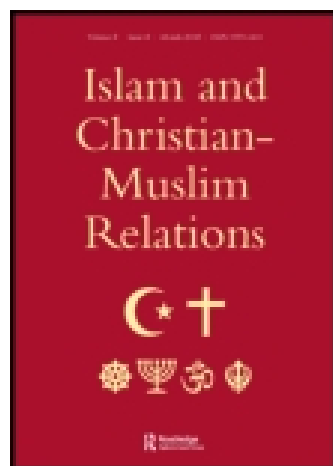




Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cicm20>

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Published online: 21 Sep 2010.

To cite this article: Rabiatu Ammah (2007) Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 18:2, 139-153, DOI: [10.1080/09596410701213953](https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410701213953)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09596410701213953>

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Christian–Muslim Relations in Contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT *Socio-economic developments in Africa in an era of globalization, the rise of charismatic and evangelical Christianity, and the call for Islamization and application of the Shari'a in parts of Africa are in danger of creating tension and destroying the apparently peaceful co-existence between the two faith communities. The article offers a conceptual basis for the relationship between Christians and Muslims from the Islamic perspective, addressing the need for Christians and Muslims to work in concert and the inherent problems that must be faced, and makes recommendations to foster a better relationship. Since any discussion of the contemporary is rooted in the past, reference is made to historical situations in order that Muslims and Christians may learn from history. Examples from Nigeria and the Sudan, where there has been polarization of Muslims and Christians, and where the problem is endemic, seek to illustrate the point, together with personal experiences and observations from Ghana.*

Introduction

This article offers an outline of the conceptual basis for the relationship between Christians and Muslims from the Islamic perspective, considers the need for Christians and Muslims to work in concert and the inherent problems that must be addressed, and makes suggestions to foster a better relationship. Since any discussion of the contemporary is rooted in the past, I will refer to historical situations in order that Muslims and Christians may learn from history. Since it would be presumptuous and naive on my part to discuss the whole continent, I shall illustrate my point with examples limited to Nigeria and the Sudan, where Muslims and Christians have been polarized and where the problem is endemic, together with my personal experiences and observations in my country, Ghana.

I do not wish to be pessimistic and dwell on conflict situations, which are inherent in any human institution and are also part of life. Rather, I wish to acknowledge the problems and stumbling blocks associated with the theological or doctrinal positions of the two faiths in dialogue, and focus more on the concept of 'dialogue for life', which is perhaps more relevant to the present situation and circumstances of African Christians and Muslims.

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0959-6410 Print/1469-9311 Online/07/020139–15 © 2007 CSIC and CMCU
DOI: 10.1080/09596410701213953

Conceptual Framework¹

The word 'Islam' is derived from the Arabic root *s-l-m* meaning peace. Peace is the fundamental concern of the entire Qur'an, and therefore it is not surprising to note that one of the attributes of God in the Qur'an is peace. God is *al-Salām*, and hence he is the source of peace. Peace is therefore what the Almighty Creator of the universe intends for his creation.

Through maximum human effort known as *jihād*, the whole of God's creation strives to make peace. This can only be achieved through active obedience or conscious submission to the will of God. A person who practises Islam (submission to peace) is therefore a Muslim and Muslims believe that 'the religion before God is Islam' (Q 3.19). This is explained to mean that the seeking of peace through active obedience is what God has ordained for his entire creation from the very beginning. This way of living, or code of conduct, has been entrusted to creation as a gift. From this definition, Muslims often speak of Islam as the religion of nature (*dīn al-fitra*) or natural religion. By this is meant that Islam is innate within the whole created order: all that exists naturally is in a state of peace with God.

In the Qur'anic vision of nature, primacy is given to humankind. Adam is divinely designated *khalīfa* (Q 2.30). He is entrusted with authority over the entire creation because of his knowledge, which is given by God and exceeds even that of the angels, who are therefore commanded to prostrate themselves before Adam. As *khalīfa*, his authority is delegated to him to be used in absolute obedience to the authority of God.

As the progeny of Adam, the whole of humanity enjoys his *khalāfa*. Humankind are therefore the servants or worshippers of God. It is through service and worship that humankind fulfils the responsibility of being God's *khalīfa* on earth. In the Qur'anic story of creation, Adam rebels against God, causing the Creator's displeasure. Here the Qur'an deals very seriously with the problem of human sin, which arises from the universal tendency to misuse the authority given by God for self-aggrandizement. This results in what the Qur'an terms ignorance and tyranny, which in turn leads humankind to cause corruption on the earth. Despite Adam's rebellion against God, the Qur'an does not develop a doctrine of original or inherent sin. Rather God, in his mercy, relents towards Adam after he has repented and sends him the revelation of guidance with the assurance that if he follows it scrupulously no fear shall come upon him, nor shall he grieve (Q 2.38). Notwithstanding the initial problem, Adam is capable of true obedience by striving to submit to the revealed will of God, thus overcoming the tendency to sin. The story of creation expounds the idea that humankind, as part of the created order, is naturally Muslim, but distinct from the rest of creation because humankind has freedom of choice and must therefore consciously choose to live the life of Islam, in which God assists by revealing his guidance. One could say that to live the life of Islam human beings are involved in a constant process of *jihād*, or struggle.

The corollary of this is that Islam is the religion of revelation or the religion of the prophets. As God is one, the revelation of his guidance is in essence one and the same for every human community to which the prophets have been sent. They have brought essentially the same message and its essence is unchanging. Hence the Qur'an expounds the doctrine of unity as universally as it expounds the doctrine of divine revelation. This is exemplified in Q 42.13: 'The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah—the which We have sent by inspiration to thee—and that which we enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: namely, that ye should remain steadfast in Religion, and make no divisions therein . . .'

According to the qur'anic understanding, Muhammad is not the founder of Islam. Rather, he is designated in the Qur'an 'the seal of the prophets' (Q 33.40). Through Muhammad, God brought the cycle of prophecy to its conclusion. The significance of Muhammad in the Qur'an is not, therefore, that he brings an entirely new revelation but that he restates the truth of the revelation brought by all the prophets and exemplifies true obedience to God as the beautiful example (Q 33.21) for the guidance of all humankind thereafter. Thus, what the Prophet founded was not, from the qur'anic perspective, a new religion, but a new community whose way of living was obedience to God, fulfilling the mission of all previous prophets and exemplifying the divine calling of all humankind. This community is charged by the Qur'an with the mission of inviting to goodness and forbidding indecency (Q 3.104, 110) by calling the rest of humankind to return to the way of Islam as revealed to the particular prophets God has sent them during their history. Perhaps this is why the Qur'an calls itself 'a confirmation of what has already gone ahead of you' (Q 2.97; 3.3; 5.45, 46).

It is against this background of qur'anic thought that I would affirm Islam as being 'ecumenical'. In the qur'anic understanding, it is all-embracing in terms of nature, humankind and human history. The mission of Islam is to proclaim this ecumenical understanding, which means to affirm Islam as the inherent or innate truth of all religions and to challenge any religious pretensions which seek to limit the universality of divine revelation. This affirmation and challenge must be given by Muslims in relation to all other historical religions but, at the same time it must apply with equal vigour to their own critique of historical Islam. Hence the Qur'an calls people of religion to an inter-religious dialectic.

Inter-religious Dialectic

This is particularly true in what the Qur'an says about Jews and Christians. It respects them, especially the Christians, for the quality of their ethical and spiritual life, and refers to them as being closest in love (Q 5.28) to the Muslims. For insofar as Christians believe in God and act righteously, the Qur'an affirms that their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve.

At the same time, the Qur'an challenges Christians in respect of certain beliefs and doctrines and appeals to them not to exaggerate in their religion (Q 4.171). The Qur'an thus calls upon Christians to enter into dialogue, having a full understanding of Islam as expounded in the Qur'an in 'reaffirmation of the gospel': 'O People of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him ...' (Q 3.64).

The Qur'an also challenges Muslims to a constant inner critique of their own practice of Islam. It challenges the hypocrites who make a pretence of Islam without truly affirming the qur'anic revelation. Again, at the conceptual level it distinguishes between different levels of Islamic obedience: the level of those who call themselves Muslims but observe only the outward practices of Islam, those for whom faith is truly rooted in the heart, and those who have literally submitted their entire self to God, who live righteously and follow the way of Abraham. Thus, the Qur'an avoids the least hint of complacency as regards the Muslim community, but rather is committed to an inner critique commensurate with the historic responsibility invested in it.

Islam I believe, like Christianity, is ecumenical, and founded on the basis that God's revelation is universal, though expressed in different ways. It relates itself to the whole

inhabited earth (cf. Q 34.28; 21.107). This is a call to Muslims and Christians to engage in ecumenical dialogue in witness to the faith in God which they have in common. They can work together in fulfilling their mutual responsibility for seeking peace on earth through obedience to the divine will. I affirm that Christians are part of Allah's creation and are my brothers and sisters. It is my duty to live with them in peace and harmony and work to achieve the 'kingdom of God', or the *umma*, on earth. As a Muslim, I have been taught in scripture that there is no compulsion in religion and that everybody has the right to freedom of religion. I must therefore relate to God's creatures on the basis of a common humanity. This probably explains why Muslims have not involved themselves in the dialogue movement in the same way as Christians (Q 2.256). The Qur'an speaks directly to the issue of religious diversity and the importance of constructive work in society, teaching that human behaviour is a kind of test (Kimball, 1991, p. 119). Therefore, assuming that people are unable fully to resolve the differences in their respective communities, the Qur'an challenges them to compete with one another in good works, as stated in Q 5.48.

History bears testimony to the fact that inter-religious dialogue between Islam and Christianity has been possible over the years. It would be wrong to assert that they have encountered one another only in conflict, but it has been an important feature of the centuries-long encounter between Islamic Empires and Christendom. This was inevitable in situations where each religion came to be identified with political and imperial power. So each religion expressed itself polemically against the other. Theological dialogue, insofar as it existed at all, became a dialogue of confrontation and conflict, serving the interests of empires which were seen as coterminous with religious faiths. Where Islam and Christianity, Muslims and Christians, lived together in the Eastern and Western lands of the Mediterranean, for example, history provides us with much information and evidence of their cultural interaction. There was a cultural environment in which Muslim law came to recognize a legitimate place for Christians and other non-Muslim communities living in Muslim societies, calling them *ahl al-dhimma*. This means that they are under the protection of God and have full rights to the protection of the Islamic state. It was therefore not surprising, during the early centuries of the caliphate, to find many non-Muslims involved in the administration of the Islamic state. This situation continued until the Crusades, which had negative consequences in Christian-Muslim relations.

Community Based on Common Humanity

Both Islam and Christianity are ecumenical and intend to found a community based on a common humanity. Theologically, the unity of the Islamic community begins with the unity or oneness of God. Consequently, the Muslim acknowledgement of one Creator carries with it a vision of humanity as one, all equally God's creatures. The external differences between people that we can see, such as race and colour, do not divide this unity, but instead are signs of God's wonderful creativity. The Qur'an emphasizes that these differences are meant to be seen as a reason for glorifying God, not for disputing amongst ourselves. The essential difference in the sight of God is God consciousness, *taqwā* (Q 49.13). In his farewell address, the Prophet speaks to the unity of all humankind by telling his listeners that all humanity has a common ancestor. 'Your Lord Sustainer is one, and your forefather, Adam, is the father of all human beings ...' (Zakaria Bashier, 1990,

pp. 120–126). Traditional Christian teachings echo this belief in the essential unity of all humankind. In the first creation story in the first chapter of the biblical book of Genesis, humankind is given a common beginning.

Many contemporary Christians in civil society, especially those involved in justice ministries, emphasize that this unity should be marked by true community, peace, and justice for all. They point to the vision of *shalom* that they see in the words of the prophets and Jesus and argue that this vision of peace, wholeness, community, and justice is God's desire for all of humankind. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives directions for living so that community will be a reality. His followers are to be 'merciful . . . pure in heart . . . peacemakers' (Matthew 5) who love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. They are not to retaliate. The model prayer, which is commonly called the Lord's Prayer, includes an acknowledgment that believers are to forgive one another. A higher righteousness than that of the Law of Moses is needed to live in this new community.

Several passages in the Qur'an and the Bible show that true community requires peace, justice and righteousness and that community between believers is essential. There are various discussions as to whether people of different faiths have common values that are worthy of being pursued in the struggle for justice and peace. But at least there are basic principles of moral legitimacy and all religions have certain social rules which are remarkably similar, or at least analogous to one another (Mulder, 1999, p. 71).

If Muslims and Christians are called on the basis of these common ethical principles to action to establish the *umma* or the 'kingdom of God on earth', they have a common agenda. Teissier emphasizes that it is a question of 'entering with our Muslim counterparts into the works of the kingdom of God. It is in these that we continue the dialogue of salvation which Paul VI expounded years ago' (Teissier, 1996, p. 157). This being so, it is not enough to acknowledge the commonalities and the aims and objectives of these two religious traditions without putting them into action. This awareness must be at the heart of Christian–Muslim relations in Africa and 'represents a major challenge to the two faiths and the call that God has addressed to them' (*ibid.*, p. 158). Indeed, it brings to the fore the bigger question of the impact of religion and religious institutions on the lives of the people in Africa.

Christian–Muslim Relations in Sub-Saharan Africa

Stuart Brown's assertion that Christian–Muslim relations were not discovered in some meeting room but have always been with us at the informal level (Brown, 1990, p. 120) is even more true in Africa. They take place through daily encounters on the streets, in the markets, in offices and, more recently, at the formal or institutional level through the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Project for Christian–Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) and other religious bodies, both locally and internationally. These meetings have not only proved invaluable by bringing Christians and Muslims together but have:

. . . also offered Christians and Muslims in Africa an opportunity to demonstrate that the relationship between them which, for economic and/or practical reasons have

bedevilled their relationship in other parts of the world, can and have been turned to positive, dynamic, and creative opportunities for the good of all of the people of the continent as well as being an example for those living beyond the frontiers of the continent. (von Sicard, 1986, p. 20)

Christian–Muslim relations, for the African, is a normal daily routine and not necessarily a spectacular matter from the African's perspective, even though it may be so for an outsider. This is, however, an unconscious relationship, which reminds me of the qur'anic verse 'to you your religion and to me mine' (Q 109.6). This acceptance of the other has been influenced by the all-embracing African traditional religion and culture, so it is not possible to talk about Christian–Muslim relations in Africa without a brief discussion of traditional religion and culture, which for centuries bound Africans together and continues to do so. Africans have generally been described as 'notoriously religious' (Mbiti, 1969, p. 1) as religion pervades the whole of the African's life. This 'Godwardness' of the traditional religion in a sense demonstrates the reality that God is fundamental to African cultures and, as a result, Africans perhaps find it easier than Europeans and Arabs to accept that God can be addressed in many different ways whilst remaining the same true God who has created and sustained us all.

This is the key to understanding the Negus of Abyssinia's acceptance of the early Muslims and his rejection of the pagan Arabs' interference. This is not to say that doctrinal differences do not matter. They do matter in Christian–Muslim relations. The full story of the Negus shows that he understood that Muslims and Christians differ in what they believe about Jesus. But the more important thing is that he recognized the sincerity of the Muslims' belief in God and their commitment to righteous living, and this was not to be dismissed because of differences of belief. The fact that Christians and Muslims believe in the same God is ultimately more important than the fact that they believe in God in different ways.

The acceptance of religious diversity which this story implies, and which is part of the African system, points to certain fundamental principles in African culture: the values of openness, inclusiveness, hospitality and generosity, to mention a few. By extending hospitality, the Negus committed himself to the guests and this enabled Islam to begin its long history as an indigenous African religion. No longer does Islam exist thanks to the hospitality of Christianity, nor does Christianity exist thanks to the hospitality of Islam. In the long term, the story points to the quality of religious tolerance which marks so much of African history as the ethical counterpart of the universal African sense of God. Therefore, for both Muslims and Christians, the traditional system is part of the African's personality and must continue to be so.

For the African, it is not only intermarriage which creates family bonds, but also African customs and particularly the rites of passage. Birth, initiation into manhood or womanhood, and death are all moments at which members of the family are brought together. Festivals have also brought harmony to the family as these are times for reunions and reconciliation, times when all eat from one bowl irrespective of differences. This traditional system is perhaps important to further our understanding of Christian–Muslim relations in our contemporary world. However, Muslims and Christians must be theologically educated to go beyond what Oduyoye calls 'unconscious ecumenism' (Oduyoye et al., 1990, p. 171) and 'live at a deeper level' to work for the development of the continent (Teissier, 1996, pp. 157–158).

Critical Areas of Concern

To work together as Christians and Muslims in Africa we must, however, address some critical issues, such as the secular nation-state and the extent to which it has failed in Africa and the search for alternative lifestyles. For

... the secular worldview is an intellectual error and is increasingly showing itself to be a social and human disaster. Yet given religious diversity, as is given within each organized society, secularism as the organizing principle of social life is inescapable so long as the failure persists to find a religious solution to that diversity; so long as religious bodies have produced no coherent theory, even, of the fact that we human beings have always been and are today religious in a variety of differing ways and insist on being so. (Cantwell-Smith, 1991, p. 11)

Furthermore, Muslims and Christians make exclusivist truth claims, are spiritually arrogant, and fight for converts. In Africa, this may be a result of foreign influence and manipulation, but, in a globalized world where issues in one area affect the other almost instantly, where people involve the other without consultation, how do Muslims and Christians deal with extremism and fanaticism, which can easily be imported? Muslims on the one hand raise the question of marginalization in Christian dominated areas, but on the other hand call for the implementation of the Shari'a in nation-states such as Nigeria because they seek alternative lifestyles. Whilst Christians are uncompromising in their attitude towards the Shari'a, there also seems to be a rise in Christian charismatic fundamentalism. I have therefore constantly asked myself the question: what is the way forward to bring to fruition our mandate or mission? How do we as Muslims and Christians establish the peace, justice and righteousness that underlie our respective religious traditions in the face of all these challenges?

African nations are nation-states and pluralistic. And so in such pluralistic societies, the question of inter-communal harmony assumes great importance. Freedom of conscience, speech, religion and the right to profess as well as propagate one's religious institutions consistently within the law and morality will obviously be regarded as the inviolable rights of everyone in the society. Within this context, Muslims are challenged to critically evaluate their call for a more authentic way of life through Islamization or implementation of Shari'a. The Shari'a appears to have a stigma attached, and is perceived generally by non-Muslims to be archaic and retrogressive, with very little to contribute to the world. More importantly, the Shari'a exhibits a basic attitude of rejection to those who do not belong to it. With Islamization, one religion is the axis around which public life revolves and Christians cannot therefore participate fully in the conduct of national life. The use of Islam as an ideology actually raises problems for the non-Muslim who does not believe in it.

Marginalization

In understanding the agitation of Muslims in several parts of Africa to revert to the Shari'a, we should not lose sight of the colonial legacy and its implication for Muslims. It is intricately related to a search for a voice, a search for justice and a search for identity. I have often asked myself why Africans should be subjected to British or French law. But by the

same token I have asked myself why I should become an Arab. Should not Africans, both Christians and Muslims, revert to traditional religion in principle if they so wish, especially since what the colonial systems bequeathed to them was/is alien to their culture? Rhetorical as the question may be, Africans have to live with and confront these real situations.

The history of colonialism and its legacy in Africa is well known. It is clear that colonial policies had several consequences, one of which was the marginalization of groups and communities. Esposito argues that certain themes cut across the agitation to return to the roots: '... a sense that existing political, economic and social systems have failed; a disenchantment with and even the rejection of the West; a quest for identity and greater authenticity' (cited in Kimball, 1991, p. 34). Most Muslims have long felt alienated and desirous of living a life that is authentically Islamic within the African context with the conviction that 'Islam provides a self sufficient ideology for state and society, a valid alternative to secular nationalism, socialism and capitalism' (*ibid.*). This sentiment is also used to justify the position of the National Islamic Front, the articulate protagonist of the Shari'a in the Sudan, when it proclaims that Muslims, being in the majority, cannot fulfil their faith without applying a definite legal system (Abdin, 1987, p. 2).

It is against this background that we should look at the agitation in parts of the continent for the application of the Shari'a. My intention in raising these issues is not to revisit history and the pain associated with it, but rather to show that some of the colonial policies have had, and continue to have, far reaching implications and ramifications for Christian-Muslim relations. For example, colonial policy on education in Northern Ghana was such that Muslims were marginalized, as missionaries were asked not to operate schools in the predominantly Muslim areas, and in places where they did, conversions took place. Therefore, lack of education put Muslims on the periphery and Muslim women on the periphery of the periphery. Although it is debatable whether this policy had anything to do with Christianity or the teachings of Jesus, Muslims still see this marginalization in the light of religion because the implementers of the policies were Christians. It is common to hear Muslims in Ghana say, sometimes rather erroneously, for example: 'They have marginalized us because we are Muslims.' 'It's because we are Muslims that the government has left us out in the development process.' These repercussions are still felt among Muslims as a group since they are on the lower part of the socio-economic and educational ladder, have very little voice in public matters, do not take an active part in the decision-making process, and therefore do not wield much influence. Marginalization has its own rippling effect, creating stereotypes and complexes. Until recently, Muslims were stereotyped as illiterate, poor, dirty and having nothing to offer, so if a woman spoke articulately on a certain subject, people would remark: 'But you can't be a Muslim. You're so different from your people.' Or, worse still, ask: 'Why are you a Muslim?'

Quite recently I myself had this experience. I was wearing a veil and driving a car. As I dropped off an aunt, I noticed a youngster, barely ten years old, staring at me and saying to his little brother in the Ga language: '*anele minako ekodan* (I've never seen this before)'. As he kept repeating this I obviously became curious and decided to ask him what he had not seen before: 'Is it a woman driving or a woman wearing the veil driving?' He retorted: 'A woman wearing the veil driving.' For him, there was some status incompatibility because a Muslim woman should not be able to do something as easy as driving, which entails moving the limbs. My initial reaction was to smile and drive off after telling him that Muslim women could drive. But I lamented over

why a little boy should have such ideas and how he came by them. Trivial as such incidents may be, there is a need to address such questions of bias, prejudice and perceptions in our training programmes because of the effects they have on relationships. This is why I have decided to wear the veil: to show that Muslim women are as capable and competent as other women.

Islamization

In as much as Muslims have freedom to apply the Shari'ah, it is equally important to note the religiously pluralistic nature of contemporary African societies, the various international law and human rights conventions, and the resultant conflict of law situations that may arise.

The Christian assessment of the Shari'ah in Northern Nigeria is typically captured thus:

We see the practical attitude of Muslims who are securely in power, as in the north of Nigeria and in the Sudan. It is a notorious fact that to gain admission to educational institutions, a promotion or any good appointment it makes a difference if you are a Muslim. And it is a constant struggle to get land for churches or permission for any number of activities. As long as the churches struggle they succeed in getting enough room to function but there is constant pressure on Christians to either join the majority or go away. Whatever shariah is in theory, this is the Shariah that Christians experience and which makes them resist its expansion. (Kenny, 1986, pp. 16–17)

This observation is interesting as it seeks to suggest that the Shari'ah *per se* may not be the problem, and that the problem may lie in the negative socialization and attitude of Muslims to Christians. Whether Christian attitudes to Shari'ah are biased and prejudiced, as Muslims usually suggest, or not, and whether their experiences have been exaggerated by the media or not, the concerns of Christians cannot be trivialized or wished away. The principles of the Shari'ah *per se* may not be the problem, as can be deduced from Kenny's statement. The problem may well lie with the popular understanding and application at the grassroots level.

Yet its implementation or its application can give cause for alarm, even to me as a Muslim, in such cases as Sudan where Numeiry used it to score political points and entrench himself, and in Nigeria where the emphasis is on the application of *hudud* punishments and not on the creation of wealth, eradication of poverty and improvement in the lives of the people.

The application of the Shari'ah, in my opinion, often seems to be stacked against women, as is evident in the cases involving the two women, Amina Lawal and Safiyya, sentenced to death by stoning in Nigeria. These two cases raise for me the manner and mode of Shari'ah application in Muslim societies and the extent to which it undermines or contradicts the very principle of justice which the Shari'ah espouses. Cases like these also bring to the fore the discourse on the reinterpretation of Islam through the process of *ijtihad*, to make it more meaningful and relevant in the world, particularly in Africa. It is no wonder, for example, that, during Numeiry's Islamization process in the Sudan, the Republican Brothers contended that the traditional interpretation of the Shari'ah, especially as it related to Muslim women and non-Muslims, was outright discriminatory.

Dhimmīs?

A corollary of this Islamization is the negative connotation associated with the classically formulated concept of *dhimmīs*, or non-Muslims living under the jurisdiction and protection of Islam. The arguments of Christians hinge on the fact that the *dhimmī* is basically discriminated against and is not considered a full citizen. There is therefore a polarity between Christians and Muslims on the whole question of the status of *dhimmīs* (Ammah, 1996, pp. 1–16). One could raise the question of whether Pentecostals, for example, will find adequate space in the predominantly Muslim Sokoto or Kano to evangelize freely, spread their message, and win converts without being wary of the Muslim authorities, while at the same time expecting converts to be answerable to the Muslim authorities in respect of their apostasy (Doi, 1979, p. 102).

In this pluralistic situation, it is imperative for *fiqh* and its teachings on *dhimmīs* to be seen in their proper context. Verses relating to the *ahl al-kitāb* and the *dhimmī* status should be studied critically, analysed, and evaluated in their historical contexts. Muslims should not address the issues solely from the point of view of classical *fiqh* formulations. The question relating to the *jizya*, the concept of citizenship, and the penalty for the apostate are typical examples that must be explained contextually to be meaningful in the contemporary world (Ammah, 2002, p. 98). In this way the fears and apprehensions of Christians would be minimized. Additionally, as Sachedina argues, it would bring to the fore ‘cultural and religious pluralism as a divinely ordained principle of co-existence among human societies’ (cited in Ali, 2004, p. 7).

If Muslims wish to live according to the principles of Shari‘a in predominantly Muslim areas, they should not be dissuaded. Rather they should be objective and realistic in dealing with those who do not subscribe to this ideology but are part of the modern nation-state and belong to the community of believers. Muslims in Nigeria and Sudan, for example, should create a congenial atmosphere of justice and freedom for both Muslims and Christians and use Shari‘a principles (properly interpreted and applied) to improve the quality of life of both peoples. Christians have to be convinced that the principles in the Shari‘a are humane, and can be a credible alternative to the existing system, and that they have very little to lose and much to gain from it. Dialogue demands listening and hearing in order to make informed decisions. Unfortunately there is a tendency to write off the other without due consideration simply because it is ‘the other’.

On the basis of this understanding of common community, Muslims and Christians must be able to live within each other’s domain without fears and apprehension if they seek to bring peace, love, brotherhood and justice to humanity. This being so, there is a need for cooperation or dialogue between Christians and Muslims to map out a strategy in the region to achieve these values, which are at the core of their respective religious traditions and make for their own self-development. An ecumenical relationship should make it possible for Muslims and Christians to work together at the tasks that advance African people and African society (Teissier, 1996, p. 158).

Dialogue for Holistic Development

Whilst recognizing the difficulties in the Christian–Muslim relationship at the state level, it is imperative for Christians and Muslims to be mindful of their vision for Africa. The areas that must inform our relationship are those that touch on the holistic development

of the African people. Here we are talking about 'bread and butter issues' and a fight for survival. So the discussions go beyond academic discourse into other realms.

The human situation in Africa is itself an agenda, so Christians and Muslims do not need to set another:

... the African situation leaves much to be desired. If God created human beings in His image and likeness then the African situation appears to be a lie to this biblical truth. As President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania has remarked, it is difficult or even impossible to see God subject to this type of injustice or oppression that the African undergoes. It is difficult to see God ragged, diseased, hungry, poor, an outcast and without honor. (Sarpong, 1990, p. 9)

Though these sentiments were expressed more than ten years ago, the situation in Africa is very much the same. The general situation of many African countries is well known and is characterized by poverty, disease, instability and the struggle to become politically, economically and ideologically independent. The insecurities in the life of many through self-imposed wars, famine, natural disasters, etc. make it necessary, if not imperative, for Muslims and Christians to use both the theological and ethical resources within Islam and Christianity to find solutions to these enormous problems. Muslims and Christians suffer the indignities of the harsh realities of life without discrimination. Many African countries are democratizing their systems with a view to achieving a certain level of socio-economic development and stability, and have tried all forms of programmes, be they the Structural Adjustment or the Highly Indebted and Poor Countries (HIPC).

It is important to reiterate here that the issues of 'poverty stricken and injustice ridden' Africa are concerns that also have gender implications and provide legitimate grounds for Muslim and Christian women, being the worst sufferers, to work for their own best interest and welfare. Christians and Muslims must collaborate more on these issues which affect their lives, and take their destinies into their own hands, as is the case with several organizations and institutions which are championing the cause of women of religion. One such is the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians inaugurated in 1989, through which women, regardless of their religious affiliation, have cooperated and told their own stories from their faith perspectives. They have not only sensitized and conscientized but have advocated at various levels. Muslim women have learned from their Christian counterparts skills of leadership and organization and used these in the development of Muslim women's organizations, at least in Ghana. I am aware that several Christian organizations, such as PROCMURA, have a women's desk where interfaith relations are part of the programmes.

If Muslims and Christians already have an agenda to push, they must communally try to eradicate malaria, poverty, diseases such as the dreadful HIV/AIDS, and corruption in all its manifestations, together with 'the evils and idolatries of society that cut across churches and religions' (Oduyoye et al., 1990, p. 173). It is imperative for the two religious communities in the era of democratization to be alert in the political domain and criticize governments that are oppressive, dictatorial, and unable to serve the people. They must address issues of human rights abuses and violations and replace them with peace and justice on the continent.

Muslims and Christians must channel their energies into creating better, healthy and strong independent nations and raising the standard of living of the people through lobbying and advocacy on these political issues, most of which may not necessarily be theological or religious, but about life—the fullness and wholeness of it—as the mosquito does not discriminate on the basis of religion. Muslims and Christians must collaborate and network in promoting peace and justice and develop ‘everywhere on the continent the collaboration of peace and justice, which alone can glorify God’ (Teissier, 1996, p. 159).

There are several instances of interfaith commissions where cooperation has had a tremendous impact. South Africa is a typical example where ‘interreligious solidarity for justice’ has played an immeasurable role in the dismantling of apartheid (Esack, 1997, pp. 179–206). In other places, such as Ghana, the Forum of Religious Bodies, primarily a Christian–Muslim body, monitored the last general elections in 2000 and also resolved a conflict between the former President Rawlings and his vice-president in the early 1990s. This forum has also inaugurated the Ghana chapter of the World Conference for Religion and Peace (WCRP) which exists in several African countries. Among other things, it has as part of its project the Hope for African Children Initiative (HACI), an NGO dedicated to the welfare of children living with HIV/AIDS.

Education for Change

Fundamental to any nation building is the task of education. In Africa, no less than in other continents, Muslims and Christians are faced with essentially the same choice when reflecting on the history of civilizations: shall we choose to perpetuate the historical conflict where religion is subordinated to the tribe and political ideology and therefore open to foreign exploitation, or shall we choose the way of dialogue, which I maintain has a natural place in the relationship of Muslims and Christians in many parts of Africa? In a sense it is easier for Africans than for some other peoples to choose dialogue because they are more firmly in the tradition of Godwardness, religious tolerance and family that has been referred to above. Yet while these features of African culture give us a tremendous opportunity for dialogue, they also present us with a challenge.

One of the major challenges lies in the realm of the unconscious acceptance of the other as Muslims and Christians in Africa. It is easy for Muslims and Christians to presume that they accept one another and become complacent about it, with the result that they often fail to objectify it in intellectual endeavour in the face of the challenges of contemporary Africa. I am aware of the institutional programmes run by PROCMURA and the WCC, but, even though a considerable amount of intellectual endeavour by Muslims and Christians goes into them, they seem totally unrelated to the cultural traditions of the countries and therefore do not appear to be based on a very solid foundation. What is more, they take place at the formal level and in conference rooms with a limited audience. This makes dialogue appear to be the concern of specialists with little involvement by ordinary people. It is preaching to the converted. Muslims and Christians must move beyond this and deliberately involve the grassroots in such encounters through theological/religious education. This is necessary in view of what foreign influences and globalization may bring to Africa. If extremism may easily be implanted in African soil, with dire consequences, Africans should find ways to nip it in the bud.

In Africa, where tolerance is part of the personality, Muslims and Christians are still suspicious of each other and label each other as unbelievers. There have been occasions

when Muslims in Ghana have shouted from the *minbar* that the Christian is a *kāfir* destined for hell. Although this cannot be justified or excused, it is not surprising, as an imam may also label the Tijanniyya or Shi'ites as *kuffār*. But in a similar vein some evangelical Christians have disparaged the Prophet and actually stamped on the Qur'an in a predominantly Muslim suburb in Kumasi, Ghana, leading to violent reactions and the destruction of property. Tele-evangelists have insulted Muslims and made a mockery of Muslims and Islam. This phenomenon of religiously motivated abuse of believers of one's own or another religion can revive negative experiences within inter-religious dialogue because it shows that in all religions 'there is a hidden tendency to become fanatic in maintaining one's limited perspective and understanding of the faith' (Evers, 1996, p. 244). This understanding must be challenged as Christians and Muslims have

... not worked out theologies for themselves that make room for the increasingly striking fact that my neighbor differs from me in spiritual matters formally. But substantially on the other hand, that neighbor may, despite the form, nonetheless not differ from me spiritually so much as the traditional theories or theologies have led us to imagine. (Cantwell-Smith, 1991, p. 11)

Acceptance of the other, especially in the wake of extremism, evangelism and fundamentalism, should move beyond the superficial and the unconscious to the conscious. The onus is therefore on Christian and Muslim leaders, who must endeavour to touch people's hearts in their sermons and presentations by emphasizing the worth and dignity of humans, their common humanity, the ecumenical nature of the respective faiths, our duties as stewards or *khalīfas* of God, and our ultimate accountability to God, rather than damnation and condemnation and giving people 'hyphenated names'.

Within the African continent it would be suicidal to think in terms of, and discriminate on the basis of, religious affiliation. It is inappropriate for a Christian to enquire about someone's religious affiliation, something that sometimes happens in my country before offering a job or granting admission to a school—or refusing it—on the basis of religious affiliation. In the same way it is un-Islamic and tantamount to *kufur* (ungratefulness) for Muslims to build a well and make it inaccessible to non-Muslims or Christians, or deny Christians in a predominantly Muslim school access to worship, as these actions contradict the concept of social justice in both religious traditions. Indeed, they must communally set up the school as a model for others to follow. For through the mercy and grace of God, even those who do not believe in God still enjoy God's sustenance and bounty.

One way Christians and Muslims can work to curb these tendencies is for the various faith organizations to consciously educate their flock in the need to respect one another sincerely and honestly. They may also constantly meet and deliberate on how to forestall these tendencies and implement programmes in their respective countries and localities. Further, since the church lives in a plural context, so its theology in Africa must be formed in a context where there is cultural and religious pluralism (Pobee, 1990, p. 194). Evangelical Christians especially must also review their understanding of mission to make it more inclusive and development oriented and not intended only to win souls for Christ.

If this theological education is important for Christians, it is even more so for Muslims. From my perspective as a Muslim, proper education of the general Muslim community is needed not only to control some of these fanatical and extremist trends, which is necessary

for our own self-esteem in the contemporary world, but also to enhance the quest for a continuous and sustained peaceful co-existence with others. This calls for an academic study of religions in our Muslim communities and institutions, which should pervade the educational system. Islam should be studied analytically and critically at all levels of society, both formally and informally. The curricula or syllabi of Islamic educational institutions should address how the Shari^ca can be made intelligible, meaningful and relevant in both content and application in the modern democratic state, bearing in mind the pluralistic nature of the society. They should also emphasize peace studies and inculcate more the values of love, tolerance and forgiveness and simple manners (*adab*) in the various institutions. This would help in the moulding of liberal-minded and progressive Muslims who are true to their faith and constructive through their critical thought and methodology, while also ensuring that the spiritual dimension of the faith is not lost. The Muslim academy therefore has a large task and must take up the challenge. As a Muslim, I am sometimes challenged to review my own understanding of Islam when I encounter other faiths and I am also humbled by Hasan Askari, who taught me a great deal when he said that 'for a religion to be a religion, it has to be inter-religious'.

As Muslims consider this education seriously, it is worth considering the need for conversion in theological circles to enable the inclusion of women, as the theological issue is whether women also bear the image and likeness of God, and if so, their inclusion like that of any other group is a must, for they will bring the necessary complementary insights of women to articulating the experience of God's self-disclosure in the world (Pobee, 1990, p. 201).

I could not agree more with this, as women are better at fostering relationships on account of their common problems which cut across cultures. But more distinctly, women differ from men in the ways they are human and religious and it follows therefore that inter-religious dialogue characterized by 'feminine inclusivity will differ fundamentally from male centered inter religious dialogue' (Anbeck, 1992, p. 69).

Conclusion

Christians and Muslims are without doubt bonded on the basis of the ecumenical nature of their respective faiths, their common humanity, and a similar ethical and theological agenda for action. There is a divine imperative not only to talk and walk, but to act for the good of humanity. If this divine imperative is to be successful, Muslims and Christians must re-evaluate their understanding of the 'other' and accept the 'other' sincerely. In Africa, this cooperation is even more needed than elsewhere, not only to help boost further the already peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians, but to bring about holistic development. The time when Muslims and Christians in Africa should be allowed to work out solutions to their problems in their own way, rather than being treated as overseas territories by Muslims and Christians elsewhere, is long overdue. Both Islam and Christianity must be allowed to develop their own forms in Africa. We must be together in this, as we cannot afford to become an 'accomplice or accessory in the resurgence of any form of sectionalism' (Pobee, 1990, p. 201). Our role as Muslims and Christians is to foster the wholeness of people and societies and an inclusive community. We cannot afford to fail. If we fail, we fail and perish together. If Muslims and Christians have no choice but to live together, they must take seriously the matter of living well and learning to do it (Cantwell-Smith, 1991, p. 11).

Note

1. In this section of the paper, I have relied on my earlier article (Ammah, 1990).

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