Prospects, Possibilities and Challenges of Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Sub-Saharan Africa

By
Prof. A. M. Ashafa

Introduction

I am delighted and feel honoured by this invitation to make this presentation. I am eternally grateful to our host, the Management of the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology (CWCIT) at DePaul University, Chicago for finding me worthy of the task. The letter of invitation made it clear to me that this is the first in a series of dialogue events between Muslims and Catholics being hosted by the CWCIT, which is geared towards interfaith understanding. Interestingly, just few days ago in October, Nigeria hosted the 7th International Conference on Youth and Interfaith Dialogue with the mission to “creating our peaceful future together through Dialogue”, which also coincided with the celebration by Muslims and Christians of the Ashura on the 10th Muharram 1437 AH in Nigeria’s Kaduna where I came from, a city known for its uneasy interfaith relations some years ago.

One issue I have observed for quite some time is that while religion has an important role to play in building peace, security and understanding, especially where violent extremism exists among followers of diverse faiths, over the centuries, relationship between religions and among adherents has remained complex and problematic.

In the case of Sub Saharan Africa (SSA), it is often catastrophic. Though Islam and Christianity converged in their Abrahamic descend in preaching peace, harmony, justice and fairness, while constantly, (but separately reinforcing their competing truth claims of being divine, monotheistic and universal), yet they get locked in misunderstanding, resulting often into violent conflicts with devastating repercussions. More worrisome is that despite the integrative character of globalization, there is variation in matters of religion so that the Christianity and Muslims in the West and SSA as well as the Islam and Muslims in the Middle East and SSA respectively often varies. In this sense, the clashes on one hand and the dialogue on the other in these climes could hardly be divorced from the history of their interactions and how they experienced one another over time, as well as the political and economic dynamics around such experiences that combined to make SSA countries good examples of religious fault lines in an under-developed sub-continent. Understanding and mitigating frosty interfaith relations in SSA

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2 A Professor in the Department of History, Kaduna State University, Kaduna-Nigeria, abashafa@yahoo.com
3 This is always a day in first month of the Hijra calendar that Muslims celebrate the liberation of the Israelites by Moses from the despotic rule of the Pharaoh by crossing to the Nile.
and the world at large for peace, cooperation and partnership will certainly be a victory for humanity. It is from this premise we that we shall discuss and appreciate the prospects, possibilities and challenges of Muslim-Christian dialogue in SSA.

One irony is that though God is acclaimed by all religions to be the Author of peace and justice, the message of peace is also claimed to be at the center of both Islam and Christianity, yet extremist Muslims and Christians in SSA hide their sacrilegious misdemeanor behind religion in a manner that conflation of religion with violent conflicts discomfits everyone. This to me should rather mobilize our moral consensus towards a genuine interfaith dialogue for better understanding and peaceful coexistence.

In SSA, though there are local factors (while also not excluding similar international exigencies to react to) that generates the kind of challenges in interfaith relations between Muslims and Christians, yet, the emerging formal dialogue hardly seems to bring the desirable peace, understanding and harmony it deserves. This is simply because such dialogues merely demonstrate half-hearted handshakes and exchanges among elite groups anchored in conferences and Round Tables, than in the true teachings of the religions been variously professed where real world of love, peace, understanding and co-operation with one another should be the basis.

Beyond this introduction, the paper is structured in nine sections. The first gives a perspective of SSA beyond the mere geographical description; the second looks at the tolerant Islam that was introduced in SSA and the third examines some of the changes that came with colonialism. The forth discusses the post-colonial reversal of interfaith engagement in SSA and the sixth interrogates Islam, democracy, Shari’a in relation to interfaith relations and the seventh is concern with concerns over Islamic radicalism and polemical Pentecostalism in SSA as it affects interfaith relations. The prospects, possibilities and challenges are in the eighth section and the last is the conclusion.

Sub-Saharan Africa: A Perspective beyond Geography

It is common to simply term SSA as a geographical area of Africa that lies south of the Sahara Desert, but politically excluding Sudan, which though sitting in the eastern portion of the same Sahara Desert, is being considered part of the Arab world. Ironically however, such countries as Somalia, Djibouti, Comoros and Mauritania that are geographically part of SSA and forms part of the cultural Arab world are conveniently more regarded as SSA than the Arab categorization. Because of this irony of convenience, which originally emanated from the historical Arab contact with Africa, and especially after the gradual Arabization of North Africa since the 7th century, the ‘un-Arabized’ part covering the vast region of west and central Africa from the coast to western Sudan was on one hand referred to by early Arab travelers, traders,
geographers and writers as *bilad al-Sudan* or land of the Blacks. On the other hand, those areas at the vicinity of the Great Lakes were referred to as *Zanj* or country of the Blacks.\(^5\)

This categorization was to remain throughout the European colonization of Africa in view of the civilizational mission that went with European interests in the continent, for which reason, Africa was referred to as a ‘dark’, ‘Black’ and uncivilized continent to justify European colonization. After independence, the term SSA was coined. This rather became a benign but modernized geographical reference to both the carry over racist Arab and European classification of Africa. This therefore made the term SSA a subterfuge coding among a generation of outside colonizers to give meaning to the inappropriate geographical, racial and historical differences between Arabized Africans in the north and Black Africans who were products of the historical Bantu socio-demographic shift. Though "Sub-Saharan Africa" also includes the southern half of the Sahara Desert, the prefix ‘sub’ attached to Saharan Africa to mean “part of”, “partially” or “nearly”, becomes an inappropriate and protean, yet convenient terminology that remains inaccurate in every conceivable connotation it is being made to imply.

By the last quarter of the 8\(^{th}\) century AD, Islam had reached the Savannah region of West Africa, which has the largest concentration of Muslim population in SSA through the Trans-Sahara trade, and was to spread in the broader Savannah region via internal trade, the *Wangara* and *Djula*, for example. The existence of relative peace in this area provided by large political systems, Ghana, Mali and Songhai for trade was to spread.

Islam is self-critical allowing internal debates as to the direction it was taking, whether or not Muslims themselves were following the tenets of the religion, and whether or not secular authority needed to be Islamic or to conform more to the ideals of the faith. This led to a number of major reform movements, also often referred to as jihads, in the 18th and 19th century West Africa. Of note are the jihad in Upper Niger region, also called the Masina jihad led by Seku Ahmadu, the Sokoto jihad led by Uthman dan Fodio, resulting in the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate, encompassing most of the area covered by today’s northern Nigeria, and parts of Niger, Cameroon and Benin and the last was the Al-hajj Umar Taal’s jihad further west, which although later centered in Segou, did not translate into a lasting political entity.

In its own way, each jihad helped to spread Islam further, again within the savannah area. By the time Christian missionaries and European imperialism visited this part of the world; Islam was part of the everyday life of the people.

In North-east Africa and East Africa, trade and its proximity to the home of Islam, made the Horn of Africa become part of the Islamic world in SSA. As commerce the between the East

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African coast and the Middle East and, later, the Indian sub-continent progressed in the first millennium AD, migration into the coastal region increased. Such immigrants intermarried with the indigenous people, leading to the emergence of the Swahili cultures centered in the various coastal cities such as Mogadishu, Lamu, Pate, Mombasa, Zanzibar, and Kilwa further south states, all of which were Islamic.

They had little or no meaningful contact with the interior, and Islam remained confined to the coast; what there was in the early 19th century was initiated by people such as the Kamba in central Kenya. There was one exception, however: the northern Mozambican coast through which Islam had entered the Mutapa Empire in present day Zimbabwe as early as the 1600s, it did not flourish.

Islam in the Busaidi dynasty and East Africa was more active from the eighteenth century, when it shifted its headquarters from Oman to Zanzibar in 1840; most of the coastal states fall under its political control. With the increase of trade between the East Coast and the interior, Muslims established a presence in places such Unyanyembe in northern Tanganyika, the Manyema country (eastern DRC) and Buganda (in the1840s) in today’s Uganda, where they attained major influence at the court of the Kabaka (king). This same area was soon to attract the attention of Christian missionaries and European imperial interests.

In Southern Africa, especially Malawi, witnessed Islam from the mid-nineteenth century, such as among the Yao of northern Mozambique who had traded in ivory as far as the Luangwa region of Zambia and began to settle in the area south of Lake Malawi. Their coastal links had introduced them to Islam, and they were to bring the faith in this land, which was soon to be associated with British missionaries and the British government.

In South Africa, the first Muslims were said to have come from the Malay Archipelago in the shape of political prisoners, and sometimes arrived as criminal, and that was from the late 1650s onwards. Others were to arrive from India, Sri Lanka, and the east African coast. The fact that slave owners were Christians did not necessarily lead to conversion, mainly because change of faith would have led to change of status, equality before the Church and in any case such an owner would not have been allowed to sale the slave as his Christian religion would not have allowed him to do so. Many of the ex-slaves had found Islam as a welcoming home, thereby spreading it.

But for this presentation, the choice of SSA by the organizers is excusable considering the fact that the Trans-Saharan trade, which on one hand involved the exchange of gold and slaves for manufactured goods and salt from North Africa and on the other hand, the Indian Ocean trade, which focused on the exchange of slaves and raw materials from East and Southern Africa for the manufactured goods of the Islamic world and South Asia, as well as the Atlantic trade, had
largely supplanted trans-Saharan trade. Both trades have correspondingly produced prominent Islamic states and Kingdoms as well as Christian societies and communities in Sub-Saharan Africa in a manner that nearly the entire northern half of the continent fell under Islamic rule and the southern half of Africa fell under mixed Islamic and Christian influences during and after colonization.

Certainly, understanding certain basic facts about Islam and Christianity as well as Muslims and Christians in SSA will make the discourse on Muslim-Christian dialogue an interesting one and these are that:

a. Interestingly, for reasons of persecutions, Africa provided protection and life for both Christianity and Islam. On one hand, Christianity was on African soil about seven centuries before Islam when North Africa provided sanctuary for infant Jesus when Joseph and his wife Mary had to escape from King Herod to Egypt where they all remained till the death of Herod.  

b. On the other hand, SSA provided similar sanctuary to Islam when early Muslims sought and were granted asylum by a religiously friendly Christian King of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). On the whole therefore, Christian God was in Africa long before the Western Christian Missionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries, as it were in SSA with Islam long before Arab traders and clerics arrived.

c. SSA Christianity and Islam converge in their separate belief and universal character of religions such as in the importance of prayer, fasting, marriage, charity, repentance, forgiveness, salvation and other ethical obligations, just as both share similar views in spite of contrasting degree of sanctions regarding sin, abominable acts as stealing, killing, adultery, corruption, injustice etc.

d. Since the northern half of Africa is heavily Muslim and Southern Africa is correspondingly heavily Christian, SSA, which stands in the middle between Northern and Southern Africa and covering about 4, 000 miles swath from Somalia in East Africa and Senegal in West Africa, or situated between the Indian Ocean to the east, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west, is a region that encompasses more than 50 countries and about 250-million Muslims, or one-fifth of the world’s Muslim population. Yet, this is where Islam and Christianity are roughly balanced in terms of adherents being transformed into a volatile religious fault through radicalism.

d. It is in SSA that people are deeply committed to either Islam or Christianity, yet most of them continue to uphold elements of African Traditional Religions dearly. For this, the character and form of both Christianity and Islam in Africa possess different configurations from what it is in Western and Islamic traditions to make them live in varieties, which for the latter has been a major doctrinaire issue of sectarian divide. But

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6 Matthew 2:13-23
on the contrary, unlike between Muslims and Christians, ATRs at whose expense Christianity and Islam expanded to this level, co-exist with both Muslims and Christians without theological and political tension largely because it is not missionary-oriented to view either of them as competitive rival and so its ability to adapt and even appropriate the two at the same time.

e. Because of the balance, it appears that neither Islam nor Christianity may expand rapidly at the expense of the other in the years ahead than in the previous century, largely because they have exhausted the pool of potential converts from outside their faiths, except through natural population growth, and

f. Given the reality of failed state scenario, the menacing collapsing government services and ravaging tension among Christians and Muslims, in the whole of Africa, it is only in SSA that religious leaders and movements are becoming major coalescing forces in civil society activities providing relief services to needy victims of state failure, and

g. Marriages, lineages, kinship, language/ethnicity, membership of political parties, educational institutions, trade unions, professional associations, civil society organizations and attending same hospitals as well as other forms of social and cultural life are important and useful bridges to unify Muslims and Christians in SSA for the promotion of inter-faith harmony and peaceful co-existence. In this sense, it is not that Muslims and Christians do not co-exist, but that both need to adjust to certain realities remains a fact that should never be ignored in any effort towards understanding and partnership for peace.

The Tolerant Islam introduced in SSA

One important reminder is that the universal claim of Islam and the timelessness of the Qur’anic revelations at a point necessitated expansionism, which reached its glorious epoch with the Four rightly-guided Caliphs. Over time however, this had been challenged by developments within Islam and Muslims and outside so that Muslims, depending on the circumstances, either negates the type of Islam bequeathed at the glorious era or became weak in the strict observance of the traditions reminiscent to that glorious era to necessitate revivalist movements by persons looking towards the reincarnation of that glorious era. Islam (and the Qur’an) unlike Christianity (and the Bible) appears the only monolithic religion with scriptural prescriptions or texts about dealing with people of other faiths.

Historically, Muhammad, (SAW), the Prophet of Islam was first identified by a monk known as Bahira as young person destined for a great mission on earth and later upon receipt of his first revelation and the tribulation of the encounter with Angel Gabriel, Waraq, a Christian monk who confirmed the incident as a prophetic experience. When Muhammad (SAW) had proclaimed his Prophethood, he first addressed the Meccan pagans who were criticized of
being polytheists while describing others with dignity as being righteous, which the Qur’an refers to as People of the Book. But when the pagan Meccan’s persecution became unbearable to the early Muslim converts, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) identified and dispatched them to Abyssinia to seek asylum, where a just and friendly Christian ruler was to give them the needed protection. This friendship and just-minded character of the Christian ruler were confirmed when the Meccans sought for their repatriation but was turned down. Islam and Muslims have remained grateful to this act of generosity and friendship and might have informed the soft spot Islam regards monolithic religions, most especially Christianity and remained critical of paganism and idol worshipping. No wonder, in classical Islamic jurisprudence, Abyssinia was granted a special status belonging to what Joseph Trimingham described as neither dar al-Islam (real of Islam), nor dar al-harb (realm of war), but dar al-hiyad (land of neutrality).

The People of the Book in the Qur’anic traditions are the Jews and Christians, who like the Muslims, belonged to similar revelatory traditions. Though there are instances the Qur’an was critical of the conflicts and disputes among the People of the Book and the divergent views they held on some issues, when it was made clear that Islam is a universal religion and that People of the Book should accept the message, it does not imply they would be forced to accept the call. Instead, the Qur’an rather teaches Muslims how to treat them and how to explain Islam passionately, while drawing attention to what unites the People of the Book with the Muslims.

After the hijra, in Medina where community of Jews were found existing side by side with pagans, with whom an agreement was reached to live together in unity based on what historians refers to as the ‘Medinan constitution’, which sadly did not endure because the Jews did not remain faithful to the letter of the agreement, which strained the relationship. Unlike the Jews that the Qur’an often criticized especially on ethical perspective, criticism Christians were on certain exaggerated dogmas, dovetailing around the Trinity, the reverence shown to religious leaders, virtually treating them as semi-gods etc.

Generally speaking, the Qur’anic reference to some non-Muslims (except pagans) as People of the Book or Ahl al-kitab, is an expression that seems to be drawing the attention of Muslims to certain similarities than differences. And since mankind was once a single community, the Qur’an informs the Muslims that: “...if Allah had willed He could have made mankind one

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7 Q Maryam 19:1-72
10 Q Al A’araf 7:157-158.
11 Q Al’Ankabut 29:46.
13 see Q Al Ma’idah 5:17, 72-75, 77 &116; An Nisa’i 4:171-172 and Al Tawbah 9:31.
community”. Interpreting this Sheikh Fazlur Rahman argues that humankind was once a single unity, which was later split up in accordance with the will (plan) of God so that Muslims, Christians and Jews should be recognized as several communities of God that are split.

External trade between the Arabs and Sub-Saharan Africans and internal amongst Africans, migrations into specific areas, missionary activities and lately through jihad, were largely responsible for the spread of Islam in the area.

How did Islam spread to SSA and how did Muslims relate with the non-Muslims before the coming of Christianity? This is important in understanding the character of Islam in its relations to Non-Muslims and in appreciating the change, which make relations frosty and precarious.

After the Arab conquest of North Africa and the gradual Islamization of that part of Africa, the trading relation with the rest of Africa had increased significantly and was to be largely responsible for the gradual spread of the religion. When they came, emphasis was placed on converting African rulers and who in turn, without forcing Islam on the predominantly pagan populace, made Islam the states religion. In the early empires in West Africa, evidences abound on the roles of devout Muslim rulers such as Askia Muhammad in Songhay, Mansa Musa as well as the Kanem Bornu among several other smaller states, who not only separately encouraged Islam and learning as well as built mosques of magnificent structures, they were engaged in series of political wars of expansionism. In SSA, such wars largely for territorial expansion and its multiplier politico-economic benefits were not undertaken for the purpose of forcing conversion to Islam. That was why as devoted as they were to Islam, they could not reverse the centuries of pagan thought, rituals and worships if such engagements were to force Islamization. No wonder, the generation of rulers that came after them were to practice a debased kind of Islam, where religious laws were interpreted with much laxity, knowledge was superficially low and never encouraged, vanity in leadership became the order of the day and unlike previous rulers whose period were the golden era of Islam in SSA, little concern if any where shown for the integral rules of the faith by the latter generation of their successor.

By the nineteenth century, the golden era of Islam in SSA had vanished and Islam appeared “tamed”, which was a matter of concern for a generation of pious scholars to initiate the return of that golden era of Islam that later became stormy and which is being refers to as the jihads. Note also that Islam is self-critical, allowing internal debates as to the direction it was taking, whether or not Muslims themselves were following the tenets of the religion, and whether or not secular authority needed to be Islamic or to conform more to the ideals of the faith. This

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14 Ma’ida 5:48.
led to a number of major reform movements, also often referred to as jihads, in the 18th and 19th century West Africa. Of note are the jihad in Upper Niger region, also called the Masina jihad led by Seku Ahmadu, the Sokoto jihad led by Uthman dan Fodio, resulting in the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate, encompassing most of the area covered by today’s northern Nigeria, and parts of Niger, Cameroon and Benin and the last was the Al-hajj Umar Taal’s jihad further west, which although later centered in Segou, did not translate into a lasting political entity.

What is important to note about these Islamic states is that the nature of relations with pagans or African traditional religions were never frosty because they were not the targets of the jihads but the professed Muslims who were considered both vertically and horizontally deviant from the path of Islam and that was why the leaders were refers to as mujaddids or revivalists. In northern Nigeria, the Sokoto Caliphate adopted several tolerant attitudes towards non-Muslims in the form of Amana relations.17

**Colonialism and Islam in Sub Saharan Africa**

The introduction of Christianity in SSA during the colonial period in particular redefined the contour of pluralism and the traditional borders of inter-faith relations hitherto restricted between Islam and African traditional religions. The colonialists who had initially viewed everything in SSA from racial and ethnic perspective, and with the gradual spread of Christianity from the coastlines, especially in West Africa into the interior to meet African Muslim communities as their neighbours, made pluralism to move from the ethnic to include the religious. Undoubtedly, colonial attitudes towards Islam in SSA varied from individual colonial powers and administrations or officials. It was marked by both friendship and hostility all of which combined to further tame Islam. On one hand, the colonial officials who recognized the pre-colonial achievements and significance of Muslims institutions: education, respect for learning, its codified laws, political and social stability, were thought to be useful as a bridge between the “savages” and the modernity that European colonialism was introducing. In

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Northern Nigeria and Ghana for example, the British seeming support for Islam was factored by the stability of the well-organized system of administration of the Muslim states and societies, which they preserved and modified. On the other hand majority of the colonizing officials and Christian Missions haboured the old-age European negative perceptions of Islam that was being equated with “oriental despotism” the Mahdist resistant movements in the 20th century further provided an evidence of. Interestingly, the colonial agenda was not outwardly after pushing out Islam, but was to contend it through pragmatism of self-interest using certain contradictory policies of restricting the expansion of Christianity into Muslim areas, encouraging the Christian missions into ‘pagan’ areas and at the same time disarticulating the legal foundation on which Islam always stands by fashioning a hybridized system that accommodated the ideals of colonial self-enlightenment and interests.19

The point being made here is that while Muslim rulers in the British colonies and the radical Muslim Brotherhood as the Muridyya in French colonies were co-opted into the colonial milieu as collaborators, they became incapacitated to act beyond mere symbolic representatives of Islam and Muslims in a manner that while Islam remained stagnated, by the time of independence large pagan areas had been brought under the influence of Christianity through the activities of various missionary denominations that created the seeming balance between Christianity and Islam in SSA.

Suspicion had already been sowed in the relationship between Muslims and Christians when the unwilling colonial powers were pressured to beat a retreat. For example, in Nigeria, when the country was being prepared for self-government, in the northern part, where the Caliphate and Bornu predominated, the Christian missionaries became apprehensive of the fate that would befall the non-Muslim minority areas that were considered the domain for pagan conversion. The educated elements amongst the indigenous Christian populace were thus encouraged to get involved in the political processes as a means to guarantee the future of Christians and Christianity. This was to lay the foundation of ‘religionizing’ politics and politicizing religion in some parts of SSA and therefore for a divided and contentious interfaith relations, which as times went on particularly infected the entire Nigerian political landscape as well as the post-colonial secular and plural societies in most of SSA countries.20 In this manner,

20 The Christian missionaries as noted earlier were refused entry to Muslim areas but allowed a free hand into non-Muslim areas by the British colonial administration. When party politics started and the country was moving towards independence, group of missionaries felt that their activities would be restricted especially with the entry of the Northern Premier into competition for conversion of the non-Muslim populace into Islam. See A. M. Ashafa “Religion in the History of Transition to Democracy in Nigeria” Arts and Social Science Research, vol. 2 Sept 1999, pp68-84; and A. M. Ashafa ‘British Colonial and the Transformation of Inter-Group Relations” in A.M. Yakubu, I.M.
post-colonial Africa’s setting was such that contact between Muslims and Christians in a supposedly new political setting of shared state and having to work together toward nation building and patriotism was affected and badly managed by the African elites.

The Post-colonial Reversed Interfaith Relations in SSA

The stage was set for serious contradictions when Sub-Saharan African countries were being prepared for self-rule and after political independence. The new political setting of supposed shared common states and the need to work together towards nation building and development were mishandled. While the reversals in political progress, development and stability in the 1960s was partly factored by ethnic identity, it was equally partly the cultural worldview of the elites informed by religious identity that goes affect and reverse the initial positive social movements amongst politicians whose newly acquired national power to reshape Africa had by this period lost out to military dictators and were submerged. The military regimes, which rather became fashionable in SSA, became too dictatorial and overbearing to the liking and expectations of most African groups as those with the tendency to speak against dictatorship were muzzled.

By the 1970s, Africa started to witness severe economic challenges, political instabilities with some aggravating to civil wars, infrastructure decay that affected service delivery and welfare of citizens. The politico-economic policies of the regimes were apparent failure especially that corruption was coming to take the center stage in the governance of the countries as power became somehow personalized and revolving among few African elites unwilling to open the political space. While some religious groups had expressed concern over the state of affairs in most countries and had delved into speaking for or against the various regimes for a change, some other Muslim groups, reflecting on the glorious era of Islam in history launched the call for the introduction of Shari’a as a better alternative solution to solving challenges a secular system both instituted and failed to resolve. What became a serious matter was that solution to national politico-economic and social problems were seen and proffered from religious point of view. And if all had thus agreed that the situation in Africa deserved a better deal, the question was on whose religious terms or inclinations would such better deal be worked out? Though the Muslims saw in the Shari’a a solution to the vagaries of secularism, even with the challenges of accommodating equality in a plural context of modern nation-states, their Christian counterparts, within the context of modern political culture of secularism were not willing to

proffer a non-secular alternative. In Nigeria, especially in the 1970s, this ignited another wave of discord to be known as the Shari’a debate and which was to rear its head again in the year 2000 when democracy was re-launched supported by Muslims while opposed by Christians in support of secularity.

Generally by the 1970s and 1980s, both Muslim and Christian faithful in Africa have been affected and partly transformed by modernity. While the transnational contact and knowledge through the media and direct contact among other means have made the Muslims more aware of the bigger Islamic Ummah and the issues that affects the global Islamic community, the religious consciousness of the average Muslim elite in SSA thus often transcends the national consciousness of the states in which he live. The globalization of the African Muslim, especially the movement that had produced the Iranian revolution and the opposition it generated in the West and within Sunni countries in the Middle East put it into contact with its most conservative and radical versions, and have combined to produce a new version of identity with sectarian consciousness in a manner that Christians were to encounter, unlike before different shades of Islam and Muslims. Christians were hardly immune from similar transformation with the increasing spread of Pentecostals so that on the whole, both Muslims and Christians have come to differ as individuals, communities and citizens to the extent that their spiritual commitment, knowledge about their separate faiths and sense of rapprochement to each other were badly affected. With this, neither Muslims nor Christians have one broad strategy towards one another as a single bloc so that relations between the two have remained tense and intolerant.

On the side of African Muslims, the growing oil wealth in the Middle East among both the Sunni and Shiite countries had intensified competition for winning Muslim support through massive financial aids, scholarship and construction of madrassa for the teaching and propagation of sectarian ideals and indoctrination. Supported by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the new Islamic Republic of Iran, it led to the activities of new Salafist era as well as Shiism in SSA respectively. While the new Salafist era and Shiism in the 1970s and 1980s raised the question about restructured politics around the Muslim world, in SSA, it was in solving economic challenges characterized by corruption. This was the era in SSA when a new crop of Ulama emerged, challenging the traditional ones in their conservative interpretation of Islam, mostly restricted to the traditional theology based on the Maliki School of jurisprudence. Their sojourn to the Middle East, interaction with non-African ulama, contact to new Islamic literature and interpretation all changed their background of African Islam. The growing concern over Arab-Israel relations in relation to series of defeats and the dubious stands of the Western powers on the matter resonates the widespread medieval theology of Ibn Tamiyyah and were to have much influence on modern radical Islamist movement.
Ibn Taymiyya, it should be noted, became such a powerful force among modern reformers and Islamic vigilantes today because he too lived during the age of profound spiritual and political upheaval. In 1258, the Abbasid Caliphate was defeated by the invading Mongol armies, so that the great city of Baghdad fall to the invaders, which to most Muslims at that time was simply unbelievable that required not only innovative but clever thinking to explain what happened and the way out. This provided Ibn Taymiyya the opportunity to come up with his literal interpretation of religious documents and whose writings were as distressing to the political establishments then as the activities of those who have taken his teachings and interpretations, including both the grounded and freelance scholars, do presently. Though the Mongols were to convert to Islam later, yet retaining the Yasa codes of law established by Genghis Khan instead of the Shari’a, Ibn Taymiyya had pronounced a fatwa of violent revolution against their political leadership. The relationship of this kind of teaching with what brought the Wahabbi revolution leading to the emergence of the modern Saudi Arabia and its monarchy is a good example of how to validate the attack against alleged political authority of political leaders (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) who have failed both in their personal conduct and political positions to uphold correct Islamic teachings. In this regard, that it is the duty of true Muslims to revolt against leaders as a means to help establishing a proper Islamic state had taken extremism in Islam beyond what many other Muslims and non-Muslims would accept. The dominant tradition of Ibn Taymiyya and salafiyya has to do with getting Islam back to the roots and restoring its traditional beliefs and practices.

That salafism is conservative and much strict thrives on the economic hardship endured by most Muslims in the Middle East is a fact. This is where religious leaders tell followers that such hardships were unknown among earliest Muslims largely because the basic principles of wealth distribution were then upheld. Ironically, while the Middle East have among the riches people who have amassed staggering amount of wealth because of the petro-dollars, most Muslims see little of this wealth, as the dichotomy between the rich and poor grows, in spite the modernization of infrastructure in their countries. This made salafism either purist, politicized and jihadi to not only command widespread appeal for a return to original Islamic practices, but in SSA, Muslims came to realize that the societies they live have not only become corrupt and degenerate, but that true justice and peace would only return with a full and rigid implementation of Islamic Shari’a. The intolerance exhibited by the proponents and opponents of this in SSA had taken the dimension it were at the international level differently, yet domesticking some aspects to jeopardize peace and interfaith relations and making parts of SSA theaters of terror as in the case of al-Shabab and Boko Haram as well as the unfolding tragic conflicts between Christians and Muslims in the Central African Republic.
Islam: Democracy, Shari’a and Interfaith Discourse in a Plural SSA

We have noted already that the socio-economic and political environments were what always informed the demand for the implementation of the Shari’a by Muslims. The call varies from one SSA country and another whether it should be on regional or national levels, a call that is seen as nothing but a ‘search for a voice, a search for justice and a search for identity’ over and against the colonial legacy\textsuperscript{21}, and the vagaries of modernity in its political, social, cultural and ethical contexts. But particularly the demand was necessary because the mode and manner in which and the extent to which shari’a had been applied to African societies since colonial rule so far, ‘undermine or contradict the very principle of justice, consultation, Islamic universalism, scripturalism, spiritual egalitarianism and rational systematization of social life of the Muslim, which the Shari’a espouses. Sudan and Nigeria are two SSA countries with well-known cases where shari’a has been introduced and where for quite some time now there has been ongoing debate about shari’a in a democratic setting and its implications to people of other faiths.\textsuperscript{22}

In discussing Islam and democracy, we must appreciate the fact that there are varying positions among both Muslims and non-Muslim scholars on the matter. We must equally appreciate that there are different faces of Islam in Africa and the entire Muslim world with different sects and different schools of thought within each sect: The Shites differ from Sunnis, which differ from Ismaelis, Sufis, Alawis, etc... Second, there are significant cultural and geographical differences between Arab and non-Arab, Gulf, non-Gulf Muslims, Middle Eastern, East Asian, or African Muslims. In fact, there are different scholars within one school of thought or within one sect will come to two different conclusions about the Islamic political tradition. This is why for “many writers there is no such thing as a single Islamic political tradition, and they suggest that

\textsuperscript{21} R. Ammah “Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa” Islam and Christian Relations, 18/2, 2007 Pp145-146.

within the varying Islamic traditions there were ample intellectual resources for those seeking to promote democratic governance.\textsuperscript{23}

In understanding Islam’s stance on democracy, we need to ask what constitutes a democratic system and, is the concept of democracy dichotomous or graded. In other words, are political systems either democratic or non-democratic, or are they either more democratic or less democratic? On the first question, different scholars and theorists present different criteria for what constitutes a democratic system. In this presentation, the focus will be on the essence rather than on a procedural, minimalist definition of a democracy, which presumes “fully contested elections with full suffrage and the absence of massive fraud, combined with effective guarantees of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly, and association.”\textsuperscript{24} Regarding the second question, Giovanni Sartori has argued that there is a fine line between what is a democratic system and what is not, and that is where the concept of democracy is dichotomous. But he also suggests that once a country is deemed democratic, a graded evaluation of its level of democracy can be applied to it. “Thus, what makes democracy possible should not be mixed up with what makes democracy more democratic.”\textsuperscript{25}

Following this logic therefore, two procedures must take place when evaluating democratic development in any region around the world: Is that region democratic based on a procedural, minimalist definition of democracy and if it is democratic, how democratic is it? However, our argument here is that though liberal democracy by origin is a product of the West and shaped by a thousand years of European history and culture whose heritage is derived from Judeo-Christian religion and ethics, as well as Greco-Roman statecraft and law does not mean when transplanted in other cultural tradition and civilization it cannot adapt and survive. What is important is that Islam has its own sets of norms, values and ideals, which emphasizes the equality of all people, accountability of leaders to community, respect of diversity in opinion and choices, other faiths and rule of law. So regardless of procedure than in essence of democracy, if any form of government would take these values away, Islam will not be compatible with it. Being anti-US and anti-West should not be confused by being anti-democracy and that whoever may feel autocracy is intrinsic to the Muslim system has taken an unduly extreme mythical position beyond what facts and reason would permit. The Islamic concept of \textit{shura}, which entails consultation and participation is evidently valued in Islam and


democracy alike as enshrined in the Qur’an thus: “And those who answer the call of their Lord and establish worship, and whose affairs are a matter of counsel...”

If anybody body argues that democracy is incompatible with Islam, it is when democracy is painted as a whole and exclusive property of the West with its procedure rather than essence. This is where Muslims become apprehensive especially when linked with years of Western cultural imperialism. Instead, democracy to Muslims only makes a good sense when we talk of it as a representative and consultative government that has the interest and will to advance their interests in issues around human essence and essence of living such as health care, education, economics, labour, national security, socialization and rights, which are never absolute anyway. Islam does not accept democracy that goes with the baggage of western institutions and liberal rights, especially the right to be weird in the form of homosexuality that graduates to same sex marriage etc, but an idea of citizenry participating in government.

Further to this, it becomes obvious that in Islam liberal rights are never absolute for which reason many in the West are being influenced into a position espoused by the ‘clash of civilizations’, which argues that Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power,” has an undemocratic tradition and Islam and democracy are incompatible, which leads Muslims to reject western values, including democracy, which leaves them disadvantaged and controlled by an authoritarian regime. For this reason, “democratic prospects in Muslim republics are bleak.” Perhaps it was from this lenses that when Fukuyama argues that there does seem to be something about Islam, or at least the fundamentalist version of Islam that have been dominant in recent years, that makes Muslim societies particularly resistant to modernity, it

26 Q42:38. Imam Mohammad Al-Shiraz, drawing from this holy verse, says shura is of two kinds: the first is the Muslim governor’s consultation of the Muslims about affairs concerning them, and the second is the consultation among Muslims about how to administer their affairs. Therefore, it is a duty on both the governor and the governed. See Imam Mohammad Al-Shiraz, Shura in Islam, (Qum, Iran: 1999), http://www.alshirazi.com/compilations/patg/alshora/fehres.htm (accessed October 22, 2015).


28 Note that it is easy to point out that of the forty six sovereign states that make up the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), only Turkey can be described as democracy, while majority have never tried it, others have tried it and failed and few others have of recent experimented with the idea of sharing, without relinquishing power, which makes them undemocratic.

29 Huntington P. 193
was criticized as a mere cultural essentialist explanation to the absence of democracy from most of Muslim countries.\textsuperscript{30}

Except perhaps Huntington and Fukuyama, both who failed to understand Islam, many other writers have understood that Islam cannot be referred to as one form, considering that that all religious traditions were multi-vocal. In this sense, the ideal, authentic religion has its own political doctrine, but the Islam that is practiced by Muslims around the world may not necessarily adhere to this authenticity. That must have been why Fred Halliday, argues thus:

To be drawn into an argument about any necessary incompatibility, or for that matter compatibility, between Islam and democracy is to accept precisely the false premise that there is one true, traditionally established 'Islamic' answer to the question, and that this timeless 'Islam' rules social and political practice. There is no such answer and no such 'Islam'.\textsuperscript{31}

That is why in predominantly Muslim countries, views on political system vary from those who would prefer the status quo, be it radical dictatorships or traditional autocracies, depending on the benefits or how they are treated. Similarly foreign powers also differ in their willingness to accept, support or even opposed existing regimes depending on where their interests lay. Some others feel that existing systems are both evil and doomed and that new institutions must be devised and installed. This brings us to say there are two forms of radicals for the latter: those who prefer western style institutions or fundamentalist Arab democrats and those who prefer Islamic institutions based on the \textit{Shari'a}, also refers to as Islamist fundamentalists.\textsuperscript{32}


\textsuperscript{32} The former are in two categories. One is a group that agitates for democracy without being restricted by some intrusive adjective nor nullified by a priori religious imperatives. Such movement of the Arab Spring followed the wave of democratic change that has transformed the governments of many countries in southern Europe and Latin America; a response to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the new affirmation of democratic superiority and victory in the Cold War, which was by no means also as a result of the growing impact of the US democracy and American popular culture in the Islamic States. The latter is made up of a group that sees democracy as un-Islamic but by circumstances, are willing to demand and exploit the opportunities that a self-proclaimed democratic system of its own logic is bound to offer them. Because most of them suffered decades of torture, oppression and imprisonment under secular-minded tyrants, they were willing to abide by peaceful rules of popular democracies by contesting elections, while not making no pretense of their contempt for democratic procedures and principles. Their intention was to ride to power from where to govern Islamic rules and principles. Throughout the history of Islam, it is common that at times of stress, disappointment, anger and frustration, there has been tendency to appease or even appeal to Islamic sentiment for change. This, for many, is even better than forcing them into a violent conspiratorial background.
But in SSA, some Muslims tend to succumb to the temptation of belonging to either, though their circumstances may differ. Those who demand for the Shari’a, it was because democracy provides, in the circumstances, a better means towards attaining the alternative, by demanding to exercise the freedom of religion as a liberal right guarantees by national constitutions and as fundamental human rights as was the case in Nigeria and the Sudan.

Though some of the issues in Nigeria and Sudan were country-specific, the discussion on shari’a by Muslims and Christians have wider context in Africa, not limited to Sudan and Nigeria. Though Muslims would argue that the state and religion are inseparable and therefore Shari’a is only for the Muslims and advocated that it would in no way limits the religious freedom of Christians, a Bishop of the Anglican Communion in Nigeria, Josiah Idowu-Fearon, preferred to see it differently that to the Christians the state has a distinct Christian orientation ‘than one been an extension of the other’. While most of the issues being raised for and against the implementation of the shari’a revolves outside theological contestations but revolves around the rights and privileges of living in plurality, a Ghanaian Muslim activists, Rabiatu Ammah, was of the opinion that in Africa’s plural setting, the shari’a can only offer an acceptable alternative to the present legal system in Africa if it is modernised and contextualised to convince Christians that they have very little to lose and much to gain by its implementation thus:

…it is imperative for fiqh and its teachings on dhimmis to be seen in their proper context. (...) The questions 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. In this way the fears and apprehensions of Christians would be minimized.\textsuperscript{34}

But fundamentally, many Muslims view the call and full implementation of shari’a as a matter of political right as an exercise of civil liberty, which Christians should not be opposed to. The insistence by some Muslims on this without regard to the concern and fears been raised by non-Muslims, especially on the secular nature of the states and national constitutions, tend to equally make them take an extreme position to exacerbate intercommunity conflicts as was the case in Kaduna State in northern Nigeria in the year 2000 that was christened ‘Shari’a conflict’. Anyhow one may look at it, religious radicalisms can hardly be divorced from reactionary posture or, more precisely, disguised forms of socio-political protestation against the ‘fear’ of marginalization and exclusion expressed in anti-modernist and anti-occidental language. For

\textsuperscript{33} J. Idowu-Fearon, “The Shari’a Debate in the Northern Sates of Nigeria and Its Implications for West Africa Sub-Region”, in J. Mbillah & J. Chesworth, (eds), From the Cross to the Crescent, Pp.15-24.  
this, injustice, poverty and social inequality favor the growth of religious radicalism in SSA with lots of implication on interfaith relations and dialogue.

We have noted already that there has always been the tendency to appease or even appeal to religious sentiment whenever people are stressed and excluded in the scheme of things. In SSA, this has been trend because the post-colonial hope on nation-building has been dashed. The colonial background to their formations and transformation into modern nation-states at independence was fragmented; they inherited weak administrative structures as well as disarticulated dependent economies, with inappropriate education and infrastructure; the vision of the new indigenous leaders contradicted Africa’s unique circumstances; heterogeneity became identities difficult to be fusion into social cohesion with sense of belonging and governance through democratic processes, popularity and legitimacy became ethnic based and sectional and decision making processes became affected by such virus. With legitimacy based on flawed premises of exclusion and sectionalism, the struggle amongst sections precipitated military coups and counter-coups, which triggered instability. In these processes limited resources from mono-cultural economies were squandered in that difficult state-making process, while corruption became endemic and coercion became the only means to beat opposition to the fold and because of this, there was the fear to leave office, which resulted in leaders not wanting to relinquish power at all cost. For some Muslims, the only alternative was to implement the Shari’a and hence its demand. On the hand, this provoked opposition from Christians, especially with a growing phenomenon of Pentecostal Christianity whose concern was on religious freedom and the status of the secular nation-states that generated concern over what it seemed as radicalized and dominating Islam that appeared unperturbed with religious pluralism.

Concern over Islamic Radicalism Vs Polemical Pentecostalism

The argument that Islamic terrorism has two global centers of gravity: the Arab Middle East and SSA were contained in a report by Ron Boyd-Macmillan, where violence against Christian as well as official and unofficial restrictions on rights and civil liberties are trampled upon.35 Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa is known for its tolerance and its ability to adapt to religious difference. Its conservative Sufi order that guaranteed peaceful cohabitation of Muslims, Christians and followers of ATRs is being infiltrated by radicals whose intellectual local actors with transnational religious roots are acting as reformers. They view Islam as being corrupted by heterodox practices thereby bringing about a redefinition of social norms in the public sphere and in the region. Terrorist jihadists represent a real menace to peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims, as certain Christian fundamentalists do not hesitate to respond to violence with violence. In fact, where churches and chapels are burnt, mosques equally became

35 See www.worldwatchmonitors.org.
vulnerable to retaliation, resulting in escalated violence. Violent Islamism could also provoke the radicalization of Christian fundamentalists and exacerbate intercommunity conflicts, which many among Islamic scholars too view rather differently and often condemned as un-Islamic.

Throughout SSA, Muslim scholars have come out publicly condemned than commend both Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram when among others they separately and restively attacked the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi Kenya in September 2014 and massacre students in northern Nigerian college to emphasize their opposition to Western education, which they consider a sin. In fact, when Boko Haram protestation transformed to violent insurgency and terrorism, Boko Haram neither spared the Christians nor the Muslims both of who were hunted and killed with impunity. While most Christians would blame Islam and Muslims that Boko Haram was a premeditated arrangement against Christians to forcefully Islamize the country and make it ungovernable to a Christian President, Goodluck Jonathan who succeeded a Muslim President that died in office. On the other hand, not a few Muslim groups and scholars linked the insurrection rather as “criminality in the name of radical Islam.” Some Muslims would link the group as surrogates of predominant southern Christians especially of Ibo extraction being sponsored to dismantle the northern part of the country preparatory to the next civil war, stop Muslims who were comparatively backward in western education from attending schools and becoming the professionals Christians are in the majority in the country and to devastate the economy to continue to make northerners dependant and beggars at a time economic hardship was biting rather harshly. Some would link at the reluctance of the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan to deal with the menace of Boko Haram squarely to the above insinuation as well as the alleged involvement of southerners and the piecemeal killings of prominent northerners as an opportunity given to Ibos who had an upper hand were in control of the country’s armed forces as a gradual retaliation of the civil war that ended in 1970.

What is more, attempts to polarize conflict between Christians and Muslims in SSA are no longer unique to northern Nigeria, known for recurring interreligious violence. Today many African countries are showing signs of vulnerability. Côte d’Ivoire, during the political crisis of the last ten years, narrowly escaped an attempt to use religion to transform a primarily political conflict into a confrontation between the majority Muslim north in support of Alassane Ouattara and the majority Christian south in support of Laurent Gbagbo. Few years ago, Guinea saw a recurrence of inter-ethnic conflicts, which degenerated into inter-religious confrontations between Christians and Muslims, particularly in the region of Nzérékoré in the Guinée forestière region. In the Central African Republic, the short-lived power-grab by the Seleka rebel movement, infiltrated by Chadian and Sudanese Islamists, was accompanied by attacks and systematic pillages of institutions of Christian persuasion, exacerbating tensions between
Christians and Muslims, which the anti-Baleka militias did and doing more than worse in the form of multiple atrocities of genocidal attacks against many innocent Muslim faithful.

For some Muslims, any so-called radicalism to justify violence than peace is both giving Islam a bad name and oxymoronic with a tendency to mutilating one’s faith. That rather than making Islam a source of violence, another name of Islam is peace, which forms the base of its teachings, meant to re-establish the primordial harmony between heaven and earth and between the Creator and the created. Though violence can be committed in the name of Islam, it is neither sanctioned by it nor condonable.\textsuperscript{36} This leads us to the next section on the prospects and possibilities of interfaith dialogue in SSA.

On the other hand, the emergence and rapid growth of African Christianity in the form of Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, remains a concern for Muslim-Christian relations and dialogue. Rather than been detain by its historical antecedent, this pentecostalisation of African Christianity and its antagonism towards Islam and Muslims in Muslim perspective is what we shall espouse here.\textsuperscript{37}

Largely influenced by similar movement in Europe and North America, these churches, with African foundations from campus evangelical and Christian organizations, later taxied to become independent of foreign churches. The young, educated and energetic charismatic leaders that emerged to lead them, acquired large followings from more educated, westernized, professional and middle class urbanized Africans whose new churches or ‘ministries’ exist outside the known denominational structures. Part of their visible features include emotional and enthusiastic services or ‘ministering’, using electronic musical instruments, publishing their tracts, establishing training ministry centers and televangelism to propagate their messages.

Though the African social and political environments of state failure greatly influenced the popularity of these churches, it was yet a Third World phenomenon with less theology than materialism and much spirituality than morality. Since nation building in Africa suffered a serious setback, with the state being rolled back due to endemic economic challenges with devastating prescriptions from the Brettonwood institutions that forced Structural Adjustments


Programmes as panacea, which also came with attendant hardship, the Pentecostal churches never lose the opportunities to make the best of rapid social and economic crunch to exploit popular insecurities in exchange for ‘prosperity gospel’ also known as ‘health and wealth gospel’. This introduced a kind of worst form of capitalism in the guise of Christianity.

The late 1970s and early 1980s, it should be noted, were periods of equally Islamic consciousness in Africa among young and educated people who were prepared to have a break with a traditional Islam in existence in Africa. Traditionally in Africa, the context of Islamization referred to both religious change and the accompanying cultural change that yet allowed for numerous local interpretations of Islam, once the core requirements of the faith were met. But by the 1970s and 1980s, Africa was changing from been passive, merely receiving Islam and not contributing source or active ingredient in the construction of Islam. The need to place Islam on the global map perhaps became necessary. The Islam in Africa Project, with a heavy Nigerian presence is a good example of an attempt through regrouping and identity assertion to integrate SSA Islam into mainstream Islamic world towards a dynamic and united global Ummah that Africa should not be left out. In East Africa, the period was characterized by the Muhadhara, which was a public lecture phenomenon by Muslim scholars, addressing issues to do with Christians and Christianity, where vicious polemics bets describes the scenario. In fact, series of polemic lectures and presentations about Christianity were recorded in audio tapes and videos and lavishly distributed of the South African-based Ahmed Deedat’s debates with Christian evangelists.

The dependency of the new Charismatic and Pentecostal churches on funding support from America and even the ‘Americanization’ of these churches was not only what Paul Gifford described as neo-colonial propagation of American prosperity preachers, but to those ‘new’ African Muslims, by blossoming into a complex varieties, with a more pronounced Euro-American influence and finances America suspected a kind of conspiracy against Islam and Muslims in Africa, which in Nigeria affected interfaith dialogue.

What is worthy of note again is that the regrouping and identity assertion was not limited to Muslims along. Christian Charismatic and Pentacostalism also emerged with group identity to redress an identity. At interpersonal level, Muslims and Pentacostal Christians lived and worked together, but at the official level, relations between the communities were largely characterized by exclusivist, polemical and offensive language. Both the ‘new’ Muslims (not because of conversion) and the ‘Born Again’ Christians (not because they were once dead),

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were disillusioned of the failed nation building in Africa, therefore had to turn to fundamentalist religiosity as an alternative for the society, the type characterized by exclusion and antagonism. For the Muslims, it was antagonism liberal representations and in the demand for Shari’a regardless of religious pluralism and insistence by Christians of secularity and religious freedom. On the Christian side, it was palpable antagonism towards people not of their own religious persuasions. In Nigeria, this led the Pentecostals in demonizing Islamic groups, venturing into the political arena and the media to combat what they perceived as an ‘Islamic Agenda”, leading to counter reaction by Muslims. Though in Ghana relations between Muslims and Christians were less antagonistic and polemical, this was unlike in both Tanzania and Kenya for example, where Pentecostal Christian leaders used uncouth language in official speeches while propagating their brand of Christianity and calling upon the stoppage by all means the spread of Islam in Africa and even been blasphemous by claiming that the revered Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, was once a Christian before he founded Islam. One would better imagine the reaction of an average Muslim to a community of this kind to warrant positive engagement.

In spite all these, dialogue is possible in SSA through increased mutual understanding and good relations; identifying the causes of tension in Christian-Muslim relations; building understanding and confidence to overcome or prevent tensions and breaking down the barriers and stereotypes, which lead to distrust, suspicion and bigotry, which we now turn to.

**The Prospects and Possibilities of Muslim-Christian Dialogue in SSA**

In spite the several efforts being made through dialogue and other form of initiatives to bridge the gap and to lessen the tension between Muslims and Christians, much has not been achieved as it should. This is what is generating the concern on the prospects and possibilities as well as challenges of Muslim-Christian dialogue in SSA. But let’s look at the respectively.

**Interfaith Dialogue and the Global concern over Tolerance and Peace:** The growing polarization between Muslims and Christians has been fuelled by wars, persecution, injustices and by individuals and groups stirring up religious divisions to achieve political or material gain. Global concern over Muslims and Christian tensions and violence and the desire for dialogue is

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being stressed now more than ever before to addressing the issues causing this growing division. This concern is also being focused on SSA as well. In addition to the politico-economic and security impacts of the violence, interfaith dialogue at the international level, which started without much Muslim enthusiasm, is now being accepted to holding the key to religious peace and harmony. Africans do not seem to be excluded in the concern and dialogue.

**Interfaith Dialogue Initiatives filtering down in SSA:** Countries in SSA are not only acknowledging but accepting the global reality of religious diversity and harmony. A review of geography of religious intolerance and violence in SSA shows that Nigeria, Central Republic, Sudan, Somalia and Kenya among others are countries interfaith initiatives are burgeoning and are being facilitated across levels. Today, not only that interfaith dialogue is being anchored by faith-based communities, but also by NGOs and Universities. In fact, governments are responding to the growing concern by initiating, encouraging and even funding inter-religious dialogue activities to ensure increase mutual understanding and good relations; identifying the causes of tension in Christian Muslim relations (more often economic, social or political rather than religious); building understanding and confidence to overcome or prevent tensions and breaking down the barriers and stereotypes, which lead to distrust, suspicion and bigotry. Conferences, meetings, oral and written exchanges and round-table discussions have been taken place in majority of SSA countries. All these have the prospects of succeeding, in spite of the challenges.

**Building on International Dialogue Initiative:** Local Muslim interfaith dialogue organizations and civil societies in SSA have the prospects of building a relationship of deeper dialogue and better mutual understanding with their neighbouring Christian communities on existing international interfaith initiatives and efforts. At the international level, Muslims see Christian institutions such as Catholic Relief Services and Caritas Internationals as natural partners in humanitarian and peace-building efforts with the prospect of partnering with global Muslim humanitarian agencies such as Islamic Relief Worldwide and Muslim Aid based outside Muslim majority countries as well as the OIC Humanitarian Department in SSA where there is the potential for ongoing tensions between Christian and Muslim communities. This provides an excellent base for local Muslim-Christian interfaith dialogue organizations to jointly encourage targeted interfaith actions in both peaceful and conflict areas to be more vocal against increasing anti-Muslim sentiments in Christian majority areas, while leading Muslim scholars will also be expected to come forward with a more pro-active public stand in favor of the well-being of Christian minorities in a Muslim majority areas.

**Globalization and leveraging on media and communication:** New communication and information technology should not be limited in the dissemination of popular culture alone but also the need for religious harmony. The globalization of religion whereby a religious strife in
far distant places are being felt locally, while local religious strife are similarly being felt across the globe coincided with a renewed willingness between Muslims and Christians in SSA to communicate with one another using the media: print, electronic and social. In fact, visual, audio and social media are important instruments to advancing unity, peace and harmony and provide excellent opportunity when used tactfully and carefully for interfaith dialogue and for a “historic reconciliation” between Islam and Christianity in SSA. This will help ameliorate the relationship between Christians and Muslim in the region and to fill the well of mistrust and suspicion that has run deep.

A New Approach to the histories of Christianity and Islam in Africa for shared interest and future: This has some great potential for prospective interfaith relations especially as it has the prospect of impacting positively on young Africans for a shared interest and future as they encounter one another. Many Muslims and Christians perceive Christianity in connection with Europe as a European or “Western” religion, or Islam in connection with the Arabs and their culture. There are lots of prospects when Africans are aware that Christianity and Islam have become part of life and societies in Africa since distinctive African traditions of Christianity and Islam had emerged. It is then they would come to realize that both Christianity and Islam in Africa are “Africanized religions” though originated outside Africa but entered the African continent during the earliest days of their existence, or spread, and have been incorporated within the historical process of the development of African societies. Though the processes of Christian and/or Islamic conversion adapted many different characters to suit many different contexts, yet since the arrival of both religious traditions in Africa, the impact of Christianity and Islam have been of fundamental importance in much of the continent and Christian-Muslim-African encounters and legacies have shaped and still shapes the history of Africa. If emphasis is placed on the long periods of the apparently peaceful encounters between the two faith communities on the continent despite the historical and regional diversities, that is when young Africans will learn from history as well as the riches and promises of a “shared living” to appreciate the primacy of the “dialogue of life”, where Muslim-Christian encounter is not a “Clash of Civilizations,” (to require a dialogue of civilizations that cannot be limited to dialogue among religions or between secular and sacred realms), but where religious plurality and diversity have always been part of the African reality and will remain so in the future.

The African Environment guarantees working and sharing: A popular African saying has it that “Africans are each brother’s keepers”. African Muslims and Christians hardly live exclusively of one another, they rather live in environments they work and share their daily lives, which provide opportunities for engagements and interreligious interactions. The African post-independence setting provided new political and social settings of a shared common state and working together toward nation building and patriotism that were mismanaged over the years by rapacious political elites. Yet, it is in SSA that marriages, lineages, kinship,
language/ethnicity, markets, membership of political parties, educational institutions, trade unions, professional associations, civil society organizations and hospitals as well as other forms of social and cultural life are shared. These, if used wisely, can serve as useful bridges where better interreligious relations between Muslims and Christians will flourish. The environments are such that if managed carefully and sincerely, would provide the potential to radically promote tolerance and respect for one another for inter-faith harmony and peaceful co-existence.

**The Challenges of Muslim-Christian Dialogue in SSA**

Though the prospects and possibilities exist for a harmonious and rewarding interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians, this can certainly not be made on the bed of roses. Interreligious dialogue is not a remote preparation for conversion to another religion but rather an expression of respect for the other; it also is about making people better human beings. While it leads to better appreciation of one’s religious commitments, mutual understanding of believers and to active engagement in the service of “brothers and sisters”, engagement in interreligious dialogue leads to a better horizontal relationship with others, which in SSA is facing numerous challenges that must be overcome. Few in a Muslim view are as follows:

**Unwillingness to Understand Islam:** That there is a clash of interest between Christians and Muslims in this twenty first century as it were since the sixth century is a fact. Many view Islam as a violent and threatening religion. Many Christians traced world events, which conspired to place Islam and Christianity in a conflicting relationship to the founder of Islam, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and view violence as a dominant culture in Islam and therefore the greatest danger for Christendom and to its successor the Western world. A set of notions was formed and propagated from which most Christians would have to choose that informs their personal opinion about Islam and Muslims. Many Christians view the claim of Islam as a peaceful as disingenuous and would not accept the majority view of Muslims that the few terrorists who commit violence in its name are deviants from moral fringes outside the mainstream of Islam incapable of assimilating the virtuous teachings of peace. This is what is being presented as Islam and Islamic in uncomplimentary terms and image, critically disposed to a negative tradition with attendant anti-Islamic stereotypes. This is not mere ignorance but unwillingness to see Islam in positive terms so that a polemical approach to demonize Islam has become a commonplace without deserving any sense of cultural accommodation. Shari’a and jihad have become scary words in the ears of most Christians. There has been no balanced approach by Christians to understand both terms and concepts as Islam has it or employing them for their true meanings, so that the two terms are distorted and given a ‘Christian’ than Islamic meanings. Shari’a simply means “legal reasoning” or even “canonical law” and the Qur’an refers
to jihad in twenty four verses, most of which emphasizes the spiritual and non-violent manifestations of struggle in the way to please God.

**Endemic Islamophobia:** Since 9/11 portraying Islam in negative light has become a disingenuous strategy of the West and acquiesced by a culture of silence or even complacency in Christendom. Islamophobia has been generically been seen as an exaggerated fear, hatred and hostility towards Islam and Muslims, perpetuated by negative stereotypes, which results more often in open and discreet discrimination, marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream social, political and civic life.⁴⁴ Hardly do most Christians agrees that Islam does not support such things as terrorism, human rights infractions and gender bias among others. For this, most Muslims are being forced to view those Western or Westernized African Christians and liberal journalists, who spout that Islam is a noble religion of peace as mere parroting deception. Lots of fortunes are being viewed not by few Muslims to denigrate Islam, not accept its peaceful nature and teachings, but as a religion of bloodletting and world domination, which Christians must resist at all cost. It is possible to infer that there are segments of Muslims as do Christians, who share difficult concepts of both religions, even ignorant of their nature and teachings, so that both Islam and Christianity have people at both sides of the spectrum struggling within and without their belief system respectively, a major scenario that renders interfaith dialogue problematic.

**The Challenges of American Popular Culture:** Truly, America is not known to have exercised any imperial authority over Muslim societies as did European powers during the colonial period. For this America did not develop the kind of imperial attitude that colored and still colors human relations between the ex-colonial powers as Britain and France and their former colonial possessions and peoples. Yet, American liberalism and popular culture have penetrated deeply and widely into Muslim societies across the globe. Its assimilative power and attractions not only challenge the claim of Islamic cultural superiority, but has exposed the inferiority of Muslims material power all of which became objects of fear and hatred especially among self-proclaimed custodians of pristine, authentic form of Islam. In this regard, it remains a fact that American popular culture appears a deadlier threat to the old values they hold there and would want to preserve and even enforce. The same sex marriage, which a section of Americans hold so dearly, earned America such appellation as “the great Satan” the Qur’an describes as mischievous, a deceiver and adversary, enjoins Muslims to constantly seek refuge from. (Q An Nas 1-5 ). Most Christians who opposed any Muslim positions on most issues expressing dislike of American attitude, as unchristian as they may appear, always succeed in making most

Muslims enraged to appear as if Christians were in active or complicit support of such American “Satanic” popular cultural practices. By this, interfaith dialogue becomes a challenge between Muslims on one hand and Christians supportive of such “Satanic” tendencies on the other.

**Clash of Provocation by the West:** It is not only the Arab and Muslim world that are witnessing a resurgence of religious intolerance; in fact, the Atlantic is no barrier for intolerance. Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, Muslims all over the world have been demonized in the media and in the West, targeted by security agencies and the police who spy on Muslim civil society groups that if it remained unchecked, may likely inspire a homegrown terrorism. And in spite the declaration by the American far right supporters as being “non-religious”, religion plays a crucial part in anti-Islam sentiment in America, a model society for many in the world. The insensitivity of some elements from the West in their mockery insensitive exercise of religious and cultural freedom put to test and most cases trigger some Muslim elements into violent acts in response. In this manner, and on the surface, each side blames or accuses the other for religious hostilities and intolerance. For example, “The Innocence of Muslims” was a bizarre movie trailer that was privately funded, which depicts the revered Prophet Muhammad (SAW) as a fraud, whose violent and sexual acts inspire a religion (Islam) bent on persecuting Christians as well as opposing science and therefore progress. The YouTube video, which ascended from obscurity to incite deadly protests across the Arab and wider Muslims world, offended by its blasphemous depictions of the Prophet and Islam was suspiciously timed to coincide with the anniversary of the September 11 attacks and the Libyan incident when the US ambassador to Libya was killed. But again, just as the indignation was receding, the Charlie Hebdo violence erupted when a French satirical magazine published pictures of the Prophet reignited several protests that were undeniably violent, including Niger Republic that was known for its religious tolerance. The issue is that unless religious and cultural relations in the West are reset, which play in the hands of too many vested interests all too keen to exploit existing prejudices, Muslims-Christian relations in SSA will continue to be influenced by events in the West. Already, we have noted that SSA Muslims and Christians have become more aware of the bigger Islamic Ummah and Christian communities respectively in a manner that religious consciousness and sentiments come to transcend the nations they live to affect their commitment to one another as being determined by events outside their shores.

**The Challenge of Pentecostalism, Mercantile Religiosity and Manipulation of Religion:** We have noted that the Pentecostalisation of African Christianity coincided with the period of similarly new Islamic consciousness that produced ‘new’ Muslims and ‘Born Again’ Christians. The Muslims sees Pentecostalism as conspiratorial, sponsored from outside Africa to combat Islam. It was neither the devotional aspects that antagonizes Muslims: claim of healing, deliverance, dream, vision and even prophecy, depending on materialism than Theology, spirituality than morality that produced personality cult into religion, but polemical stance on
whatever Muslims stood for, including the Shari’a and Islam in Africa. We have noted how nation building failed in SSA and where glaringly the states have failed due to corruption and bad governance. Sadly, religious leaders have failed to their responsibilities due to their rapacious mercantile religiosity. In Nigeria, when late General Sani Abacha was looting the treasury blind as a military dictator, Muslim religious and traditional leaders who pretend to represent Islam, continued to express support for him interpreting texts to suggest that General Abacha was there at God’s pleasure and would even pray for him exchange of favours so that any challenge to his rule was a challenge to God Himself. Many other democratic regimes in Africa have unleashed such bad governance as Zimbabwe such that it has led to conflicts of disturbing proportions of between Muslims and Christians as in the Sudan, Ivory Cost, Nigeria and Central African Republic. It is obvious that no religion has developed immunity from being manipulated and abused. And though violence does not recognize religious and cultural boundaries and can easily find a home in the most sublime and innocuous world religions, they become vulnerable only when they fail to find ways of preventing the use and abuse of force in their names. How religions in SSA can inculcate a consciousness of peace and non-violence in the minds and hearts of their followers is a challenge to fostering interfaith dialogue.

The Challenge of Divine texts with Human interpretation: Generally, religions are understood and thought differently, which human history has well illustrates. We have earlier noted that Islam means unconditional submission to God but what one does with the submission is always a matter of interpretation. It is easy to placate Islam and Christianity as contradictory in proclaiming being peaceful, non-violent and even opposed to violence; but at the same time having traditions in which violence, war and aggression not only exist and permitted, but sanctified and which makes it “holy”. In this manner, violence or war is being equated an act of devotion. This suggests a contradiction between theory (proclamations of peace) and practice (violent behavior), so that again there is a conflict between two important and fundamental aspects of religious theory: one part, which treats peace as holy and another that also sees violence as holy.\(^4^5\) Sadly, insisting that violence is somehow a sanctified act of religious devotion also means that a person can place violence in the name of religion beyond human criticism. We all know that it is only religion that defines what is "sacred" and what is "mundane." By calling something "holy" is to place it on a higher, almost transcendent plane of being a rewarding act, and thus beyond human judgment or criticism. Unlike the Catholics who have the Pope that can claim to speak on behalf of a significant population of Christians and exist as an embodied denomination, there is no ‘embodied’ Islam, where a unified, homogenous and unchanged tradition exists. Islam has a democratized knowledge, preaches, cajoles, enjoins and even recommends a great many deeds, many of which can be found and

debated in texts and traditions of Islam. The five classical school of the Shari’a for example differ significantly in their relationship to both sources and interpretive methods. In this manner, while the texts undoubtedly remain divine, the interpretation of the text is human and therefore fraught with all the human exigencies. If therefore a group from deviant fringes makes argument that a text or tradition is calling for violence, what is meant is their own interpretation of that text or tradition. The challenge this has in interfaith dialogue is that it always provide a leeway for some to interpret texts and traditions irresponsibly to suit certain sectarian, doctrinaire and dogmatic leaning, which majority of Muslims do not share and which not a few in Christendom are willing to understand, perhaps for which reason the concept of “Good Muslim and Bad Muslim” was invented. This irresponsible acts is not only limited to Muslims. For example, on one hand, for whatever reason, some clergies during the Rwandan civil war, lured some people into the church for the purpose of been slaughtered; on the other, in Nigeria, the renegade Boko Haram much as they are being condemned as un-Islamic by mainstream Muslim, their activities remain unchangingly graphic as is also the case with the Christian anti-Baleka in Central African Republic in their engagement with the minority Muslims.

**Conclusion**

We have earlier noted that in spite of the vigorous efforts being made across the divides towards dialogue between Muslims and Christians hardly seems to bring the desirable peace, understanding and harmony it deserves. On the whole, interfaith dialogue, which is also an inter-cultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims, is so important that cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is, in fact, a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians. We appreciate that global concern over Muslims and Christian’s tensions and violence and the desire for dialogue is being stressed now more than ever before to address the issues causing this growing division. The fact that Muslims and Christians make up over 50% of the world's population makes dialogue and cooperation even more imperative. Therefore, there is a sense of urgency, a need to build upon the good relations that we have, and to provide an example of understanding, trust and cooperation that can be followed by Muslims and Christians in SSA and other parts of the world. Dialogue is of great importance as it makes a major contribution in helping to create an integrated and cohesive community at ease with diversity and secure in a sense of common purpose. But are we succeeding? To me, it has been dialogue without communication where people pretend to bury their differences for progress to be archived.

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I have a story for you from my country Nigeria. Two leaders, Sir Ahmadu Bello and Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe who struggled for the country’s independence both headed Regional Governments in the North and South respectively, and had to form a coalition at the central government. They became concerned over the growing tensions between the coalition partners between the Northern People’s Congress led by Bello and the National Council of Nigerian citizens led by Dr Azikiwe. The tension brought into the open divergences between the majority Muslim north and the majority Christian south, almost degenerating into ethno-religious antagonism. In an organized dialogue session to restore some understanding, the republican Dr. Azikiwe was said to have said to Ahmadu Bello, “Let us forget our differences and forge ahead.” But the pragmatic and frank Ahmadu Bello replied, “No, let us understand our differences; it is by understanding our differences that we can build unity in Nigeria”.

At the root of all conflicts, it was noted, is the problem of effective communication. This means we need to explore more creative and more robust means of communication across religions and cultures. Such inter-faith gathering here is perhaps one avenue. The question however is how much communication takes place in such interfaith dialogues in such nice but often closed environments, where like a meeting of in-laws, everybody is eager to be nice to the other? Apart from that, the caliber of people that attend such meetings in Africa and elsewhere are the least of the problem. People conducting interfaith dialogue must ensure that they take into consideration the religious, cultural and ideological peculiarities of the people they are communicating with; otherwise you may be surprised to find out what is being received at the other end. Frank and constant communication breaks down barriers, challenges and stereotypes and builds confidence across the wider society. Dialogues must go beyond mere demonstration of half-hearted handshakes and exchanges among elite groups anchored in conferences and Round Tables, towards the true and frank teachings of Islam and Christianity where real world of love, peace, understanding, co-operation with one another and where human beings are being human should be the basis. People should endeavour to make religion a relationship between the creatures and the creator and among the creatures and not mere ritual acts of spiritual devotion. Though African Muslims and Christians can run fast when they go alone, but cannot go far without walking together. Walking together in peace is what we need in Sub-Saharan Africa between Muslims and Christians.

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47 Ibid. sss