

MANAGING CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN THE
COMMONWEALTH: CHALLENGES FOR AFRICA.

When the cold war ended in 1989, the United States was convinced that it had achieved a moral and an ideological victory over the Soviet Union. It considered that its moral obligation was to husband the rest of the world along the path of western, liberal, democracy nudged on by the invisible hand of the market. World expectation and attention really focused along these lines. The United States took it upon itself to gather together the debris of the dreams of the peoples of the former Soviet Union (*the evil Empire*) after it imploded. Along with other European powers, the United States played a very significant role in helping the newly independent countries to democratise and open up their markets, believing that the world was now going to march to the same drumbeat.

However, as it turned out, most of the prognostications seemed to have gone awfully wrong. Our hopes that we were standing at the portals of the *brave new world* of liberal democracy where all would live in freedom and pursue market economic dreams soon came crashing as ethnic wars broke out in the Balkans. The process of putting life back to these countries consumed the energies of the United States and its European allies right into the end of the millennium. The world had barely welcomed in the new millennium when it was awakened by what was by far the worst single event in recent times: **September 11th, 2001**. The world woke up to the news that the main perpetrator of this evil was one **Osama Bin Laden**. The said Osama Bin Laden it would later be revealed had enjoyed a cosy relationship with the *Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)* of the United States government in the days of the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. We were further told that the said Osama bin Laden was the leader of a terrorist network known as

Al-Qaeda and that they were determined to take the war to the United States of America on their own soil. The world would not be the same again.

In the same way, on the African continent, a stunned world had watched on in total disbelief as the released Mr. Nelson Mandela, hitherto, the world's most prominent prisoner, walked out of the gates of prison to freedom on February 11th, 1990. These were Africa's own treasured mementos from the fallen Berlin Wall. Four years later, the miracle found even greater expression with the freed prisoner becoming the leader of a country which had run the world's most vilified system of oppression, **apartheid**. An ecstatic Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the foremost moral opponent of apartheid baptised his people of South Africa as the *Rainbow People of God!* Africa at last had found its soul just in time to enable the continent negotiate the final turn into the new millennium as many optimists now believed. Then Rwanda came as a rude shock to the continent in particular and the world in general. Overnight, with machetes, knives, bows, arrows and other local weapons, the Hutus allegedly slaughtered approximately 800,000 of their fellow Tutsi countrymen and women in one fell swoop. Despite being a poor reflection of the reality, the world watched this implosion with disbelief, but saw it as the boiling over of the poisoned pot of ethnicity. So, we might ask, why does the world continue to live in such cyclical phases? Why does the bad news appear so quickly to drive out the good news? We are still unable to capture the essence of what is going on because, as Amartya Sen (1998 winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics) has argued: *Modern conflicts that call for analysis in terms of contemporary events and machinations are then interpreted as ancient feuds, real or imagined, that place today's players in pre-ordained roles in an allegedly ancestral play*¹.

¹ Amartya Sen: *Civilisational Imprisonments: How to Misunderstand Everybody else in the World* (The New Republic. June 10, 2002, p28

Post September 11th has cast the world in a new shape altogether and everyone is asking, what exactly is happening? Is it a *clash of civilisations* or a clash of cultural expectations and interpretations of civilisations? If this were to be so, what or whose civilisation would we be talking about? Either way, Mr. George Bush has since cast the conflict in a moral tone as one between *Hell's Devils* and *Heaven's Angels*. Only recently, General Boykin, a senior military officer and right wing Pentecostal Christian extended this Manichean paradigm of the conflict when he stated that he believed *his Jesus* is certain to conquer *Satan, the Muslim god*. What is most important is that either way, Africa now finds itself sucked into a war that it did not really start and has a very limited role to play in. Just as it was before and after colonialism, Africa has found itself caught in the power play of western hegemonies as they struggle for contention and control of resources in and outside their own continents intensify. These interests have always been wrapped in the dubious fig leaf of religion, culture or higher civilisation. And, when the west sneezes in the process, Africa and African citizens find themselves conscripted to fight proxy wars that have very little to do with their realities, wars that they mistakenly associate with religion. The result is that in Africa and Asia, citizens who subscribe to both Islam and Christianity are today experiencing severe strains and difficulties in their relationships. They are subsequently called upon to *Dialogue* and find ways for peaceful coexistence, to borrow the common clichés. It is the struggle for this Dialogue that this paper is concerned with. To do this, I will divide this paper into four sections. Section 1 will try to place the issues before us in a historical context. My intention here is to attempt to examine the problems of Dialogue from an African perspective. Section 2 will take on the issues of the strategies and themes for engaging in this Dialogue. Section 3 will examine these themes against the backdrop of Globalisation or post September 11. Finally, Section 4 will summarise the arguments and identify some of key themes that could be incorporated state policy by way of recommendations.

1: History, Evangelisation and Empire Building:

Even at the best of times, history has always been a very contentious subject. Being largely cast as the footprints of glorious knights in moral shining armour, it is not surprising that this view of history has ignored some realities and preoccupied itself with sanctifying those footprints of the conquerors. In the pages of these histories lie accounts of Africa as *a dark continent*, occupied by soulless creatures and savages in dire need of salvation and civilisation. Whether as colonialists who conquered lands, kingdoms, Empires and subjugated kings or as missionaries who vanquished and exorcised the devil from the souls of the African covered the real motives and thus became the basis for social, political and religious relationships today. They are part of the texture of our various crises and conflicts as a people and in defining our relations with other civilisations. There are still some nagging questions that have refused to go away. I believe that we need to spend more time asking more questions than seeking simple answers to the African condition today. But, I am aware that this is not the essence of this initiative.

I believe that we do not need to rewrite history, but we need to sincerely confront these carefully crafted or distorted accounts of our histories and cultures, accounts that justified colonial excesses, assault on our cultures and still serve as determinants for an unjust economic, social and political relationship. It is this convoluted and distorted view of ourselves and our willingness to unquestionably internalise these skewed views that make conflict along ethnic and religious lines part of our daily national lives across Africa. For example, should we not be interested in finding answers to some questions: How dark was the continent of Africa before the coming of both the missionaries and the colonialists? Assuming that this continent was so dark, how did the gold diggers, fortune seekers and soul seekers from Europe and Arabia find their way into the gold and oil fields of Africa? What were the cultural, social and spiritual histories of Africa that preceded European colonialism? What became of those Empires and kingdoms that created their own civilisations well before European states emerged? What was really at stake in Africa? Were

Christian missionaries seeking to rescue Africa for Christ or expand the hegemonic frontiers of their home countries as some have contended? What accounted for the intensity of conflict between, for example, Protestant and Catholic Missionaries on the one hand or Irish missionaries and British missionaries and colonialists on the other? Indeed, what were the implications of the so-called scramble for Africa and the subsequent partitioning arising from the Berlin Conference of 1885? What were the implications of Africans being parcelled out as *subjects* of Queens and Kings of Europe and what were the implications of non-Catholics being subjects of Protestant Queens or Protestants being subjects of *Queens* or *Kings* who claimed to be Christians and custodians of the faith? And what about Muslims being the subjects of *Christian Kings* and *Queens* whose faith they did not accept? What were the implications of slavery in this relationship?

Historically, Islam preceded Christianity by hundreds of years in different parts of Africa. Before the advent of colonialism, Islam had been the local coloniser in many parts of Africa, though it encountered other civilisations through trade and lived peacefully side by side with local authorities and cultures in such places as the Coastal cities of Eastern Africa and South-Western Nigeria. Unlike Christianity, Islam sometimes used Empire building and conquest to spread the frontiers of its faith and thus consolidate faith and power. This is the story of the Sokoto caliphate in what is now Northern Nigeria. Not so Christianity in many respects. By the time Christianity came to Africa, its appetite for empire had been curtailed by developments in Europe. Thus, Christian missionaries did not seek direct conquests of lands as a means of establishing Christian kingdoms but rather, western Kings and Queens, seeking empire and wealth, used Christianity as an entry-point but, beyond the diamond and mineral fields, they never sought to establish a kingdom for Christ in Africa in the way of the Muslim caliphate. The end of *Christendom* in parts of Europe had seen the expulsion of religion from the state. Yet, when colonialism reared its head in Africa, Christianity paid the price in many respects. Thanks to a distorted view of history,

missionaries were considered *Brothers* and *Sisters* of the colonialists and were tarred with the same brush, but in some parts of Africa such as Nigeria, the post colonial state that emerged ensured that British interests were better protected by connivance with the traditional Muslim ruling classes whose feudal systems approximated British royalty. It is necessary to make these points because right up to today; the sources of our crises can only be better appreciated against the backdrop of these histories. Indeed, right from the beginning, this contradiction preoccupied the thinking of the first generation of the African literary and political elites.

The late Jomo Kenyatta, one of the first generation of leading Pan Africanists and first President of Kenya, cast this predicament in words that have been told and retold by African scholars. I find them rather apt. In his book, *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta, the anthropologist turned politician, told the following story. Known as *The Gentleman of the Jungle*, the story went like this: A man built his house. An elephant came and demanded if he could find a place to shelter his trunk from the rain. The man conceded, but the elephant went on to eject the man from the house. Commotion ensued and the Lion appeared on the scene to find out what was happening. When the lion heard the case, he suggested that a Panel be set up to investigate the matter. The Panel, made up of the *Buffalo*, *Rhinoceros*, *Fox*, and *Hyena* were called in to listen to the case and make recommendations. The Panel decided to take evidence from the Man who had been evicted from his house. Unfortunately, in the process of hearing the man's evidence, the animals in the Panel decided that it was better to save time so the case was struck out on the grounds that the man had not confined himself to the facts of the case and there were inconsistencies in his account. The animals retired to the house of the Elephant for a meal and also to write their final Report and make recommendations. After the meal, they then delivered their judgement: *In our minds, you tried to make a case, but it lacked merit. However, in sympathy, we give you another space to build yourself a new house.* Fearing the animals and some repercussion, the man did not appeal but quietly went ahead to put up another building. He had barely finished building when

the Rhinoceros moved in. The charade about justice and a Panel continued with the same judgement offering him a new piece of land. Convinced of the injustice, the man decided that his new house would have to be the last house he would build. This time, he built a grand house that was better than anything he had ever built. No sooner had he finished than, predictably, all the Kings of the Jungle, Lion, Elephant, Fox, mainly the various members of who sat on the Panels regarding his case, moved into the new house. Each wanted the beautiful house for him. But they soon got involved in a fight as to who would own the house. While they quarrelled and argued inside the house, the man stepped out and set the house on fire, thus burning down all his tormentors, the so called Kings of the jungle! Surveying his burnt house and his oppressors, the man said: *Peace is costly, but it is worth the expense!*²

The fact here is that to many, these stories of historical injustices are a distraction because the common expression is; forget the past and move forward. We are told often that Slavery existed in Africa before and we cannot continue to dwell on the past about which we can do nothing. Colonialism has long ended and Africans should get on with life and not continue to make excuses. We are told to look at the *Asian Tigers* who underwent colonialism, but now, they have picked themselves up. If only African leaders would be less corrupt, manage their resources well, embrace democracy and open markets, reduce ethnic and religious wars and focus on development, all would be well. With so much religion on the continent, Dialogue should be the new catchword, we are told. But, whatever may be the level of our preoccupation with finding peace or using religion as a force of reconciliation, there is an urgent need for us to come to grips with how some very deep historical memories still shape how people see religion, history and politics in a world that has become gradually concerned with power to the exclusion of human welfare.

² Quoted in Chinua Achebe: Home and Exile (Oxford University Press. 2001) p65-7

It is important to note that underlining the crises in the world and in Africa, are the issues of the persistence of injustice in resource management, control, allocation and distribution. Both victims of injustice and the perpetrators of injustice are appealing to the some divine elements as a basis for their claims. There is very little in terms of conviction and divine claims between Osama Bin Laden and President George Bush. Their moral claims to leading a divine cavalry to rout out evil in the world are basically the same as well as the rhetoric they deploy. Today, the world has become far more dangerous. And despite Africa having nothing directly to do with the quarrels between President Bush and the United States on the one hand and oil rich Iraq on the other, Africa has suffered severe collateral damage since the war started. The result is that Dialogue between Islam and Christianity has become much more difficult now than it ever was before.

Africa has now become caught up in the war against terrorism spear headed by the United States of America. But occasionally, by a Freudian slip, we somehow get to know the reasons for this war. From George Bush claiming that *Saddam Hussein tried to kill my father*, Halliburton's scandalous mega dollar contracts on the oil fields of Iraq to the refusal of the United States to allow such *moral rebels* like the Russians or the French a piece of the action in the multi billion dollar reconstruction contracts of Iraq, we now know that the war against terrorism has more than one script. Yet, despite not being on the line of fire, African lives have been lost from Kenya to Nigeria with relations between Christians and Muslims coming under severe strain. The volatility of these relations is better captured in the hundreds of lives that were lost in the Nigerian Muslim city of Kano when an argument over an Osama Bin Laden poster led to a fracas. So, while the United States continues with its mission of empire building and the pursuit of self-interests, the texture of African life is constantly overstretched. It is within this maze that we are asked to find a way to Dialogue between Islam and Christianity in Africa and elsewhere. Against the backdrop of what we have said, and given the moral inconsistencies that becloud America's foreign policies, how might this Dialogue be conducted now that we have all been conscripted to fight

terrorism? These are some of the difficulties. Yet, we must look carefully for some strands in the wind to make Dialogue possible.

2: Ingredients for Dialogue of Religions:

The real issue here is how to answer the questions of the **How** and the **Why** of Dialogue. Who needs Dialogue and why? And, how might this Dialogue be conducted? What issues should Dialogue be concerned with? It seems to me that in Africa, Dialogue among religions has tended to shy away from the very difficult questions and preoccupied itself more with attacking the symptoms rather than the cancer of injustice, which is at the heart of the crisis that Dialogue has been trying to resolve. In the heat of internal crises, various Governments for example are quick to stampede religious leaders by conjuring up such words and themes as *Tolerance, Peace, Harmony, Unity, Coexistence* and other bland words as magic wands to calm frayed nerves. What is more, Dialogue in many African countries has tended to focus on Christian leaders teaming up with Muslim leaders, holding hands and smiling while the cameras click and click around the corridors of the powerful. These pictures are then sent out through the media and they are supposed to send out signals to the effect that if ordinary Christians and Muslims see that their leaders are working together in peace and harmony, they would follow suit. These cycles of Dialogue have been going on in Nigeria for many years and yet, as it is clear, the violence has not relented. If anything, in the last few years, religiously induced violence has claimed thousands of lives in the country. Sadly, neither the religious leaders themselves nor those whose policies generate tension and violence seem prepared to face the real issues of why violence persists in African societies. By and large, in almost all circumstances, instances of so called violence between Christians and Muslims have always been in reaction to certain government policies undertaken by government largely for its own self-interest. Thus, when religious leaders are

shown to be in a cosy relationship with a government that ordinary citizens do not trust, they are merely compounding the issues. Two examples will do here.

Immediately Mr. Frederick Chiluba became president of Zambia, he declared Zambia a *Christian state*. This generated a curious response from a country like Nigeria. On the surface, many of my friends and colleagues were surprised when I insisted that this was a very dangerous gamble. A friend of mine, obviously scandalised by my lack of enthusiasm, praised Mr. Chiluba arguing that, after all, Muslims have always had no qualms in doing the same thing! Well, I said to him, if we object to Muslim politicians doing this in principles, surely, Christian politicians doing the same thing should not make (what is wrong) right simply because they claim to be Christians. I sensed that Mr. Chiluba was merely clutching to the straw and hoping to extend his political mileage. Sadly, three years ago and after serving two terms as President under very dubious circumstances, Mr. Chiluba's political career ended in humiliation, in a manner unbecoming of a Christian presiding over a Christian state. Today, Mr. Chiluba has fought a very bitter and scandalous divorce and is standing trial for stealing state resources!!

Similarly, Nigeria has had its own fair share of similar opportunistic decisions by politicians. The issue of whether or not it is right for a President, Governor or any senior Government official or politician to have a Chapel built in the Seat of Government has generated controversy. I personally do not believe it is necessary because it has serious implications for the future given that all occupants of the place are birds of passage and the structure needs to be insulated from the vagaries of politics and other social norms. My position is that such a structure should be religion neutral to command loyalty of all citizens across the religious divide. The reactions of Christians in Nigeria have been, *It is our turn*, After all, they argue, the Muslims have built mosques in the same premises and the President is a believer. However, with Freemasons and Ifa worshippers now in prominent positions of power in Nigeria and actively in government, we can only await

what structures will be erected next in the State House in future. To my mind, it is these opportunistic and haphazard policies that deepen tensions between believers and finally generate anxieties and tensions between Christians and Muslims. Imagine what will happen when a Muslim President decides he needs a different mosque because his predecessor belongs to a different Muslim faction (*Darika*) or a Catholic Protestant President who decides that all the Catholic statutes and images have to be pulled down because Catholics worship Mary! These are some of the unforeseen problems which those blinded by power do not seem to see now.

Politicians were elected to deliver goods and services to their citizens. Despite this bogus spirituality across the land in many African countries, elections are rigged and citizens lose a sense of moral direction, corruption persists and the social chaos looms, providing ingredients for violence by the hungry citizens (which will then on be said to be crisis between Christians and Muslims!). Over the years, religious violence in Nigeria has been generated not by Christians and Muslims suddenly fighting over the right to build Mosques, Churches or worship. On the contrary, these tensions have been generated as a result of jealousies nursed by the feelings that Governments are taking decisions that favour one religious group against the other. The decision to admit Nigeria into the Organisation of Islamic Conference, OIC in 1986, threw Nigeria into a crisis that lingered on for nearly ten years. The decision to set up a Muslim Pilgrims Board for Muslim begun in the former Northern region and was contested by non-Muslim bureaucrats when it became a national initiative. Today, Nigerian Christians have a Christian Pilgrims Board and all things considered, one aspect of Dialogue has been resolved! Today, Nigeria is perhaps the only country that is wasting millions of dollars in a venture that ordinarily has nothing to do with Government. I do not know of any other country that spends the resources that Nigeria spends on these Pilgrimages. But, having tasted the benefits of the patronage that comes from these initiatives, the Governments and politicians have held on the Pilgrimages as a means of garnering support for political ends. While all this goes on, the business of governance, delivery of services,

ensuring justice and the rule of law, clarifying the moral options for governance become abandoned as religious leaders find themselves jostling for positions and patronage from the governments it is suppose to guide. In the year 2000, the Federal Government of Nigeria set up what it called the *National Reconciliation Committee, NAREC* made up of a gathering of both Christians and Muslim leaders. They have had very little effect in dealing with such issues in Nigeria like the Sharia crisis. Both sides were unable to rise beyond the confines of their religious barricades in the heat of the crisis. The result is that except for the Federal Government, very little is known about what the body is doing. But, while all this goes on, suffering and poverty persist in the land.

During these national self-induced crises, religious leaders are often asked to find suitable Biblical or Koranic injunctions that speak about *Peace, Unity and Harmony or Tolerance*. Some times, these leaders preoccupy themselves with explaining the substance of their belief systems to one another in the name of Dialogue. The idea here is to create the impression that the violence that societies experience can be averted if only Muslims come to a greater understanding and appreciation of what Christians believe in or vice versa. The result again is that more and more literature is generated with Christians and Muslims believing that they are the ones who are not living according to the dictates of their faiths. But the process of generating this literature is itself problematic. For example, who writes the material for this education? Will Christians be expected to water down what they believe regarding the Son-ship of Jesus Christ, since Muslims are most offended by what they consider to be the *heretical* claim that God had a Son? Or will Muslims be expected to come round to appreciating the fact that Jesus was not just one among a chain of prophets but the subject of Prophecy? The reality is that in my personal experience, most people who have tried this line of Dialogue find it an exercise in futility because in the end, it opens up new wounds rather than heal. But more importantly, is it really the case that understanding one another's faith is enough condition for ensuring tolerance among believers? On a secular plane,

can we argue that a condition for peaceful business competition within Car manufacturing companies for example, will be better guaranteed if Ford learns more about the central beliefs and strategies of Toyota Company? Only stringent regulations can regulate their conduct. It is the absence of these regulations that adds to the confusion that we face so constantly.

I have made these points not because I am cynical about Dialogue or do not believe in it. However, it does seem to me that in many respects we run the risk of barking at the wrong tree in the name of Dialogue. In the developing countries of Africa, there is need to first of all understand the circumstances that have led to the crisis that Dialogue has always tried to resolve. If we do this, we shall then be compelled to address the deeper historical questions outside the realm of mere belief systems held by Christians and Muslims. For example, let us take the two most notorious African countries where tensions between Christians and Muslims have persisted with intensity; namely, Nigeria and the Sudan. Both countries were British colonies. In both cases, the British consciously created a North-South dichotomy based on religious and educational discrepancies. In both cases, the South ended up with sometimes-western educated elite trained by missionaries. But in both cases, the British consciously schemed and plotted to hand power over to the Northern Muslim elites rather than the so-called Christians in the South. In both cases, the Muslim ruling classes had fought the British but when defeated, they had tactically aligned with the British to guarantee the survival of their interests and religion. Yet, deep down, they had treated the British with some level of contempt as infidels. In both cases, the British erected walls of separation that sought to protect Islam from incursion by Christian missionaries. Whatever may have been the good intentions, the reality is that post colonial politics has been shaped by the prejudices that were nurtured on both sides over these walls of separation. Time and politics have not successfully bridged these walls. Instead, the political elites on both sides have found solace and comfort in them in moments of political crisis. The so-called labels of the *Muslim North* and the *Christian/Animist South*, popularised by the British,

have become the defining identities of citizens from both sides and today. They define relational perceptions of differences and prejudices. These inherently conflictual cleavages account for the tensions that both Christians and Muslims continue to experience as they continue to see those labels as a basis for justifying the chasm in power and social relations, with each seeing the **Other** in negative terms. Against this background therefore, it is to my mind rather futile for us to continue to speak as if we can conjure up unity when these problems have not been resolved or appreciated. British colonialism lasted for well over 60 years in both countries, and yet today, the British expect ill equipped African states to resolve tensions, crises and walls of prejudices that they built over these years. I am therefore making the case that indeed; there is need for us to rethink what we have always referred to as *religious crises* in former colonies whether they are Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda or Rwanda. This is because in the main, these crises are largely the crises generated by the structural weakness and inefficiency inherent in the post-colonial state. In some cases, the colonial state exacerbated tensions along religious lines as we have indicated above, in other cases even where there were ethnic homogeneity as in Rwanda, the colonial state manufactured ethnic differences to sustain its divide and rule strategies. There are the stark conditions in which we are being stampeded to engage in Dialogue. But, my argument is that although Dialogue is an imperative and therefore not impossible, there is need for us to rethink our histories and experiences not as Muslims or Christians, but primarily as citizens who were collectively violated and need to regain our lost heritage as a people. I therefore propose a two-pronged approach.

First of all, I propose a Dialogue between the state and her citizens and here, I speak of the state as an agent for the delivery of services and good governance to its citizens. Historically, both the colonial and the post-colonial states failed to generate popular support among citizens due to the absence of a platform of legitimacy. The lack of infrastructure and institutions to resolve some of the lingering contradictions of the colonial state such as the monopoly of power by tiny elites

along ethnic or religious lines, lack of transparency and accountability, lack of popular participation and the constant harassment of citizens all have meant that in the main, the State now as then has still not been able to generate the loyalty and support of its citizens. The colonial state was considered oppressive because of people's experiences with hard labour, unjust taxation and racism. In both Sudan and Nigeria, the pro longed periods of military rule (again largely by Northern Muslim military officers) tended to heighten and deepen tensions and also generate resentment between Christians and Muslims. On the surface, Christians in both countries continuously felt marginalised, resented the State and often charged it with pursuing pro Islamic agendas such as the sponsorship of pilgrimages or the building of Mosques for Muslims with state resources. But, as we have tried to argue, in the final analysis, these politicians are interested in the capture and control of power and not religion whether it be Christianity or Islam. Here, the issues of good governance and the state's seeming lack of capacity to fight corruption are beyond the purview of Dialogue since the issues can only be resolved if a state lives by the rule of law. It is therefore futile to think that we can resolve issues of injustice, oppression and corruption by merely encouraging Christians and Muslims leaders to engage in Dialogue. Religion cannot be a force of stability in an unstable state! What is more, those ordinary Muslims and Christians who genuinely feel strongly and deeply convinced about their religious values are the first to detect the moral waywardness of leaders who preach one thing and do another. This has been the experience of ordinary decent Muslims in Sudan or Nigeria in the heat of the Sharia crises in both states. This is what triggers off the moral revulsion that leads some believers to take to the path of violence as a way of expressing righteous indignation against those of their own faith who merely seek to manipulate the religions!

Thus, the only condition around which Dialogue can become a very fruitful exercise is in an environment in which the state takes its sovereignty seriously and begins to address very coherently, the issues of the welfare of its citizens. It is citizenship anchored on the rule of law

and other supporting institutions that offers the only viable platform for meaningful Dialogue. It is the absence of these institutions that has put so much pressure on the religious bodies to mediate in conflicts which the state has generated but which the religious bodies have no mechanisms (such as Courts or Police) to address.

When a state establishes the basis for citizenship, its Police and the Courts can then mediate in conflict. It is against this background that citizens can be brought to justice not as *Christians* or *Muslims* but as Sudanese, Nigerians, South Africans, Liberians and so on who have infringed upon the law. After all, when anyone commits a crime in Europe or America, they face the consequences of the law as citizens, not as Muslims or Christians. It is this lack of an institutional platform erected by a legitimate state that makes it possible for criminals who should be prosecuted for their crimes of murder or arson to challenge the state on the grounds that they are being persecuted because they are *Christians* or *Muslims*. In his comments on this, Taker Amir concluded that: *Co-citizenship is the encounter of persons as equal actors in society and polity who, while influenced by culture and religion and ethnicity, cannot be reduced to the roles assigned to them in the name of communal identities, loyalties and perceived interests*³. In a state of injustice, religion must always continue *asking for trouble* by raising difficult questions for the state to address.

Secondly, there is Dialogue that must include a concerted attempt at re-examining the nature of the issues of the moment; namely, how western interests, right from the period of colonial rule, had nothing to do with the spread of Christianity but the pursuit of secular power, domination and economic opportunities. Indeed, the situation is even worse now that Europe has entered what it calls a *post Christian era* as it struggles to ensure its interests and security. Conflicts generated in Africa now are conflicts around minerals and other resources in developing countries. The

³ Taker Amir: *Issues in Religious Dialogue*: ([www. Islamonline.net](http://www.Islamonline.net))

injustices perpetrated by multinational corporations and their governments on the continent of Africa over the scramble for Diamonds, Gold, Oil and so on goes beyond what Christians and Muslims can be called upon to resolve. It is important to underscore this point because of the asymmetrical power relations between these weak states and a combination of powerful western interests, which are allied with multinational corporations. **Transparency International**, the Bonn based anti corruption organisation has now exploded the myth that corruption is a function of weak states in Africa by compiling a **Bribe Payers' Index**, showing those western countries from where multinational corporations are more prone to give bribes in pursuit of their business in developing countries. The focus of the findings was: *The propensity of companies from 21 leading exporting countries to pay bribes to senior government officials*⁴. Resource generation, management and allocation are moral issues and not the function of mere dry laws and human caprice. Unless anchored on the principles that ensure the care and protection of the weak and the common good of all, nations with resources such as Zaire, Nigeria or Angola will continue to be islands of violence in a sea of massive poverty and squalor.

3: Religion and Dialogue in a Globalised World:

A lot of attention has been given to the positive dimensions of Globalisation and it seems that we are all supposed to be celebrating this new dawn of a world that has further shrunk and made everywhere else just a mouse-click away. Those who celebrated Globalisation created the impression that it was a fall out of the end of the cold war and that indeed, its existence, if properly handled, could actually bring us closer to values of our common humanity. However, if anything, the world is getting increasingly violent and intolerant, while world poverty and inequalities are rising and deepening. There are therefore many central questions, which need to

⁴ Transparency International Report, 2003: *Explanatory Notes and Comparative Tables*. Spain, Germany, France, USA, Japan were just slightly above the average in the rankings!

engage our minds now such as; *What kind of world do we want to live in? What is the future of the United Nations and other international institutions such as the European Union, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in relation to these problems? What are the moral responsibilities of the super powers that continue to define power in naked and material terms without a sense of moral balance?* It is clear that contrary to the assumptions that welcomed the end of the cold war, the new world order of justice and fairness towards all that we much expected has still not yet been born. What is even more threatening are the consequences of the policies of new Empire builders and their impact on developing nations. So far, what separates the challenges of today from those of yesterday lies more in the fact that the tunes have changed, but the message is essentially the same.

The project of Western Empire building is couched now in different but perhaps more palatable idioms. In his book, *The Breaking of Nations*, Robert Cooper, a close adviser to Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, has come to the conclusion that the world is best understood within the context of **Premodern**, **Modern** and **Post-modern** societies. There is very little in the substance of the debate that changes the assumptions of who is on the saddle and who ought to be the horse. The thrust of Mr. Cooper's argument as I understand him is that Europe and the United States live in post-modern societies and they have a responsibility and duty to first of all figure out the threats posed by the pre-modern societies where presumably, life is still in its Hobbsean state being, *nasty, brutish and short*. With pre-modern states characterised by state failure, chaos and anarchy, Mr. Cooper argues that Post-modern societies must ensure that pre-modern chaos does not intrude into their space, never mind that this space that is now being well guarded and fortified owes its wealth and continued strength to the extraction of resources from the pre-modern world! After all, as he says, the Roman Empire collapsed not from the threat of superior

Empires like the Persian Empire, but from the barbarians⁵. He further argues: *We may not be interested in chaos, but chaos is interested in us. In fact, chaos or at least the crime that lives within it, needs the civilised world and preys upon it. At its worst, in the form of terrorism, chaos can become a serious threat to the whole international order. Terrorism represents the privatisation of war, the premodern with teeth*⁶.

Against this background, what should constitute the elements of Dialogue at this level? To be sure, there is enough evidence to suggest that since the role of religion is in severe decline in the west, Dialogue within religions with the same Christian traditions are not a viable option in the eyes of this post-modern bug bear. After all, the European Union has at least for now, rejected recognition of any Christian roots in defining its history and identity as was shown over the debates on its Constitution. Christianity is not about to engage in Dialogue with Paganism, the now dominant religious beliefs that can claim local origins in Europe. There is very little to suggest any urgency in Africa over a quest for Dialogue with Oriental religions with their minimal presence. We are left with a new form of Islam which is demonised as fundamentalism, characterised by tolerance and terrorism as the only variants of religion that pose a real threat world order. Although Africa has suffered collateral damage from America's war with its former collaborators of yesterday, Africa is once again being asked to fight this war in the name of international security.

Clearly, the threat to a new order should be of concern to all citizens of the world. But, do we have a new international community whose principles and policies should be cherished by all and where all are equal? So far, we have the United Nations and the World Court as the only institutions that show our collective commitment to living within some reasonable ground rules.

⁵ Robert Cooper: **The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the 21st Century**
(Atlantic Books. London. 2003) p70

⁶ Robert Cooper: **The Breaking of Nations**, op cit. p77

Now that the United States has decided to place its interests and citizens above the principles of the United Nations and the *International Criminal Court, ICC*, what should other nations do in our collective search for justice and equality? How should the Africa and the world deal with the issues of the inequalities and perceived injustices that have spawned the globe and now account for the perpetration of chaos and disorder about which people like Cooper waxes so lyrically? So far, Osama bin Laden has sought to rally some troops from some parts of Africa, but it is only in relation to his war with the West and the United States. So, how might Africa fit into this war?

First of all, I believe that there is need to rethink more forcefully, the issues surrounding **Globalisation**. There has been more concentration on the economic dimensions of Globalisation to the exclusion of its impact on our collective humanity. Hence, as they say, although Globalisation means freedom of movement, but this freedom is only free for goods and not for human beings. A clear framework for addressing these issues must include the incorporation of the supremacy of the human person over mere economic ideals. Otherwise, the new world would not be better than the old order of Communism with its command structure which undermined the individual human person in favour of the state. Secondly, there is the attendant problem of **Immigrants** and **Asylum Seekers** in European nations. Many western nations are reluctant to tackle head-on the challenges posed by the mass movement of human beings across borders. However, there is need to show the connection between these movements and the international interests that sparked off the internal civil wars leading to these migrations in the first place. From Latin America, Asia to Africa and the Middle East, the movements of human beings to the United States and Europe are sometimes informed by wars externally driven as part of the fallout of the cold war, the struggle for domination and control of resources etc. The reason for the first and second wars against Saddam Hussein's Iraq (1990 and 2003) were Oil then and Oil now. But, they have set off trends which have spawned the deep crises that lie ahead among religions. Under Saddam Hussein, Christians enjoyed some levels of religious liberty. But a post Saddam

Hussein Iraq has now led the same George Bush and his Generals who have called themselves *warriors for Christ* to now align themselves with a faction of Islam that is vehemently anti Christian. Who is going to facilitate the Dialogue between Christians and Shiites in the new Iraq? Thirdly, there is the problem of the deepening **Inequalities** that have now become even more prevalent now than they used to be some fifty or so years ago. Of course, one of the advantages of Globalisation lies in the fact that through the Internet and other sources of instant information despatches such as *Cable News Network, CNN* give us immediate information. Naturally, citizens from different parts of the world feel they also wish to replicate what they see on these screens in their own countries. Thus, when ambitious citizens see life on the other side, they reason, *If the mountain will not come to the Mohammed, Mohammed had better go to the Mountain!* Thus, the flow of human traffic has to be taken as fallout of Globalisation. Dialogue should include how best to protect these vulnerable people many of whom have become victims of human trafficking, the modern day slavery. Fourthly, there seems to be evidence to suggest that amidst all this, the world feels itself torn between the challenges of **Individualism** and the sense of being a **Human family**. The era of the *war of all against all* may be in retreat, but it depends on how much civil society groups, the human rights community and the faith-based communities prepare for this fight for human dignity. The contradictions thrown up by trade agreements such as those encapsulated in the *World Trade Organisation, WTO* raise many troubling moral questions about justice. The crippling policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Paris Club and other lending institutions, continue to have negative impact on poor countries. The existence of the World Court is a testimony that the world wishes to create a common ground for the respect of human rights of all citizens of the world. But it does not help that the United States believes that its citizens are above the principles of that Court! Fifthly, there are still some more burning issues such as the role of religion in redefining the place of **Women** in many of our societies in Africa and elsewhere. There is no doubt that in many developing countries in Africa, religion is being used as a tool of legitimating the tyranny under which women live. There is need

for religion to redefine and re-echo the teachings of scriptures as regards the equality of God's children and the need for the word of God to trump negative cultural norms. Sixthly, is the issue of the status of **Minorities**, especially religious minorities. In many countries today, despite being signatories to various statutes and conventions, there are nations where citizens still do not have their rights on grounds that they constitute ethnic, numerical or religious minorities. Again, as in the case of women, there is need for religion to provide a moral basis for a proper appreciation of the fact that the state's primary obligations are to their weakest members of its society. The quest by ordinary Muslims to live under Sharia law has its own good points and in principle should not pose a problem. However, as we have seen in Nigeria, weak states provide a dangerous platform for political demagogues to play with the fires of religion as a means of consolidating their hold on power. The experience of Nigeria with Sharia law has shown that the hypocrisy of so-called Muslim politicians is perhaps far more dangerous a threat to both religious harmony and democracy. The charade that characterised the trials of the two Muslim women, Safiyya and Amina, who were convicted for adultery by lower Sharia Courts sent out mixed signals as to the efficacy and propriety of the application of Sharia Law even within the Muslim community. Unfortunately, during the Sharia crisis, all sides were left more damaged as far as prospects for Dialogue were concerned. The unnecessary loss of lives is evidence of what could happen when politicians seek to extend their political mileage through the application of religious idioms.

4: Summary and Conclusion:

In this paper, I have tried to address the issues of Dialogue by problematising some of our assumptions about what constitutes Christian-Muslim Dialogue and its projected outcomes. I have done this largely in order to move away from the assumptions that Dialogue is simply about getting Christian and Muslim leaders to come together so as to ensure that religion becomes a

means to achieving peace. This goal may be desirable, but it is an insufficient means for explaining the difficult issues that constantly cause the breakdown of our moral universe by way of open conflict in weak states. I have tried to argue that there is need for us to come to a proper understanding and re-reading of our colonial histories and the negative impact of this legacy on our polities. I argue that the sources of conflict in and among many religions in former colonies go back to deep-seated historical experiences, some of which were contrived by the colonial regime to strengthen its hold and control. Thus, I have tried to show that it is not enough to merely seek to learn about one another's religions as many people have always argued. I have argued that the absence of strong policy frameworks within new states for guaranteeing the efficient domestic delivery of the fruits of good governance make Dialogue a futile exercise since a hungry man remains an angry man. There is no doubt that religious education is very important and can lay a foundation for addressing the problems of statecraft and the place of religion in society. As Professor Kayode Makinde of the Babcock University in Nigeria has noted: *While the visible nation's bankruptcy is such that worries even the a-religious secular minded citizens, there is still a general concern expressed at the idea of renewal and national rebirth mid-wifed by religious education. Religious education should serve as the catalyst of moral regeneration and integration*⁷.

A poor reading of history by some Muslim scholars in relation to African history has tended to create the impression that *western colonialism* was synonymous with *missionary evangelism*. Despite the overlapping interests, the issues are far more complex, but these prejudices persist. The result is that even some of the best scholars such as the renowned Professor Ali Mazrui,

⁷ JA Kayode Makinde: *Trends and Tensions in Religious Indoctrination and Education: Babcock University as a Case Study*. Paper presented at a National Workshop on Religious Pluralism and Democratic Governance in Nigeria, Centre for Research and Documentation, July 27-8th, 2001) p6

continue to mistakenly use the words **West** and **Christianity** synonymously. Consequently, these Muslims treat Christians in Africa as if they are repositories of western interests, thus beclouding our ability to realise that in the eyes of the same western nations, we are never treated separately neither do Americans, Germans or the French speak of themselves a French, American or German *Christians*. Rather, state interests are paramount and various peoples with their religious or cultural traditions are held together by the mesh of Citizenship which then becomes the basis for their claiming their rights and privileges from the state. The absence of a sense of citizenship against the backdrop of the failure of institutions in Africa means that ordinary people continue to negotiate with the state as *Muslims* or *Christians*, *Hutu* or *Tutsis*, thus making conflict, tension and violence inevitable. Under these circumstances, religion and religious leaders cannot be summoned to mediate in conflicts that are the result of such deep-seated state failure.

It is also important to note that conflict in African societies has been engendered more by the universal claims of Christianity and Islam than the failure of its human agents. These universal claims contrast with the non conflictual nature of African traditional religions, which did not seek to evangelise across cultures. Professor Chinua Achebe tells a story that best explains this and can be replicated by many communities across the continent of Africa. As the story goes, the people of **Ogidi** (where Achebe comes from) claimed that a certain tribe migrated and finally settled among them. These strangers were welcomed and given a place to settle by the people of Ogidi. But, after settling down, the strangers made a request that seemed most strange to their hosts: they expressed the wish to be shown how to worship the local gods of the people of Ogidi apparently as evidence of their loyalty and wish to become fully integrated into their new community. Although the people of Ogidi found this irrational and incomprehensible, they reacted with pity instead. They gave their guests two gods but they insisted that these new gods must never be called **Udo** (the name of the official Ogidi god). These new gods were to be given names that denoted that they were subordinates and only the son and daughter of **Udo**. In reviewing this

story, Professor Achebe concluded: *Surely, such a people cannot have any notion of the psychology of religious imperialism. And that innocence would have placed them at a great disadvantage later when they came to deal with European evangelism. Perhaps the audacity of some stranger wandering thousands of miles from his home to tell them they were worshipping false gods may have left them open mouthed in amazement*⁸.

Finally, despite the difficulties enumerated above, I believe there are prospects for Dialogue among religions in Africa. However, it must never be forgotten that Christians or Muslims, Animists or Atheists are primarily citizens of nation –states. It is the duty and responsibility of the state to create the Constitutional basis delineating the role and place of religion. Where countries have weak constitutional basis for corporate existence and ambiguous definition of the role and place of religion, there can be problems. In Africa, post independence states were caught up with either civil wars or military dictatorships. The post-colonial elite merely inherited the same colonial states and went ahead to re-enact the same contradictions that had guided relations between citizens and state. After independence, these countries dissipated their energies as conscripted soldiers in the barren cold war which had nothing to do with the interests of Africa. In the process, the continent’s history was marked by civil wars, military and civilian dictatorships. Now after 50 years of the cold war, except for its minerals and oil resources, both sides in the cold war have deserted Africa. Indeed, even the new states of the former Soviet Union who were the enemy yesterday, now all enjoy greater support from the European Union and the United States, their new allies. Western reaction to the Balkan wars and the reaction to Rwanda testify to this. However, as the continent struggles to climb out of the years of military repression, it requires to lay minimum conditions for relevance in this new phase of its history.

⁸ Chinua Achebe: Home and Exile, op cit p12-3

It is therefore gratifying to note that more and more African countries are embracing democracy, thus, creating the necessary condition for cross cutting cleavages beyond regions, ethnicity and religion as basis for political party affiliations. This development will take the pressure away from the religious groups as politics offers a new platform and basis for representation. The role of religious bodies in a democracy is a completely different one. But we must note that Democracy by itself is a necessary but an insufficient precondition for any form of Dialogue among peoples, nor is it a guarantee for a just state. Rwanda happened under a democracy. Thus, the role of the religious bodies is to serve as watchdogs for the **Common good**. However, despite its weaknesses, democracy lays a condition for reducing conflict and ensuring the delivery of services. Conflicts are here to stay with us in the world. The end of the cold war has only changed the context of conflict. However, as they say, *democracies do not go to war*, because democratic societies provide a haven for the pursuit of individual, communal and national growth. It is the absence of these firm roots that make many seemingly ordinary arguments in Africa boil over leading violence in the name of religion or ethnicity. When frustration and sentiments gestate over a long period of time in an undemocratic environment of poverty, the slightest spark can cause havoc. For example, the crisis over the application of Islamic Law or the hosting of **Miss World** in Nigeria claimed so many lives and led to massive destruction of properties. These occurred when a faltering democracy was struggling with its faltering steps out of the dungeon of pro-longed military rule. At the heart of it all was the crisis of powerlessness felt by a people who, rightly or wrongly, felt threatened by the suffocating fumes of the a world that was spinning out of their control. Some times, the issues of Dialogue could threaten to divide a society on the short term. But whether we are negotiating our differences or points of agreement over what may seem to be Religious rights, Minority or Women rights, it is only a democratic environment, no matter how imperfect that offers us a *terra firma* on which to get started. We must seek to defend democracy despite its imperfections while struggling to tailor its ideals to suit our peculiar collective norms. Democracy was never mean to be a one size-fits-all dress for all, nor should its claims be conceived of as being cast in stone. Its ideals remain contested terrains. Navigating around them is what politics is about. Religion offers the lubricant that enables the machine of state to move smoothly. Thank you for your kind attention. **Draft Text of the Lead Paper presented by Fr Matthew Hassan KUKAH (Kennedy School of Government , Harvard University, Boston) at the International Conference on Christian-Muslim Relations in Commonwealth at the University of Melbourne, Australia**
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