscience to achieve a political end. As the cliché goes, they would even sell to the hangman the rope with which to send them to the gallows.
- Then, there are the victims of corrupt and heartless judicial officers who preside over an equally corrupted and inefficient judicial system. Islamic in character though, these courts have now been stripped of their Islamicity. They are yet mandated to apply those aspects of the *Sharia* left intact. Such folks view the debate by reference to the raw deal they have at one time or the other received at the hands of these personnel in these forums. Giving the choice they would have nothing to do with either the personnel or the forum. Traumatized by the system, they are unable to distinguish what is essentially a common law judicial institution informed and nurtured by its ideals from its Islamic counterpart whose ideals the corrupt judicial officers have failed to live up to”
- Very importantly too there are those who, having lost leadership of Africa’s largest democracy, the Nigerian Muslim finds it funny to subject himself/herself to the dictates of the Christian leadership. And having lost power in the north to the more progressive, emerging new leadership, the Northern Muslim finds it expedient to seek relevance and relaunch himself/herself back to the power-equation by playing on the embers of religion, and so offering the *talaks* *sharia* instead economic empowerment which the average Northern Muslim needs no less than spiritual upliftment and subjugation to *sharia* judgment. This crop of disgruntled and recycled power seekers find a ready tool in the *sharia*, to destabilize the administration of a Christian president Olusegun Obasanjo. Their agenda are not about religious faith.

Giving the perceptions, images and symbols surrounding the *sharia* debate in Nigeria, and evaluating our

perception of the nature of God, the Christian as much as the Muslim is guilty. Both the Christians and Muslims as the debate unveils smacks of religious intolerance and fanaticism which are banal characteristic of metaphysical thinking. For one, such metaphysical thinking reduces all reality to some common substance. Two, it focuses attention on an ultimate divine Being. The argued point here is that reality is one and whatever does not fall within this conceptual scheme (of reality) is a second order reality or a total unreality. This metaphysical position; the superior, holier-than-thou attitude finds expression in the religious jealousies of the religions of the world, but in particular fuels the zeal of the Muslim to insist on the implementation of the sharia legal system as the only way of guaranteeing his religious freedom as provided for under section 38 of the 1999 federal constitution.

For the Christian however, such understanding and interpretation violates the spirit of the same Section 38, for under the sharia legal system, his freedom of thought, conscience and religion is daily infringed upon. He is for instance not free either alone, or in association with others, and in public or private allowed to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice or observance in the areas under sharia administration. The logic of the sharia legal system which subjects only “persons professing the Islamic faith” and “any other person who consents” and which further enjoins the courts before it exercise its jurisdiction, to “ensure that the consent given was voluntary and the person is legally competent and responsible to give it. . .” is clearly fallacious when subjected to the human court of practical reason. For one, Christians who are in no way “persons professing Islamic faith” are forced to stand trial in these courts, and without their consent. John Danfulani, a onetime Constituent Assembly member publicly confessed that his sister was forced into marriage under Islamic law and when she ran away, she was arrested and tried under the sharia law. (Ihuah 2001:316).

This metaphysical attitude insinuates that, that which occupies one’s mindset does not occupy the mindset of another. But this mode of reasoning clearly contradicts human nature. By insisting that one’s perspective encompasses the totality of being, both the Christian and Muslim creates an orthodoxy – a total system of norms and values from which their followers, must not deviate, thereby extolling an attitude of fixism, fanaticism and intolerance. This mode of thinking is not only nihilistic but also vengeful, and thus threatens the true human vocation to see and say of what is, as it is, and to see and say of what is not, as it is not. This metaphysical attitude insists on “a saying of that which reveals itself to human being in manifold ways “knowing fully well that, no one is better equipped to account for what is experienced or seen other than the experience or seeing object.

...since seeing and saying are not the prerogative of one man alone but that of every mortal who is human enough for his ontological wonder to be excited, discursive communication in which one discloses his intimate experience also calls for authentic silence...of listening attentively to others whether or not what they say is strange to us (see Momoh, Onuoha and Miskin (ed) n.d p 289).

Unarguably, man belongs to earth, and this in itself makes him heir and learner of all things which again distinguishes him as a being among beings, hence he is a conversation. Heidegger agrees here thus that, “we ...mankind...are a conversation. The being of men is founded in language. He argues point-blank thus:

Listening to...is Dasein’s existential way of Being – open as Being – with for others. Indeed, hearing constitutes the primary and authentic way in which Dasein is open for its own-most potentiality-for-being-as hearing the voice of a friend whom every Dasein carries with it. *Dasein* hears because it understands. As a Being-in-the-world with others, a Being which understands, *Dasein* is ‘in thrall’ to *Dasein*-with and to itself, and in these thralldom it “belongs” to these. Being-with develops in listening to another... which can be done in several possible ways (Heidegger, 1976:206).

The implicit suggestion here is that, effective communication and an open meaningful human relationship are governed by the art of listening to others and sharing the richness of the others’ traditions.

This spirit is lacking in the interactive behavior of the world religions. Such is the explanation of the flagrant display of dogmatic posturing of the two most populous religions in Nigeria i.e. Christianity and Islam. It must be argued however that, differences in our outlook in themselves are not, and should not hinder, a harmonious interaction. Rather, they should form a basis for testing our humanity, which essential nature is not in isolation. From the position of our own essence, we *can never* counter only ourselves, and any conception of our own environment that perceives only ourselves and our dispositions is necessarily flawed from the point of view of essential human nature.

Muslims may still be governed by the Sharia so as to be protected from the wrath of Allah (Q45:18), they may still advance other jealousies by saying “every child is born a Muslim”, they may even establish Sharia courts they should also know precisely that their Christian brothers are like them, governed by the Federal Constitution, part of which guarantees their religious freedom too. They should also acknowledge that for the Christian too, “every child is born in Christ,” and that Sharia courts and the entire Islamic legal system should not muzzle the public or private legitimate business of the Christian anytime and anywhere in Nigeria.

While affirming within the confines of their religious faith; the path they have chosen to follow, they should be humble enough to empty themselves individually before the universal pool of brotherhood in acknowledgement of the fact that nothing can be better for them alone unless it is better for them all; as Christian and Muslims put together.

Our argued position is that this task is through an institutional framework which adherents of different religious and culture traditions still wear their distinctive features though they are enabled to find in these same traditions a source from which the principles of real and mutual tolerance might be articulated.

## TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

The word phenomenology used strictly in its philosophical sense is an *analytic tool* for delivery into the core of our being of inquiry. It is the disposition, the orientation, the attitude of mind which lets entities be seen in their proper light and being itself is the light, the emergent power which throws light on beings” (Unah 1997: 18) This tool of philosophy is an attempt to understand the principle which acts as a guide to human action i.e. tolerance. Here tolerance unveils itself as that metaphysical temperament that allows *things to be in themselves as they are*, knowing full well that no one has monopoly of truth about an idea.

Our evaluative analysis of the concept of God reveals divergent shades, perceptions images and symbols. So also is our consideration of the sharia question in Nigerian politics. There is however more to benefit in unity and to avoid the risk of irrelevance and parochialism if only followers of different religious traditions, and cultural groups can reach out of their ghetto mentality of isolationism, exclusivism and denominationalism. More important, the idea that one’s God is more God than the other’s God cannot stand erect before any human court of reason. For thought is free and whatever the mind thinks about must necessarily be a being from which it must follow, that the mind cannot think of nothing where nothing is conceived as a total not or absolute nothing (Unah undated p. 288). But here again the elucidating voice of Hossein Nasr finds relevance, No religion, whether it be Islam or Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism, can without a doctrine as to what is absolute and what is relative. Ditto the doctrinal language differs from one tradition to another. Nor can any religion be without a method of concentrating on the real and living according to it although the means again differ in different traditional climates... no religion is possible and man cannot attach himself to God without God having himself through his grace, provided the means for doing so.

Every orthodox religion is the choice of heaven and while still intact contains both the doctrines and method which 'save' man from his wretched terrestrial condition open to him the gates of heaven. (1966:15ff)

It means that, no two religions can be completely difference one from the other without sharing some common elements. As it were, Christianity and Islam have a lot in common. It is reported (Omoregbe, 2001:249; Guillaum, 1954:14) for instance that prophet Mohammed grew up among Arab Christians, and Christian Monks are said to have given him the tonics he wore in his youth when he was poor. Again, when his followers were attacked in Mecca while they were preaching, they fled to the Abyssinian Christians for protection. It is reported that they were allowed to practice their religion freely without hinderance. Mohammed appreciated this friendly gesture of the Christian and reflects it in the Quran thus; "You will find the most affectionate friends will be those who say we are Christians" (q 5:85). In a true sense, the two can call one another brothers and sisters in faith in one God. Besides, they have many things in common: the privilege of prayer, the duty of justice accompanied by compassion and arms-giving, and above all a sacred respect for the dignity of man among many other things.

It thus argues that "it is the desire and goodwill of all to accommodate mote religions, to entertain more avenue of communion with God (Unah, Ibid p. 290). The attitude of domination of, and discrediting other religions different from one's own is itself irreligious, and mischievous. There must be a disposition to discuss values in the assumption that nobody has a monopoly of truth and that everyone has some share in it. Above all, there must be a preparedness to endorse publicly the values at the heart of all traditions. There must be a search for values which are in need of particular nuance to cope with life today.

It is perhaps within this informed spirit that we find in the expressions of Muhammed Talbi (1971:3) that combat against non-Muslims today is generally put forward as the last resort must all the same conform to material and moral restrictions in order to be acceptable:

It is above all important to bring out clearly that verses which incite to war have an essentially circumstantial application, connected with specific contingencies which today, we would hope, are definitely something of the past. They do not present us with the deep, permanent spirit of the message, which is that of a hand respectfully and courteously held out to our to our neighbour...it is deep and permanent spirit that we must rediscover today in order to clear the path to dialogue of all misunderstandings which have blocked it in the past and which are in danger of blocking it again today in combination with other difficulties of the present time.

Pope John Paul II in an address to the Muslim community in Kaduna on the 14 February 1982, similarly expressed the Christian hand of fellowship thus:

All of us, Christians and Muslims, live under the sun of the one merciful God. We both believe in one God – who is the creator of man. We acclaim God's sovereignty and we defend man's dignity as God's servant. We adore God and profess total submission to him... Both of us can spearhead the principle and practice of religious freedom, ensuring its application especially in the religious education of children... I am convinced that if we join hands in the name of God we can accomplish much good.

Perhaps the suggested distinction between different kinds of norms according to their range of application may suffice as an analytic tool for religious tolerance. Professor Mason (1985:120) list three of such norms as, (i) *Universal norms* which are binding on all members of the political community regardless of religious faith, cultural or political differentiation; (ii) *Alternative norms* which allow options, sometimes under different headings, in complying with norms; and (ii) *Specialty norms* that are restricted to, and are distinctive of a particular group within the larger community. Clearly, religious tolerance in Nigeria must take special cognizance of these kinds of norms to avoid causing great and unnecessary anguish, social



disequilibrium and injustice. The implementation of the sharia legal system should be understood in the context of *special* norms which practice and enforcement must be in proportion with *alternative* and *universal* norms.

Wittingly or unwittingly, the logic of sharia legal system which acts as a universal norms is not only illicit and mischievous, but mask of false premises and thus invalid from the point of conception and practice. It is founded on illicit generalizations. This conclusion finds its validity in the voice of Sheikh (of Al-Azhar) Ali Abderraziq (1925) who says, the message of Islam was essentially religious, and that the organization of a Muslim state was not part of the Prophet's mission.

It is thus observed here that, while we cannot ignore the fact that religion is part and parcel of the life of Nigerians either as indigenous worshippers, Christians or Muslims, and while religious belief does have influence on some, if not all aspects of individual and social life, the need of the moment is not one religion but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of the different religions. The deliberate recognition, and internalization of the social, cultural religious and geographical diversities of the Nigerian union in the Federal constitutions via the sharia legal system is tolerance personified in the nation though, the sharia legal system still ranks within the category of specialty norms and should not take precedence over and above the federal constitution which lays down the general principles that govern the corporate existence of the Nigerian union. In bearing witness to our faith, we do not have to deny the reality of the experiences of grace and salvation that are found in the other faiths of mankind.

Our humanity, and our gateway to the humanity of others lie in behaving in the uniqueness of ourselves and in accepting ourselves as the masterpiece of God. Our responsibility for others is the measure of our own humanity, let us judge our own wellbeing by the needs of others, by uniting ourselves with them to a higher truth. As Pope John Paul II (1982) put it "if we join hands in the name of God, we can accomplish much good. We can work together for harmony and unity, in sincerity and greater mutual confidence."

It is true that difference exist in our varied faiths, however they are essential, and need not be divisive. What we need in the Nigerian union today is the spirit of tolerance; a philosophy of compromise which need neither relinquish principles nor suffocate initiative. It need not be either opportunistic or irresponsible. It needs neither force, confrontation nor divisiveness. Force, confrontation and divisiveness will play less a role provided a sufficiently large number of people at the appropriate levels are prepared to resolve these issues that divide us by reason which respects and establishes the differences among us, while giving us the roots of our unity (Mason, 1982:125). Since the battles on the barricades are ultimately rooted in conflicts of minds, let us be ever prepared, while an issue remain unresolved even after we have exhausted our last argument, to begin again, if necessary, informed, civilized and frank discussions and eschew the dialogue of the deaf.

Religious practice and observance is not doubt a factor in our union and must be given the serious and deserved consideration in our body polity. Religious pluralism is normal in a set up like ours and such pluralism, if honestly and sincerely managed, should serve as a source of strength for the attainment of greater heights. This is what we most urgently need; we require a leadership that would motivate the citizens to imbibe the culture of tolerance and accommodation. To view religious practice and observance as "the only way of life and egalitarian theocracy" not only negates the culture, religious and ethnic plurality of Nigeria, but also fans the embers of discrimination and disunity. All of us; states and its citizens are shielded under Section 38 and are subject to the highest law of the land, to wit, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. After all, "we the people of Nigeria under God..." which preamble of the 1999 Constitution reads, recognize God as the head of Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION

In concluding this discussion, it may be well important to remind ourselves of an old Sufi tale as told by Professor Alao[2] involving four fellow travelers; a Turk, a Persian, an Arab and a Greek- who had an argument as to how to spend a coin left with them. According to the tale, the Turk asserted, I would want to purchase *uzum* with the coin, the Persian retorted, I want *angur*, the Arab wanted *inab*, while the Greek insisted to purchase *stafil*. The multi-linguist who overheard them intervened claiming that if he was given the coin he would purchase what would meet the preferences of each of the fellow travelers. The multi-linguist went and bought a bunch of grapes. The Persian jumped at the bunch saying it is my *angur*, it is my *azum* said the Turk, it is my *inab* said the Arab. It is *stafil* remarked the Greek. The four soon realized (thanks to the wisdom of the multi-linguist) that they have the same preference expressed in different tongues. The four shared the grapes, and were pleased with one another ever after. In our own Nigeria, the grape common to the different religions is buried under the heap of procedural verbiage waiting to be isolated and revealed for man to actualize the divine in him, to assist him to ascend to the pedestal of goodness. It lays in the objective of making each man his brother's keeper and eradicating all evils in society.

While we as a people cannot pretend about our many differences concerning religious belief, such differences are only grounds advocating (or indeed commanding) understanding and accommodation. Nigerians must tolerate their differences in order to facilitate the realization of common objective of creating a peaceful and humane community that is materially and spiritually prosperous. This is an argument to the effect that, believers must ideally be "multi-linguist" striving for positive understanding; i.e from various points of view so as to smoothen communication and keep the common objective, the common grape on focus; God, of actualizing the divine in him. This religious attitude resolves controversial issues, unites and harmonizes believers much faster and truly than daggers, bombs and bullets.

Believers with different convictions and belief systems should be challenged to search from within their own resources, both from the motive and the principles, to instantiate a great dream of a world society with a universal religion which the historical faiths are but branches. Such a society presupposes a certain range of understandings and expectations to collaborate in building a society worth living in and dying for.

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## FOOT NOTES

[1] Christian exegetes disagree with this interpretation, and Christian theologians view it as heretical though, it serves to show for the Muslim that sharia is founded in antiquity and obedience to it is not only necessary but *sin qua non* for Islamic faith, practice, and observance.

[2] See Momoh, C.S., Onuoha, E., El-Miskin, T. (n.d) (ed) *Nigerian Studies in Religious Tolerance* vol. IV, Lagos, Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC) and the National Association for Religious Tolerance (NARETO). P. x