

Dialogue Beyond Documents: Theological and Social Criteria for Sustainable Christian-Muslim Coexistence in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The official documents of the Christian-Muslim dialogue, such as *Nostra Aetate*, *Fratelli Tutti*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Ecclesiam Suam*, pastoral letters, *A Common Word*, the Marrakesh Declaration and the Abu Dhabi Document, clearly have guidelines of mutual perception, freedom of religion, and Fraternity among people. However, everyday coexistence in Nigeria remains precarious, revealing a difference between the document and reality presented on paper and the one on ground. Employing a normative-analytical methodology grounded in documentary analysis and secondary scholarship, and basing this paper on a three-layer approach, comprised of macro (law and politics), meso (peace-building infrastructure), and micro (daily life), this paper promotes both theological and sociological standards that help in determining whether the propositions made in the literature of dialogues turn out to be real and ensures sustainable pluralism. Based on the legal pluralism, interfaith institutions, and routine interreligious interactions in Nigeria as a running case study this paper ask nine hard questions to examine fear, state neutrality, impunity, and the legacy of wounded memory. This paper then proposes a theology of stratified co-existence which is a framework that reconciles doctrinal commitments with institutional structure and daily practise. The result is a normative-empirical matrix with the capacity to evaluate initiatives without regard to their textual affect: do they regulate structures, staff institutions and reanimate practises that instil trust? An action plan that is sequenced, context-relevant, recommendations are the final part of this paper to give Nigeria that means to move beyond a document to systematic and daily transformation.

Keywords: Christian-Muslim dialogue, Interreligious coexistence, Nigeria, Legal pluralism, Peace infrastructure, Religious freedom, Religious freedom.

INTRODUCTION

There is a paradox in the relations of Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria. On the one hand, in recent times, it has observed an unprecedented number of interfaith activities of high level, joint declarations and theological statements, to reinforce comprehension and favour peace among religious communities. Since *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican Council II 1965a), to *A Common Word* (2007), since the Marrakesh Declaration (2016), to the Abu Dhabi Document (Francis and Al-Tayyeb 2019), the writers of these documents present inspiring theological images of dignity, hospitality, justice, and neighbour-love as the basis for the coexistence of religions. However, regardless of the abundance of these rich documents, most parts of the world and Nigeria especially still register frail ties, intermittent violence and a high degree of mistrust between Christians and Muslims. This gap reveals a critical revelation, which is dialogue on paper does not necessarily mean dialogue in action.

This paper seeks to combine both Christian and Muslim documents on theology along with social analysis to come up with the criteria and indicators that will be used to assess how true Christian-Muslim coexistence should be in Nigeria. This is not about asserting that dialogue is ideal but rather to explore whether the institutions of Nigerian society, its legal institutions, peace institutions, and everyday relations, monitor the theological

imperatives of dignity, justice, freedom, and peace. By so doing, the paper recommends dialogue beyond the documents: dialogue that is embodied, structural and lived.

Methodology: This paper employs a normative-analytical methodology. It does not generate primary empirical data through fieldwork; instead, it draws on documentary analysis of principal interfaith texts (including conciliar declarations, papal encyclicals, and multilateral interfaith agreements), secondary scholarly literature on Christian-Muslim relations and religious conflict in Nigeria, and a structured analytical framework derived from comparative theological and social theory. The nine diagnostic questions examined in Section 6.0 are applied to existing documentary evidence, reported institutional indicators, and established scholarly accounts of Nigeria's interreligious landscape rather than to primary interview or survey data. This approach is consistent with normative-framework studies, which aim to establish evaluative criteria against which lived realities can be assessed. The framework proposed here is intended to guide and inform future empirical research.

Why Dialogue Documents do not Automatically Change Realities

The dialogue documents more often than not do not change on-the-ground realities as they operate on a theological plane, when the very reality of the interreligious issues in Nigeria is social, political, institutional, and historical in scope. This gap exists in three main gaps:

The Translation Gap

The human dignity, hospitality, justice and peaceful coexistence are some of the principles expressed in the theological texts. Nonetheless, these values should be transformed into political systems, legal frameworks and administrative values. Political calculations in Nigeria frequently compromise constitutional guarantees of religious freedom by being inconsistently enforced, interacting legal institutions (civil, customary and Sharia), and through political calculations that instrumentalize religion. Documents of dialogue cannot in itself reform policing, reorganise the courts, or stop the mobilisation of the politicians around religious identity during election. Therefore, even with good motives, the distance between theological beliefs and political reality remains wide.

The Implementation Gap

Many interfaith institutions exist in Nigeria but most are with either lack of resources, continuity and institutional authority to enact the values in the dialogue statements which include NIREC, state peace committees and clergy-based mediation networks.

The statements of national level may not be connected with local reality particularly in the rural areas where religious authority is more decentralised and close to local leaders as opposed to national religious elites. The absence of an institutional capacity means that dialogue documents will never be transformative but just aspirational.

The Perception and Experience Gap.

Human beings are not exposed to dialogue papers in their day-to-day activities; they are exposed to each other. Markets, schools, online divisions, working areas, transport cities and neighbourhood exchange influence the perceptions in much more direct manner than elite statements. In several regions of Nigeria, Christians and Muslims live everyday lives together in a certain level of suspicion, rumour, financial strain, and inherited grievances. An early encounter of discriminated policing or the lack of impartial justice supports group-based perceptions of susceptibility.

These lived experiences are not overshadowed by dialogue documents. Furthermore, information dissemination on the internet is fast spreading and enhances panic in the period of crisis. In case the micro level contravenes the principles of dialogue, the documents lose their credibility.

All these three gaps indicate that dialogue can only be made structural in order to become meaningful. An individual cannot change relationships alone by the theological statements without alignment on the political, institutional and social levels in Nigeria.

Nigeria's Macro–Meso–Micro Religious Landscape

To understand the reasons as to why dialogue documents often would fail, the interreligious reality in Nigeria should be explored in terms of the three layers of the development of the public life.

The Macro Layer: Politics, Law and State Institutions

The macro-level environment in Nigeria includes the constitutions, legal systems, systems of governance, and the national discourses relating to citizenship and belonging of the people. Despite all the clauses provided in the constitution concerning the freedom of religion and equality, the practical reality is significantly different. This overlapping in the jurisdiction results in confusion and insecurity due to the coexistence of civil, customary and Sharia legal systems. The spread of Sharia law in twelve states in the north since 1999 (Paden 2005) has been taken in different ways by both Muslims and Christians at times leading to the fear of being dominated or sidelined.

Religion is often used by political players to entrench themselves in power especially during elections, which leads to more suspicion (Kukah 1993). The perceptions of impunity are supported by weak judicial institutions, prolonged court cases, inadequate investigations, and absence of conviction in religion-related violence cases. Most societies believe that offenders do not face much justice. In a scenario where the state does not perform the functions of a neutral guarantor of rights, coexistence is weak, and dialogue documents lose legitimacy.

The Meso Layer: Peace Infrastructure and Institutional Mediation

The meso layer comprises the institutions, which mediate the conflict, offer early-warning systems, offer educational formation and translate the national ideals to be practised in a community. The peace infrastructure in Nigeria is made up of bodies like NIREC (Kukah 1993), state-level peace committees, local mediation agencies, women organisations, youth organisations and clergy-emirate agreements. They act as intermediaries between the national policies and the local realities.

These institutions however differ greatly in capacity. There are those who have good leadership and community goodwill, and still, others do not have sufficient funding or political back up. Most of them act in reaction to the problem and not proactively.

In educational institutions, especially in seminaries, madaris and school, curriculum changes are still not balancing as many religious leaders and young people are left without the theological or social instruments to relate to religious differences peacefully. Unless such institutions are properly funded and coordinated theological commitments cannot become long-term civic practises.

The Micro Layer: Everyday Life, Social Perception and Digital Spaces (Dialogue of Life)

Most of Nigerians do not coexist religiously in Abuja or state capitals but in their day to day lives- the market, schools, transport centres, places of work, sports grounds, social events and more or less in the digital systems. These encounters make up the micro layer, and trust is either established or broken.

Natural bridges tend to naturally link Christians and Muslims due to the daily cooperation. However, this is a coexistence that is so easily disturbed by rumours, misinformation, grievances that have not been resolved or competition over limited resources.

Online platforms have the capability of escalating tensions at an extremely fast rate especially when messages that are inflammatory are being distributed during times of crisis. The online stories that are presented to young

Nigerians, especially, can possibly either cause suspicion or leading to the new forms of coexistence. The micro layer is therefore the most unstable precarious location and is also the final determinant of dialogue life or death.

Theological Criteria for Genuine Dialogue

Based on *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican Council II 1965a), *Fratelli Tutti* (Francis 2020), *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican Council II 1964), *Ecclesiam Suam* (Paul VI 1964), *A Common Word* (2007), and the Marrakesh Declaration (2016), four theological criteria are created as the key points to the genuine Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Dignity-First Recognition

Christianity as well as Islam bases human dignity on the act of creation by God. Conversation starts with the acknowledgment of the fact that the other already has certain value in the eyes of God that does not depend on agreement or the belief system. - 49:13 (Al-Hujurat): “O humanity, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. The most noble among you in God’s sight is the most righteous.”

Truthful Hospitality

Dialogue involves openness to listen to the other as he / she presents he/herself, not as he/she inherits stereotypes or tells polemic stories. Hospitality entails the strict scriptural and historical interpretation and not caricature or selective reading.

Religious Freedom as a Theological Good

Dignitatis Humanae (Vatican Council II 1965b) has it that Religious freedom is a right grounded not in subjective conscience (‘I’m right’) but in the objective dignity of the human person. Therefore, this right applies even to those who are in error. Also *Evangelii Gaudium* (Francis 2013, §255) stresses this further, “The Synod Fathers spoke of the importance of respect for religious freedom, viewed as a fundamental human right.” Quranic verses that emphasizes freedom ‘The truth is from your Lord; so, let whosoever will believe, and let whosoever will disbelieve.’ (Q 18, 29), Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. So, can you (Prophet) compel people to believe? (Q 10, 99), so, remind. You are only a reminder. You have no control over them (Q 88, 21-22). In both traditions, freedom of conscience, freedom of worship and equality of citizenship is theological. They are not political compromises but the manifestations of the will of God to a righteous life of the community.

Justice-Shaped Peace

Both customs promotes peace and justice. Theology imperatives include protection of minority, fair law and institutional protection.

These criteria provide a framework of analysing the reality of interreligious realities in Nigeria.

Taken together, these four criteria constitute what this paper terms a theology of stratified coexistence: a normative framework that holds that genuine Christian-Muslim dialogue requires structural alignment across all three layers of public life simultaneously. At the macro level, this means legal systems that protect and enforce religious freedom without discrimination. At the meso level, it means interfaith institutions adequately funded, staffed, and coordinated to translate theological commitments into durable civic practices. At the micro level, it means daily encounters governed by dignity-first recognition, truthful hospitality, and mutual accountability. The framework is operationally assessable: each layer corresponds directly to the social indicators developed in Section 5.0, enabling practitioners and policymakers to identify where a given coexistence architecture is most deficient and to direct interventions accordingly.

Social Indicators for Sustainable Coexistence

In order to determine whether Nigeria upholds these theological values, we need pragmatic pointers in all the three levels.

Macro Indicators

- i. Civil, customary, and Sharia systems Legal transparency.
- ii. Protection of religious freedom in the constitution.
- iii. Responsibility when it comes to religion related violence.
- iv. Government budget plans of interfaith peace.

Meso Indicators

- i. Well-staffed, well-financed interfaith organisations.
- ii. New curricula that will produce pluralistic society leaders.
- iii. Proper coordination of the media and anti-rumour-controlling systems.
- iv. Healing of traumas, restorative justice and commemoration practise.

Micro Indicators

- i. Market, school and neighbourhoods every day co-operation.
- ii. Weakening on the assaults of the places of worship and strengthening mutual solidarity.
- iii. Interfaith groups and digital-literacy efforts between the youths.
- iv. Polls of trust, equity, and terror.

These indicators are the translations of ideals in theology to practical valuation of peace building assessments.

Examining Nigeria's Hard Questions

This section examines nine diagnostic questions using the indicators outlined above, demonstrating how theological standards drawn from Christian and Muslim documents translate into realistic assessment instruments across the macro-meso-micro levels of Nigeria.

Does coexistence in Nigeria exist more out of fear than trust?

Micro-level perception indicators that show the level of intergroup trust, fairness and fear uncover whether relation is controlled by fear. Constant fear shows that confidence has not been established by macro-justice. Trust is enhanced when there was macro responsibility on display and meso platforms enhanced local trusts.

Have we normalised periodic violence?

Normalisation is the situation where cycles of violence fail to decrease or cause reform (Falola 1998). Weak prosecution is unveiled by the macro indicators, and a vulnerable position regarding worship safety is manifested by the micro ones. As a solution to normalisation to an end, there must be macro enforcement, meso rumour control and trauma healer, and micro solidarity.

Why are dialogue documents thriving at the time that everyday relations are so weak?

There is fragility that lacks a national implementation roadmap that has actual budgets and timelines. Theological unanimity has to be institutionalised in curriculum reform, in public education and in translation locally.

Does the Nigerian state consider itself to be a religiously neutral state?

The neutrality has to be checked up with legal audits and survey on community perceptions. Inconsistent enforcement is disastrous to neutrality. The first step is to make jurisdictions clear and standardised in application.

Why are the religious violence perpetrators seldom held responsible?

When case-clearance is low, it is an indicator of system failure. Justice should be more investigative, prosecutorial, and protective of witnesses and transparent. Micro trust develops in relation to the delivery of justice to the community; Meso institutions serve the victims.

Are religious leaders preaching peace and condoning structural injustice?

Formation indicators show discrepancies in training clergymen on pluralism, justice and rights of minorities. Reform in the curricula is required to synchronise peace preaching and structural justice.

What is the case of having an injured and not healed memory?

Memories that are not yet healed cultivate lassitude and vengefulness. To recover trust, the use of restorative justice, trauma healing and memorial practice is crucial.

Do young Nigerians receive hope or resentments?

The indicators of youth provide evidence that formation fosters cooperation or claims. Hopeful inheritance is facilitated by interfaith clubs, exchanges and digital literacy support. However, young Nigerians are inheriting resentments.

Is co-existence with Christians and Muslims beyond survival?

A future of survival is hinged on compatibility within macro justice and meso institutional strength and micro cooperation. Good imagination flourishes in situations where the citizens perceive credible justice and benefits.

A combination of these indicators can produce a reform diagnostic map. Macro justice, meso translation, and micro trust subsequent to each other are needed to ensure sustainable coexistence. In case these layers are matching, Nigeria will be able to realise dialogue beyond documents.

CONCLUSION

More than merely theological pronouncements is needed for sustainable Christian-Muslim coexistence in Nigeria: it also requires the incorporation of doctrinal conviction, political justice, institutional competence, and everyday trust. The disconnect between the documents and the real lives will continue to exist unless the three levels; the macro, meso and the micro levels will support each other. In a society where justice prevails, institutions are reliable, and the relations are defined by neighbourly love, dialogue is no longer the aspiration, but a reality experienced. As a result, Nigeria will be able to advance from a weak coexistence towards a thriving pluralism.

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