Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.3 No.2 June, 2020; p.g. 139 –158; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

INTERRELIGIOUS-ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE: VERITABLE MEANS OF PEACE-BUILDING IN NIGEIRA.

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Abstract
Religion is unarguably one of the major causes of conflict in Nigeria. The diverse religious experiences of men, which often demonstrate varied understanding and appreciation of their relationship with the divine or supernatural being and the social implications of this relationship, culminate in the adoption of assorted religious values and attitudes. Accordingly, the existence of diverse religious persuasions in Nigeria accounts for the multiple, and often conflicting, religious ideals and principles. It is the contention of this discourse that extremism, fanaticism, and fundamentalism are negative traits found in the mainstream religions in Nigeria and often causally linked to religious intolerance and bigotry. Are there possible means of curbing this ugly trend? Are there objective principles and common grounds of intra-religious and inter-religious unity in Nigeria? These are the basic concerns of this paper. The project of inter-religious dialogue which, in the context of this discourse, largely squares with ecumenical dialogue highlights the imperative of a conscious intersubjectivity with a view to achieving mutually enriching coexistence among the different religious enthusiasts. This paper, therefore, defends the thesis that dialogue is a veritable means of peace-building among the diverse religious persuasions in Nigeria. The realization of objective religious values, standards or disposition would certainly make for peaceful co-existence among the adherents of the different religions in Nigeria.

Keywords: **Religion, Ecumenism, Dialogue, Peace-building, Sociobiology.**

1. Introduction

Nature is obviously replete with a number of supra-sensible and inexplicable realities. The quest for rational answers to such fundamental questions as what constitutes the essence, the existence and the ultimate end of man brings to man's consciousness the objective idea of the supernatural realities. Man's understanding and belief in these supernatural realities constitute the basis of his religious disposition. In other words, man's acknowledgement of the existence of a supernatural being whose power is made manifest in the sensible world, makes him develop some sense of reverence for him. Religion is therefore formally seen as the "belief in the existence of supernatural ruling power, the creator and controller of the universe, who has given to man a spiritual nature which continues to exist after the death of the body, or one of the various systems of faith and worship based on such belief." (Hornby, 1995:988). As a virtue, it is that which inclines man to render to God the worship due Him as creator and Lord of all things. But it may also signify the worship itself (Harrington, 1965:219).

There exists a mutual complementarity between man's religious disposition and his social relationship. Virtually all the major religions of the world, at least in principle, express the imperative of harmonizing man's relationship with the divine and his relationship with his

fellow men. Religion is, therefore, never successful if it does not promote socio-political progress. In order that religion may achieve its objective, emphasis must be laid on the positive aspects of the different religious persuasions. By means of dialogue, each religious group is led to appreciate the positive values in other religious groups.

The discussions in this paper are mainly founded on four major presuppositions. Firstly, the paper underscores the fact that religion is a very fundamental and decisive aspect of human existence. As a means of natural and necessary relationship with the divine or the supernatural, religion is not only of quintessential relevance to man but a critical factor in peaceful co-existence. Secondly, the variegated assortment of religious experiences ultimately engenders a variety of religious bodies or religious persuasions. Thirdly, against the backdrop that there are some elements of disunity within each of the mainstream religions in Nigeria, an effective dialogue aimed at peace-building, should feature intra-religious and inter-religious dimensions. Fourthly, while the tenets and beliefs of these religions differ, and sometimes conflict with each other, the discourse aims at establishing the fact that they have possible points of intersection. Hence, it is argued that by promoting interreligious dialogue among the mainstream religious bodies in Nigeria, that is, Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion, sustainable and peaceful co-existence could be achieved in Nigeria.

2. Religion: A Quintessential Aspect of Human Existence

With a view to establishing the necessity of religion for man, the essential nut to crack is whether man has a primary or secondary disposition to religion. Some modern philosophical thoughts provided the basis for both an empirical tradition that considered all mental contents as the product of learning, and a parallel heritage that stressed a doctrine of innate ideas. While the former gained prominence in the insights of the English empiricists Locke, Berkeley and Hume, the latter was advanced by Charles Darwin and his followers who emphasized the idea of inborn, native mental forces including motives, perceptions, and actions. These conflicting views pose the difficulty of logically establishing whether religious disposition is essentially a function of nature or nurture. However, some psychologists of religion, sociologists, anthropologists and scholars whose disciplines are directly concerned with human behavior hold that religious behaviour has both sociological and biological foundations. This is especially captured in the concept of "sociobiology," as popularized by Edward O. Wilson. To be sure, Sociobiology is understood as "the systematic study of the biological basis of all forms of social behavior, in all kinds of organisms, including man" (Hood et al., 1996:14).

From their famous investigation of thousands of twins at the University of Minnesota (U.S.A), N. Walker, B. Kojetin, T. Bouchard, D. Lykken and A. Tellegen, advanced the project of sociobiology, offering insight into the extent of hereditary and emotional influences on religious beliefs and behaviours. Using five measures of religious beliefs, interests, and activities, they studied samples of identical twins and fraternal twins who were reared either together or apart. Reporting their findings on the degree to which genetics versus environment entered into religious inclinations of those studied, the researchers asserted: "Our findings indicate that individual differences in religious attitudes, interests, and values arise from both genetic and environmental influences. More specifically, genetic factors

account for approximately 50% of the observed variance on our measures." (Hood et al., 1996:15).

Some insights from ancient Greek philosophy and contemporary religious doctrines suggest that the ultimate essence of man is not necessarily in the physical or material world but in the supernatural. In his doctrine of forms, for instance, Plato (428-348 BC) expressed the view that the real world is not the visible world but rather the world of forms, that is, those changeless, eternal, and non-material essences of which the actual visible objects we see are only poor copies. This accords with the predominant religious conception of the human soul as having a semblance of God, a non-material essence, and belonging to the supernatural world, where God himself is absolute goodness. Hence, the Christian theological understanding of the basis of religion, is man's creation in the image and likeness of God and for the glory of God (Genesis 1:2). While religious disposition is considerably consistent with man's nature, it is also necessarily nurtured. Indeed, proper religious disposition requires conscious commitment to the cause of living in accordance with the supernatural world order. Regardless of his religious persuasion, therefore, man lives authentically only in relation to his creator and his ultimate end.

The understanding of man's relationship with the transcendental realm may differ from one religion to another. Christianity, for instance, teaches that man's earthly existence is temporal. His ultimate destiny is in eternity, not in time. After the present life comes judgement that culminates either in eternal life or eternal damnation. A similar view is expressed in Islamic religion, where it is hoped that at the end of man's earthly sojourn there will be reward or punishment for fidelity or infidelity respectively. Similarly, in African Traditional Religion, it is only through a well-lived life that one can secure a place with the ancestors.

The major religious traditions of the Eastern world, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, equally express like views. Taking a brief look at their basic tenets, Omoregbe (1990:61-68) observes that Hinduism, a religion of the Indian people whose fundamental doctrines are enunciated in the *Upanishads*, maintains that the whole of reality, including man, is ultimately one and divine; and this ultimate reality is *Brahman*. It also holds that history and time are circular and repeat without finality of purpose. The only way to escape from this cycle of time is to achieve self-liberation (*moshka*). This can only be achieved when man begins to see himself as part of *Brahman*. He must also detach himself from the things of this world which are unstable and illusory. The *Nirvana* or the "Buddhist paradise," which Buddhism aims at achieving through the conscious suppression or extinction of human desires, also suggests a possible spiritual state that transcends the present corporeal state characterized by suffering. Taoism pursues a similar objective as it teaches that high integrity lies in man's realization of his nothingness. In its paradoxical ethics, Taoism teaches that non-action overcomes strength, kindness conquers harshness, to yield is to conquer, to be inactive is to act, to be empty is to be full, to have plenty is to be confused, to know too many things is to be unwise, to have little is to be rich, and to be very active is to do nothing. As a religion and an ethical system which aims at transmitting to posterity the wisdom of the ancients, Confucianism holds that the ideal man is the man of principle who maintains his inner tranquility in spite of the vicissitudes of life.

Notably, religion has two intricately connected dimensions, namely the vertical and the horizontal. Whereas the vertical is concerned with man's relationship with the divine or supernatural being to whom man often believes he owes his existence, the horizontal borders on his relationship with his fellow men. The latter, the social aspect of religion, is evident almost in all religions of the world, especially as expressed in "The Golden Rule." While in Judaism, it is captured in the expression, "What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man (*Talmud*, *Shabbat*, 3id), in Christianity it is stated thus: "In everything do to others as you would have them to you (*Matthew*, 7:12). The Golden Rule also obtains in Islam as Prophet Muhammad taught that "no one is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself (Al-Bukhari, *Sunnah*).Similarly, Confucianism, holds that "if there is one maxim, which ought to be acted upon throughout one's life, surely it is the maxim of loving-kindness. So, do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you (*Analects*, 15, 23).Authentic religious disposition, therefore, expresses an appreciation of the moral aspect of human life. In fact, morality takes a central place in religion since it is believed in most religions that to do good or to be virtuous is to live according to the dictates of the divine law or the law of God. This, of course, is a necessary factor in man's admittance into the eternal life, the life after death, the next world or union with God.

The central idea expressed here is that religion is an integral aspect of man's existence. Consciously or unconsciously, man is immersed or submerged in the ocean of religion. By virtue of his existence, man is naturally a religious being and so the manifestation of anti-religious tendencies is antithetical to his ontological essence. Also, man's relationship with the divine parallels his relationship with his fellow men. The love of God is concretized in the love of man. Thus, any religious principle that works against objective unity among men, the love of one's neighbor, and the institution of world peace is unfortunately irrational and should be jettisoned.

The acknowledgement that there is a supreme being to whom man owes his existence, and the existence of realities outside the realm of the visible, are general features of religion. However, the varying understanding of the nature of the supreme being and modes of worship occasionally breed disagreement. Thus, while there is virtually a universal acknowledgement of the fact that religion plays a vital role in the human society, the ultimate success of religion is sometimes vitiated by its actual practice. The socio-economic breakthrough and the sciento-technological advancements of the modern human society notwithstanding, man's religious disposition is still deficient, and accounts for a number of conflicts experienced in the contemporary human society.

3. The Philosophical Notion of Dialogue

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* gives a simple definition of the concept 'dialogue' (Greek, *dialogos*). It defines dialogue as "a discussion between people in which opinions are exchanged." (Hornby, 1995:320). As a literary term, "dialogue" very closely correlates with, and is understood in the light of the concept "dialectics" (Greek, *dialektika*), that is, "the art of discovering and testing truths by discussion and logical argument." (Hornby, 1995:319). Dialectics denotes a discourse between two or more people holding different points of view about a subject but wishing to establish the truth through reasoned arguments

(en.m.wikipedia.org). It is, therefore, a process of reasoning based on the analysis of opposing propositions. Simply put, it is the art of reasoning from opinion to truth.

The origin of the concept "dialectics" is attributed to Zeno of Elea (c. 489-420 B.C), whose creative paradoxes gave rise to the method of analysis in philosophical inquiry. Zeno's works exposed the natural sequence of principles and conclusions in logical reasoning. His paradoxes often featured arguments aimed at convincing the listener of the truth, especially by challenging ordinary opinions and assumptions. Similarly, Socrates (c. 470-399 B.C) conceived dialectics purely as dialogue, that is, the ability to conduct disputes and bring out the truth by disclosing and resolving contradictions in the arguments of the opponents. The Socratic method, also referred to as the *elenchus*or *elenctic method*, features in such Socratic dialogues of Plato as *Apology, Gorgias, Euthyphro*, and*Ion*. This dialectic method basically employs questions and answers to stimulate critical thinking. Plato (c. 428-348 B.C) formalized the Socratic method, highlighted its conversational method for arriving at truth and transformed it into a formidable tool for philosophical inquiry. Plato's dialectics finds expression in his later dialogues like the *Sophist* and *Statesman*. In Plato, the concept "dialectics" assumes a metaphysical status as it highlights the relationship between the sensible things and their archetypes in the world of forms or ideas. For his part, Aristotle (c. 384-322 B.C) conceived dialectics as logic, the method by which the mind approaches truth, and the mental structure in which reasoning takes place(*Rhet*. 1.2, 1356a30f).

Against the backdrop of his view that all knowledge begins with sense, advances to understanding and culminates in reason, Kant conceived dialectics as the logic of appearance as well as the study and critique of transcendental illusions. For Kant (1998: 14), dialectics, as part of transcendental logic, "is the spurious attempt of reason working independently of sensibility to provide metaphysical insight into things as they are in themselves." Building on Kant's idea, Hegel explained the dialectical process as a clash of opposites. This, for him, involves a triadic movement from thesis to antithesis and finally to synthesis. Hegel (2010:125) discusses this as the three sides or moments of every logical concept, including: (a) *the abstract* side or that of the *understanding*, (b) *the dialectical* or *negatively rational* side, (c) *the speculative* or *positively rational* side. Though Hegel did not use exactly the trilogy of words, thesis-antithesis-synthesis, as popularized by Fichte (1993:249), and often represented as the "problem-reaction-solution" model, his Abstract-Negative-Concrete" model highlights the contradictory process between opposing ideas and how it is ultimately resolved. Adapting the Hegelian idea of dialectics to arguments bordering on traditional materialism, Karl Marx opined that dialectics expresses the clash of material forces, which culminates in a change. For him, it is a method of cognizing reality, a method which explains the process of movement in history as well as makes provisions of rational solutions to man's immediate problems. In his words, "the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought." (Marx, 1887:14). Thus, the intrinsic relationship between the concepts dialogue and dialectic is demonstrated by the fact that both are preoccupied with arriving at objective truths via logical reasoning. In fact, the principle of dialogue naturally presupposes a purification of thoughts and re-enforcement of convictions.

From the philosophical viewpoint, therefore, dialogue is understood as an interpersonal encounter that often ends in advancement in knowledge. It is often inspired by the admittance

of the unique individuality of the other and his consequent perception as 'a subject' rather than 'an object.' In the context of this discourse, it is considered a suitable means of promoting unity among different religions. Given that people are often unwavering in their religious convictions, dialogue as a reasoned discourse, seems a plausible means of achieving peace and unity.

4. The Theological Significance of Dialogue

As a formal theological enterprise, dialogue is an organized interaction aimed at investigating such themes as man's relationship with God and his fellow men, the purpose of man's existence and his ultimate destiny. With particular regard to inter-faith relations, it is concerned with discussions and reflections on the tenets and ideals of a given religious tradition as well as insights on possible grounds of its relationship and cooperation with other religious traditions. Thus, the notion of dialogue, from a theological perspective, underscores a religious disposition that readily acknowledges the authenticity of the other's articles of faith once their correspondence to objective truth is reasonably verified. By means of dialogue one gains further insight into one's original convictions as well as appreciates the objective ideas of one's interlocutor. It leverages on the natural tendency of the human mind to embrace truths and mutual cooperation. The theological relevance of dialogue finds eloquent expression in the contexts of ecumenical dialogue and inter-religious dialogue. In these contexts, dialogue is considered a veritable instrument for the promotion of peaceful co-existence among adherents of the different religions of the world.

As thought-provoking and enlightening initiative, dialogue has a very wide scope, and so, has been given multi-variant approaches by theologians. Articulating possible approaches to inter-religious dialogue, Francis Cardinal Arinze (1990:163-165) identified five complementary forms of dialogue including dialogues of life, social engagement, communication of religious experience, being together to pray, and theological discussion. In his view, the dialogue of life borders on mutual enrichment among people spurred by natural conditions of life like families of varying religious orientations. Dialogue is said to be of social engagement when it is primarily motivated by social factors and culminates in mutual appreciation of the truths of faith. It aims at ameliorating human suffering and the promotion of justice and peace. Dialogues of communication of religious experiences and coming together to pray highlight the need for collaboration in spiritual exercises in spite of their divergent religious convictions. The dialogue of theological discussion designates a formal discussion by religious experts who exchange information on their beliefs and practices with a view to seeking mutual understanding.

The unity that dialogue aims at in the projects of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue should not be mistaken for uniformity. As a collaborative movement towards the truth, interreligious dialogue does not primarily aim at conversion of the other but highlights the imperative of appreciating the other's point of view, eliciting greater readiness to do God's will and achieving cordial relationship and peaceful co-existence. It emphasizes the points of unity and agreement instead of the points of division. In fact, where it is possible, that is, where the traditions do not radically differ, the adherents of different religious traditions can collaborate in such spiritual exercises as common prayer or worship. By so doing, the wall of prejudice and hatred is broken and a positive change of attitude is effected among different

religious traditions of a given human society. Francis Cardinal Arinze (1990:162) corroborates this view thus: "Interreligious dialogue is a meeting of heart and mind between followers of various religions. It is communication between two believers at the religious level. It is a walking towards truth and working together in projects of common concern."

In the light of the foregoing, the Catholic Church (1993) insists that dialogue is at the heart of ecumenical and interreligious cooperation and could take different forms depending on the immediate concerns it sets out to address. She considers dialogue as involving both listening and replying, seeking both to understand and to be understood. It is a readiness to ask question and to be questioned; it is to be forthcoming about oneself and trustful of what others say about themselves. The parties in dialogue must be ready to clarify their ideas further, and modify their personal views and ways of living and acting. It is expected that improved understanding and appreciation of others' religious values, through dialogue, would naturally lead to mutual respect and more cordial relationship.

Love and Openness to Truth: Principles of Ecumenical and Interreligious dialogue

Love, as a principle of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, engenders proper disposition for mutual understanding and mutual respect for human persons irrespective of their religious orientation. It presupposes the disposition to share in the joys and sorrows of the other. Evidently, the intricate connection between belief and life accounts for the overflow of doctrinal convictions into the ordinary life. The success of interreligious dialogue is largely dependent on the extent to which it expresses concern for common interests including the spiritual and material well-being of the participants. Interreligious dialogue entails a collaboration in the promotion of objective human values, including the sanctity of human life, inalienable human rights, sustainable social reforms and care for the environment. This implies that the quest for unity transcends doctrinal factors and permeates the social, cultural, historical, political, and psychological dimensions of human existence. The differences that the diverse religious orientations stimulate are therefore resolved by the principles of love and mutual respect.

Closely allied to the ecumenical principle of love is that of openness to the truth. Even as each religious sect maintains its convictions, it must of necessity be open to the inherent truths in other faiths. Openness borders on the need to be honest with ourselves and our partners in dialogue and the readiness to re-examine our presuppositions in the light of existential realities. It is the acknowledgment that diverse religions could be mutually enriched through dialogue and appreciation of the good and noble values in the other's religious tradition. The pursuit of objective truth is, therefore, a distinctive feature of dialogue. So long as openness and mutual respect are advocated, steadfastness to the objective truths of faith equally remains an urgent ecumenical necessity. Objective truths of faith necessarily accord with facts and reason; they require sincerity and openness to acknowledge their veracity. With the acknowledgement of the positive religious ideals and objective human values in other religions, channels of mutual relations are opened.

5. Obstacles to Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue

Religious Pluralism

In a world replete with multi-variant manners of religious faith expression and where everyone holds onto the tenets of their religious faith with the pertinacity of the asp, there is bound to be conflict of religious ideas. This is the case in Nigeria. Religious intolerance and religion-induced conflicts in Nigeria are often causally linked to the diversity of religious worldviews. As already observed above, this paper considers the multiplicity of religious worldviews both an intra-religious and inter-religious feature. Hence, religious pluralism, with its consequent variation in values, militates against ecumenical dialogue and interreligious dialogue.

In spite of the religious pluralism of the modern human society, and the consequent variegated moral judgements, common objective conclusions could still be reached with a view to achieving peaceful co-existence. Sharing this view, Hood et al (1996:338) maintain that Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus may not agree on the nature of God, or on religious rituals and teachings, but they do tend to agree about moral issues. In fact, for them, when it comes to ethics, major world religions are amazingly consistent in their teachings about right and wrong, especially concerning murder, stealing, and adultery.

Religious Conservatism, Dogmatism, Extremism, Fanaticism, and Fundamentalism

Whereas love and openness to truth, as expressions of dynamism, predispose one to dialogue, conservatism, dogmatism, extremism, fanaticism, and fundamentalism underscore religious dispositions often averse to dialogue and ultimately breed religious bigotry and intolerance. Conservatists, Dogmatists, Extremists, Fanatics, and Fundamentalists are found in virtually all religions. In the mainstream religions in Nigeria, they are not in short supply. In fact, it is a commonplace to find these bigoted religious attitudes in Nigeria. In Christianity, Islam and the African Traditional Religion one finds the conservatist disposition or the tendency to resist any serious change, and the dogmatist attitude, which insists that one's beliefs are right and that others should accept them irrespective of the merits of their opinions.

Religious wars and religion-induced conflicts are often glaring manifestations of religious bigotry. In Islam, for instance, "Jihad" denotes a "holy war" fought by Muslims against those who reject Islam. Similarly, the history of Christianity features series of wars, otherwise referred to as "Crusades". The crusade refers to any of the wars fought by European Christians to recover the Holy Land from the Muslims in medieval times. The African Traditional Religion, in its various shades, also waged cold wars against Christianity and indeed other religions, which they considered alien and inimical to the African culture.

Religion scarcely achieves its purpose if religious values are not freely accepted. The practice of religion can be fruitful only if it lacks social, economic or other forms of external coercion but flows from one's free will. One must of necessity respond freely and in love to the divine which alone satisfies ultimately man's inner cravings. Ordinarily, Islam acknowledges this fact, as the Quran (2:256) recommends: "Let there be no compulsion in religion." In like manner, Islam basically promotes the sanctity of human life and condemns terrorism; hence, the Quran cautions: "If anyone has killed [without authorization, sanction, or justification] one person, it is like he has killed the whole of mankind" (Quran, 5:32). Nevertheless, the

fundamentalist Muslims posit actions that grossly contravene the basic teachings of Islam, including the respect for human life. Hence, on the global stage, the world continues to battle against terrorism, especially as perpetrated by such groups as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Hezbollah, Hamas and similar extremist Muslim organizations. The attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, in 2001, are vivid demonstrations of terrorism stimulated by religious bigotry.

In Nigeria, the aforementioned negative religious attitudes breed animosity and mutual suspicion among the adherents of the mainstream religions. Some Christians perceive certain Islamic religious principles as being opposed to Christian religious values and so are skeptical of any form of dialogue with Muslims. In fact, Christians are prone to reject governmental policies and programmes with Islamic undertone in the fear that they constitute possible means of Islamization. For instance, while Christians jettison the Sharia law, especially given its tendency to be pro-capital punishment, the extremist and fundamentalist Muslims, insist that Christianity must be rejected alongside such correlate as western education, which they perceive as evil. This is the import of the idea of "Boko Haram."

In essence, the effectiveness of dialogue is relative to the disposition of those who take part in it and the extent to which people show respect and tolerance for others' religion. Indeed, any religious attitude that expresses rigid, unwavering, unyielding, and uncompromising adherence to the tenets of one's religion often breeds religious intolerance. This attitude, which is coterminous with lack of openness, certainly militates against religious dialogue. A more objective view of religion, which entails greater emphasis on the points of unity than on the those of disunity or disagreement, would make for mutual understanding and social development.

6. Interreligious Dialogue: A Correlate of Ecumenical Dialogue

It is a basic assumption in this discourse that among the mainstream religions in Nigeria, Christianity is the most prominent. Akin to this is the fact that religious intolerance is compounded by an obvious disunity among Christians and intra-religious conflicts associated with Islam and the African Traditional Religion. The course of peace-building, therefore, necessitates a conscious quest for Christian unity and the establishment of mutual understanding among the different religions. Accordingly, an investigation into interreligious dialogue, in the context of this discourse, largely correlates with the enquiry into ecumenical dialogue, which borders on the efforts to achieve mutual understanding among the different ecclesial communities and ultimately dovetails into the imperative of peaceful co-existence among different religious bodies.

The concept of Ecumenism

In the *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, Thomas F. Stransky (1995:457) gives a considerably comprehensive definition of ecumenism. He defines it as "a process that is directed towards the achievement of unity among all Christian churches, and ultimately among all religious communities." Etymologically, the term "ecumenism" expresses the ideas "the household of God" (Greek, *Oikodome*) and "the whole inhabited world" (Greek, *Oikumene*). Ecumenical dialogue is necessitated by the multiplicity in the Christian church, which often stems from an undue emphasis only on a particular quality of the person of Christ. A wholistic view of

the person of Christ would invariably culminate in unity of the Christian churches. As a movement that is concerned with the achievement of Christian unity, the task of ecumenism is two-pronged. While the church, through ecumenical dialogue, seeks to achieve unity among all Christian churches, it behoves her as well to strengthen in faith and promote proper understanding among feeble-minded Christians whose shallow knowledge or understanding predisposes to heresy or schism. Hence, ecumenism as a function of the church could be directed inward (*missio ad intra*) or outward (*missio ad extra*).

A conscious effort to resolve the apparent differences among Christians by means of dialogue presupposes an identification and objective evaluation of possible obstacles to this process. As already observed, one of such obstacles is the subjective emphasis on a particular attribute of Christ, which accounts for the evident discrepancy in such doctrinal issues as the Trinity, the authority of the Bible, the sacramental character of baptism and the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper, justification by grace through faith, the priesthood of all believers and manner of worship. Others include papal authority, women ordination, Mariology, and such ethical issues as contraception, and human experimentation.

If, in spite of the efforts made in the project of ecumenical dialogue, the Christian views on the above issues remain divergent, then, a number of fundamental questions are still to be answered. The major concern here is to review the efforts so far made by the mainline Christian denominations to achieve mutual understanding. It is equally an attempt to establish the fact that these differences are real but they can always be overcome when Christians emphasize more their points of unity than the points of disagreement.

Catholicism and Ecumenical Dialogue

The wave of ecumenism was already felt in the church from its earliest times. The challenges of the early Christian community demanded an immediate ecumenical attention. Specifically, with the misunderstanding between the Greek-speaking Jews and the Hebrew-speaking Jews, the early Christian community was confronted with the challenge of disunity but this was eventually resolved through ecumenical dialogue (Acts 6:1-7).

The first formal ecumenical council of the church, the council of Jerusalem, had similar concerns as succinctly articulated by "The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica" (1998). It was a conference of the Apostles in Jerusalem in about AD50, which decreed that Gentile Christians did not have to observe the Mosaic Law of the Jews. It was occasioned by the insistence of certain Judaic Christians from Jerusalem that Gentile Christians from Antioch in Syria obeyed the Mosaic custom of circumcision. A delegation, led by apostle Paul and his companion Barnabas, was appointed to confer with the elders of the church in Jerusalem. The ensuing apostolic conference (Acts 15:2-35), led by the apostle Peter and James, decided the issue in favour of Paul and the Gentile Christians. From this time onward, Gentile Christians were not bound by the Levitical ceremonial regulations of the Jews, except for the provisions of the apostolic decree: abstention from what has been sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what is strangled, and from unchastity (Acts 15:29). Thus, the Council of Jerusalem demonstrated the willingness of apostolic leaders to make compromises on certain secondary issues in order to maintain peace and unity in the church.

With the religious wars that broke out in Europe after the reformation, Christendom was launched into its darkest ages in history. The age of Enlightenment with its rationalist undertone and modernism were all vehemently opposed to the Church. This protracted tension between the church and the modern world was only calmed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), especially with its promotion of ecumenical dialogue. In fact, prior to the second Vatican Council the Catholic Church maintained a negative attitude towards ecumenism. Believing itself to be the true church of Jesus Christ on earth, it hardly accepted the possibility of salvific grace existing in other Christian traditions. At the Second Vatican Council, however, the Roman Catholic Church strongly affirmed its ties with its "separated brethren" both in Eastern Orthodoxy and in the several Protestant churches.

Ecumenism gained ascendancy under the ministries of popes John XXIII and Paul VI, and through the ecumenical diplomacy of Cardinal Augustin Bea, the first president of the Secretariat for promoting Christian unity. As a matter of fact, the Second Vatican Council, which was announced by pope John XXIII on 25 January 1959, as a means of spiritual renewal for the Church, continued its work under Pope John's successor, Paul VI, and was concluded on Dec. 8, 1965.Among the decrees promulgated by the Council was *Unitatis Redintegratio*, which emphasizes ecumenical renewal and a change of attitude and not necessarily of doctrines. It calls on Christians to be more positive and optimistic, and to understand that there are more uniting factors than there are dividing ones. The document also expresses the idea that ecumenism is a modern movement for Christian cooperation and unity, the aim of which is however not conversion but dialogue. Focusing on Christ, as a common heritage, it aims at getting rid of the walls of prejudice and hatred that obstruct mutual understanding among the Christian churches. The Council affirmed that the Catholic church, in her efforts to establish a communication link with other ecclesial communities, still tries to maintain a balance between relevance and identity. Thus, while the Catholic church acknowledges the possibility of the existence of some elements of salvation in these ecclesial communities, she still maintains her conviction that the true and one church of Christ subsists in her. Hence, the view "*extra ecclesia nulla salus*" (outside the church there is no salvation), held by the early Fathers, was reformulated using more accommodating expressions like: "the church is necessary for salvation" (*Vatican II, LG*. 14), and is constituted as the "general instrument of salvation" (*Vatican II, UR*. 3), or as "universal sacrament of salvation" (*Vatican II, LG*. 48).

The Second Vatican Council further prescribes that Catholics should try to eliminate words, judgements, and actions which do not represent the condition of the separated brethren with truth and fairness, and so make mutual relations between them more difficult. It advocates dialogue between competent experts from different churches and communities. Through such dialogue, everyone gains a truer knowledge and more just appreciation of the teaching and religious life of both communions. Cooperation in social action for the common good is also recommended, likewise coming together for prayer where this is permitted. According to the Council, all these activities have the goal of leading all to the examination of their consciences and their own faithfulness to Christ's will for the Church and, wherever necessary, undertake with vigour the task of renewal (*Vatican II, UR*, 4).

Leaning on the provisions of Vatican II, Pope John Paul II wrote his 12th encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint* (that they may be one). The encyclical systematically contextualized the contents and

objectives of ecumenism as expressed in *Unitatis Redintegratio*. For Pope John Paul II (1995), division among Christian could be overcome by total self-giving as seen in martyrdom. He finds a similarity between ecumenism and martyrdom; both come under the umbrella term "witnessing." The Pope avers that once Christians are united in fellowship of the martyrs, they cannot be divided. For him, if Christians share the same truth about the cross, there will be no division.

Making concrete application of the ecumenical principles the Catholic church distinguished between the principles: *Communicatio in Sacris* and *Communicatio in Spiritualibus*. Whereas the former deals with issues bordering on mutual sharing in the sacred things, particularly the sacraments, the latter deals with other aspects of divine worship. While the concerns of the former are guided by Canon 844, the contents of the latter are, to a very large extent, regulated by the extra-canonical legislations contained in the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism.* Against the backdrop that the sacrament of baptism is a true means of incorporation into Christ and his Church, as well as a means of rebirth and sharing of the divine life, the Directory (1993:61) offers deeper insights on rebirth and sharing spiritual activities and resources among Christians. Such activities include common prayers, sharing in non-sacramental liturgical worship, sharing in sacramental life with the members of the various Eastern Churches, sharing sacramental life with other churches and ecclesial communities, as well as the common use of sacred places and of all necessary objects. Through such celebrations the people of different liturgical traditions – Catholic, Eastern, Anglican, and Protestant – have mutual understanding and share more deeply in traditions which often have developed from common roots.

From the Catholic perspective, therefore, the ecumenical movement seeks to recover the apostolic wisdom of the early church expressed as unity in diversity. It is a lively reassessment of the historical sources and destiny of what followers perceive to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of Jesus Christ. With such ecumenical dispositions, as expressed above, mutual understanding become a real possibility. Hence, it would not be out of place for a Catholic teacher in a non-Catholic school, for instance, to attend the morning act of worship; neither will it be wrong for a Catholic priest to accept an invitation to speak in a protestant church. When these concrete principles are sincerely followed, the goal of ecumenical dialogue would have been achieved.

Anglicanism and Ecumenical Dialogue

The history and features of Anglicanism as articulated by Dean and Sachs (2009:1) present it as one of the major branches of the 16th century Protestant Reformation and a form of Christianity that includes features of both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. It is loosely organized in the Anglican Communion, a worldwide family of religious bodies that represents the offspring of the Church of England and recognizes the Archbishop of Canterbury as its nominal head. Anglicanism prizes traditional worship and structure but operates autonomously and flexibly in different locales. The essential beliefs of Anglicanism comprise four major elements, namely, the Bible, the Nicene Creed, baptism and Holy Communion, and the episcopate.

Right from the end of colonialism and with the rise of newly independent nations, Anglicans began to reconsider their identity and mission. In other words, Anglicanism became conscious of the need to tackle its internal problems and to establish a working relationship with other Christian bodies. It also sought to adapt in an affirmative way to new and challenging social circumstances. In 1947, for example, Anglicans joined several Christian bodies to create the Church of South India, a unique ecumenical union. Even more dramatic developments took place in Africa, where in the early 21st century more than half of all Anglicans worldwide live. In 2004 the church in Africa sought to establish its own identity at the First African Bishop's Conference. The bishops in council declared that the church in Africa had come of age and should focus on issues of poverty and social justice. The council called for the creation of institutions to train clerics in Africa, rather than in England or America, and to develop a theology relevant to African society.

Another issue of ecumenical concern from the Anglican perspective was the controversial admission of women to the church's priesthood and the prospect of women bishops. Opponents of the ordination of women feared the loss of the church's Catholic heritage while advocates saw it as a chance for Anglican leadership in expanding the ministries open to women in the church. In 1976, after a heated debate, American Episcopalians approved women as priests. Although several other Anglican churches took a similar course, the church of England hesitated to study and debate the issue. Eventually, The Lambeth Conference of 1988 confronted the possibility that a woman would become a bishop in the United States. That possibility became a reality in 1989, when Barbara C. Harris was ordained a bishop. (She was elected as a suffragan bishop of Massachusetts but did not head a diocese). In subsequent years, other women were consecrated bishops. Equally problematic was the consecration in 2003 of V. Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, as the bishop of New Hampshire, U.S. This step met with strong opposition throughout the church – especially in Africa, where bishops called for the Episcopal Church, USA, to repent and even came close to forging a schism over the matter.

The elevation of women and gay men to the office of bishop invariably created an obstacle to improved relations with Roman Catholic Church. However, a critical study of the self-understanding of Anglicanism reveals that Anglicans see themselves as catalysts for Christian unity. They consider the Anglican blend of Catholic liturgy and Protestant procedure a basis of a broad ecumenical encounter. Indeed, Anglicanism has points in common with virtually all other expressions of the Christian faith. Anglicans readily engage the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant leaders in theological discussion and joint liturgy. Ecumenical processes involving the Roman Catholic Church have been regular and intensive, though without prospect of organic reunion. For Anglicans, therefore, ecumenical discussion is the appropriate context for advancing the Christian mission.

On the whole, the Anglican Communion has tried to bridge the gulf between Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox churches. It has always been open to establishment and promotion of ecumenical dialogue. In 1974, for instance, the Church of England and English Roman Catholics, Baptists, United Reformed, and Methodists agreed to form a national commission for discussions of the possibility of practical reunion. Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie and Pope John Paul II, following their historic meeting in England

in 1982, emphasized the importance of the reconciliation effort. This effort was continued by Runcie's successors, including Rowan Williams, who made a trip to Rome soon after his elevation to the position of Archbishop of Canterbury in 2002.

Protestantism and Ecumenical dialogue

The ecumenical movement as it exists today owes its origin to a congress of protestant missionaries held at Edinburgh in 1910 under the impulse of protestant missionary pastors, who considered it disastrous to carry into mission lands a Gospel that bred division. The delegates were not to speak of doctrinal differences but only to seek unity of action. When this congress ended in June, another conference, the conference on Faith and Order, was organized by Charles Brent, then the Episcopalian bishop of the Philippines in October 1910. The purpose of the conference was to compare the different doctrines and to work towards unity. The issues were mainly about faith and ecclesiastical government, though some attempts were also made to promote ecumenical dialogue.

Tracing the formal origin of Protestantism, Bainton et al (2009:3) observe that it began in northern Europe in the early 16th century as a reaction to medieval Roman Catholic doctrines and practices. It generally refers to all non-Roman Western Christians, particularly the four major confessions or confessional families – Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed and Free Church. The largest of these non-Roman Catholic denominations in the West is the Lutheran Church. Most of the Lutheran churches of the world have participated in the ecumenical movement and are members of the World Council of Churches, but Lutheranism has not moved very often across its denominational boundaries to establish full communion with other bodies. In the 19th century some protestant bodies like the Congregationalists, Methodists, and Baptists (and Presbyterians in England) were together referred to as "Free Churches." Even though these "Free churches" tended to reject some of the Roman Catholic traditions and doctrines, they also saw the need for inter-church cooperation and to support the ecumenical movement. Notably, Protestant bodies that owe their origins to the reformatory work of John Calvin and his associates in various parts of Europe are often termed "Reformed", particularly in Germany, France, and Switzerland. They are distinguished from both Lutheranism and Anglicanism by the thoroughness of their separations from Roman Catholic patterns of liturgy, piety, and even doctrine. During the 20th century most of the Reformed churches of the world also took an active part in the ecumenical movement.

In his study of the protestant sensibility with a view to establishing grounds for dialogue, Yves Congar (1966:311) expresses the view that protestant consciousness has taken shape which has been formed and nourished by a whole system of imagery, a collection of memories, judgements, attitudes and group reactions. According to him, this is the most likely area for harbouring anti-Catholic prejudices and a deep and active resentment against Rome; against persecutions which have been endured, against all the abuses of the past and against the system from which they emanated. However, he strongly affirms that "everything which is unadulterated and authentic and positively Christian in the religious protestant in his individual sensibility, calls of itself for integration into the visible catholicity of Christ's Body in unity."

7. Mainstream Religions in Nigeria and Interreligious Dialogue

The mainstream religions in Nigeria, Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion, at least in principle, acknowledge the necessity of mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence among their adherents. Some of these religious traditions also have formally established frameworks and channels of interfaith dialogue. The nature and mode of this interaction have great consequences for the human society.

Christianity and interreligious dialogue

The diverse socio-political and cultural background of the early Christians, as discussed above, mirrors the multi-variant cultural and religious orientations in Nigeria, which wield very decisive influence on Nigerians. Given that one's religious world outlook invariably conditions one's socio-cultural disposition, the success of interreligious dialogue in Nigeria would most likely result in improved socio-cultural relations among Nigerians. Indeed, the issue of interreligious dialogue in a society replete with diverse religious values is very sensitive. However, with the acknowledgement of the fact that the points of unity among the religious bodies in Nigeria far supersede those of divergence, mutual understanding is possible. It only takes a proper harmonization of the religious variables to reap the fruits of interreligious dialogue.

Evidently, since the 1960s the Christian Churches in Nigeria started appreciating the need for ecumenical dialogue and interreligious dialogue. The efforts to promote mutual relations among Christians and other religious bodies is typified in the establishment of such Christian organizations and institutions as the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), which is made up of such "protestant" churches as Church Missionary Society (CMS, now Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion), Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Qua Iboe and Salvation Army. Others include: Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN) or Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) and ECWA Fellowship. Together with the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, which represents the Catholic Church, these form the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).Mention could also be made of such institutions as the Christian Health Association of Nigeria (CHAN), Bible Society of Nigeria (BSN), Ecumenical Association of Nigerian Theologians (EANT), Institute of Ecumenical Education (IEE) Enugu, Teachers' Institute of Moral Education (Time project) Lagos, and National Ecumenical Centre Abuja. The coming together of these Christian churches and the formation of these organs of cooperation basically aim at the promotion of Christian unity and religious tolerance in Nigeria.

With the establishment of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 and its collaboration with the Vatican in organizing meetings between Christian leaders and the representatives of other religious traditions, the ball was set rolling for interreligious dialogue. Towards the end of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Pope Paul VI established a Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions with a view to studying other religious traditions and promoting inter-faith relations through education. This secretariat was eventually reorganized in 1989, during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II (1978-2005), and renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The Pope, widely reputed for his drive for the realization of a peaceful world, travelled to about 117 countries, during which he encouraged world leaders to

promote world peace. Remarkably, his visit to a mosque in Damascus in 2001 marked the first visit of a Roman Pontiff to a mosque.

The Catholic Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (1975:1-23), in the document, *Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National and Local Levels*, outlined some useful bases for grass-root ecumenical dialogue. Some of these include: sharing in common prayer and worship, common bible work, joint pastoral care, shared premises, collaboration in education, joint use of communication media, cooperation in the health field, national and international emergencies, relief of human need, social problems, bilateral dialogues, meetings of heads of communications, etc. These possible ecumenical contact points are common in Nigeria and could constitute grounds for fostering inter religious dialogue. Thus, in hospitals, institutions of learning, industries, prisons, the armed forces, radio and television stations, the works of the various ecclesial communities and religious traditions should be coordinated jointly as these provide avenues for collaboration and effective means of promoting unity through mutual appreciation of doctrines.

An accommodating Christian disposition, stimulated by successful interreligious dialogue, elicits better social, cultural, and even political relationship in any human community. The good news of Christ breeds peace and unity not conflict and division. A profound understanding of Christian values culminates in a better appreciation of socio-cultural values. When this is achieved, the racial, social, religious barriers must have been broken. The Gospel breaks the barrier between the Jews and the Gentiles, Slaves and Freemen. The Gospel reconciles all things in Christ.

Islam and interreligious dialogue

Very much like Christianity, which has diverse denominations, Islam also features different factions including the Shiite and Sunni factions. While the Shiite Muslims hold that Muhammad appointed Ali, his cousin, as his successor and that each Imam designates his successor from the family of the prophet, the Sunnis hold a contrary view. Insisting that Muhammad never formally appointed any successor, they maintain that succession is necessarily decided through election by prominent members of the community. Similarly, the multiple sources of the Sharia law, including the *Quran*, the *Sunnah* (or the tradition of the prophet), the *Qiyas* (or analogy), and the *Ijma* (or consensus among scholars), also occasion discrepancy, given that their prescriptions are sometimes variedly interpreted. These variables in Islamic principles and practice evidently stimulate a crack in the walls of Islamic religious tradition. From the point of view of Islam, therefore, the quest for peaceful co-existence and social development through dialogue necessitates mutual understanding within each religious tradition (dialogue *ad intra*) and the promotion of its relationship with other religious bodies (dialogue *ad extra*).

As already observed, virtually every religion has bigots whose extremist dispositions and actions culminate in religious intolerance. Religion-induced violence is, of course, not limited to the attacks of some members of a given religious tradition directed to others but also misunderstanding within different sects of a given religious tradition. The efforts at resolving the consequent conflicts and promoting peaceful co-existence find expression in the different attempts at interreligious dialogue. Instances abound of tenets of Islam that constitute

obvious grounds for interfaith relationship between Muslims and Christians. Also, practical attempts have been made by Muslims to promote cordial relationship with other religious traditions especially as they address issues of common concern.

Some biblical personages are recognized in both Islam and Christianity even though their understanding of these personages may differ. Mention could be made of Abraham and Hagar, as well as Jesus and Mary. The Quran which, like the Christian Bible, is an embodiment of the tenets of Islam, also features some teachings that accord with those of Christianity. It recognizes the existence of prophets (*anbiya*) and messengers (*rusul*) of God. Moses and Jesus are examples of such prophets, each with his community of faith or "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitab*), who are all destined to have some reward if they remain righteous (Quran, 2:62 and 5:69).

As a basis of unity, too, Islam teaches that it is part of God's plan that humanity will be ultimately united, and that the present division among men is only a test of the people's faith. Accordingly, the Quran (5:48) states, "Compete with one another in good works. To God you shall all return and He will tell you (the truth) about that which you have been disputing." In addition, the Quran (2:256) corroborates the Biblical stance that religion should not be forced, as it asserts: "there shall be no compulsion in religious matters." The Quran acknowledges the usefulness of inter-faith dialogue, especially as a means of getting rid of the prejudices and misconceptions about Islam; hence it avers, "Invite all to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and engage with them in ways that are best and most gracious"(Quran, 16:125).

Initiatives on Muslim-Christian dialogue, which date back to the seventh century, were stimulated by the acknowledgement of the common values and heritage between both religions. Their shared monotheistic views and the patriarchate of Abraham, for instance, were considered feasible grounds of dialogue. Notably, too, the enhanced transportation and information flow of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted in mutual understanding and better assessment of the doctrines of Islam and Christianity. In addition to the World Council of Churches, which basically aimed at enhancing Muslim-Christian relations, a number of Muslim-Christian dialogue programmes, including the Muslim World League, the World Muslim Congress, and the Middle East Council of Churches, were developed with a view to achieving the same purpose. Thus, while it is practically difficult for Christians and Muslims to engage in dialogue as equals, remarkable efforts have been made and are still being made to foster cordial relationship among them.

African Traditional Religion and interreligious dialogue

African Traditional Religion, in the context of this discourse, designates the religion of the Africans before the advent of Christianity and Islam. While acknowledging its characteristic diversity in forms and methods, the African Traditional Religion generally incorporates not just the Africans' way of worship but their entire culture and worldview. Their socio-cultural activities, including their eating habits, thought patterns and processes, mode of dressing, way of working, eating, playing, and praying, have intense religious coloration. The African seeks the approval and the blessings of the gods in all his endeavours. He also believes that anti-social activities and actions that harm others are abominable and have dreadful spiritual

consequences. Given that the African religio-cultural values are ingrained in the African person, every other religion is considered alien to him. Hence, serious effort at interreligious dialogue is required to achieve mutual sharing of religious values.

Although African Traditional Religion is not a missionary religion and does not primarily aim at gaining converts, its positive values could form the basis of interreligious interaction. Its commitment to the promotion of peaceful co-existence, respect for elders, love, justice duty to one's family and community constitute veritable grounds of interreligious dialogue. Adherents of this religion are often accommodating and open-minded. Perhaps, this accounts for why they are easily converted to other religions. In fact, a number of Christian religious leaders acknowledge the existence of some positive values in African Traditional Religion and the imperative of sharing religious values. For instance, in his Post-Synodal exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope John Paul II's call on Christians to promote cordial relationship with adherents of African Traditional Religion demonstrates an eloquent appreciation of these values and opens a channel for interreligious dialogue. In his words, "The adherents of African Traditional Religion should be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language should be avoided." (John Paul II, 1995b:67)

The Post-Synodal exhortations of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI on evangelization and African religions in1994 and 2009 respectively, marked the assumption of a positive disposition towards non-Christian religious traditions. With this new orientation, a new light was cast on African religion; its religious observances, which were formerly considered fetish, idolatrous, and diabolical were considered actions of souls also engaged in genuine search for God. Hence, *Nostra Aetate*, a document of the Second Vatican Council on the relationship between the Church and non-Christian religions, declares: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men." (*Vatican II*, *NA.* 2). In the light of this declaration, the Church calls for interreligious dialogue and emphasizes the urgent need for collaboration with the followers of other religions as long as they promote positive spiritual, moral and socio-cultural values.

8. Implications and Merits of Effective Interreligious Dialogue

A number of benefits can be adduced as the fruits of dialogue. The most prominent, however, is the realization of peaceful co-existence and cordial relationship among people in spite of their divergent religious orientations. Of course, with its emphasis on the points of unity instead of those of division interreligious dialogue highlights the common features of all religions. Indeed, effective dialogue, which borders on mutual appreciation of the objective values in the different religious tenets, culminates in religious tolerance and the realization of the common origin and destiny of the entire human race.

The immediate logical consequence of peaceful co-existence occasioned by effective interreligious dialogue is an advancement of the temporal goods of the human society including socio-political progress. Mutual cooperation or understanding has practical and social implications, as it disposes the people to make a unified and objective response to critical existential concerns with one mind. By means of dialogue, prejudices and fears are

overcome. It also promotes mutual respect and trust, justice, peace and genuine quest for the development of the human society.

The principle of openness to objective truth, as examined above, evidently brings about an advancement in human knowledge. By means of interreligious dialogue, therefore, one is availed of the opportunity of learning and appreciating the teachings of other religions. In fact, with such knowledge one assumes a vantage position of more objective assessment of other religious tenets. Interreligious dialogue, therefore, provides an opportunity for a positive review of the different articles of faith, refines religious worldviews, thoughts and language.

On the strength of the foregoing considerations one can rightly conclude that dialogue is a fundamental factor in the movement for ecumenical and interreligious cooperation. It necessarily demands openness, sincerity and an unbiased disposition, which make for a whole-hearted acceptance of objective truths. It culminates in the acknowledgement of such objective values and truths as the existence of supersensible realities, the sacredness of human life and the imperative peaceful co-existence. Thus, in addition to providing the opportunity of positively re-assessing particular religious values, a fruitful interreligious dialogue strengthens objective human values.

Obviously, with the contemporary trend of globalization, religious intolerance is fast becoming unfashionable. When mutual cooperation is achieved through ecumenical dialogue and interreligious dialogue, socio-cultural interaction is enhanced given that it would no longer be biased by religious differences. Indeed, with an authentic ecumenical attitude, one respects and promotes the other's right to freedom of worship without endangering one's own faith. Hence, the pressure of diverse religious orientations notwithstanding, Nigerians must persevere in their quest for peace and unity. Though the efforts so far made is appreciable, it is not yet satisfactory. If it must yield the required fruits, it must be continued and sustained.

9. Conclusion

Religion has a pivotal influence on man as it permeates all aspects of human life. Religious influence on man obviously has cosmological, social, moral, and psychological dimensions. Religion attempts to provide explanation to the mysteries of life and tries to account for the ultimate end of man. Save the emphasis religion lays on the need for one to be in good terms with God, it equally stresses the importance of peaceful co-existence in the human society. Religious principles in one way or another border on such values as the respect for human life, respect for elders and those in authority, maintenance of justice and social order, as well as such personal virtues as self-control, self-reliance, spirit of sacrifice and service, spirit of forgiveness, humility, courage (especially moral courage which is the ability to stand for what is right), simplicity, modesty, generosity, prudence, temperance, perseverance, cleanliness, and so on. Thus, the objective values fostered by religion often constitute effective grounds for socialization, reliable principles of a meaningful life, and a more peaceful human society.

Even though religion is a fundamental aspect of humanity, it is often a cause of division, misunderstanding, and conflict in the human society. In order to restore peace and unity in a

society bedeviled by religious intolerance, religious differences must be overcome by means of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Using the mainstream religions in Nigeria as case-study, this discourse demonstrates that with the principles of openness to truth and love, sufficient commitment to the cause of unity, and the acknowledgement of the fact that there are more factors that unite the different religious bodies than divide them, a communication link is established, and this ultimately results in peaceful co-existence and sustainable development of the human society.

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