

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN GHANA: A MODEL FOR WORLD DIALOGUE AND PEACE

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Abstract

The relations between Christians and Muslims has been a shaky one for centuries. Islam and Christianity are locked up in competing truth claims that has often led its adherents to resort to force to drive home the truth of their claims. In all the continents of the world, wars have been fought between the adherents of these traditions, which curiously are both descended from Abraham. Indeed that is why they are called the Abrahamic faiths. The events of September 11 2001 in the United States have further deepened the suspicion between adherents of these two faiths. In the West African country of Nigeria, clashes between Christians and Muslims have become a yearly ritual. Conferences are organised all year round in every part of the world in the name of Muslim-Christian dialogue all in an effort to ensure lasting peace between these faiths. These conferences have hardly yielded their desired results. In Ghana however, Christians and Muslims have lived in absolute peace since the introduction of Christianity and Islam in the fifteenth century. This paper explores Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana and specifically examines why Muslims and Christians have lived in peace for centuries now. The paper concludes that it is the “dialogue of life” that will ensure peace between these two faiths rather than conference meetings and half-hearted handshakes. There are great tensions between and within nations. Religion has often exacerbated these conflicts and tensions rather than ameliorate them. Christians and Muslims constitute nearly half of the population of the

world. Therefore whether or not the people of these faiths live together in peace and harmony has serious implications for world peace. In most parts of the world, Muslims and Christians have been at each other's throat. In the West African nation of Nigeria for example, conflict between Christians and Muslims has become a yearly ritual with its attendant loss of lives and property.

Introduction

The world has seen violent conflicts for several centuries and witnessed two world wars. Ever since the end of the Second World War, the world seems to have resolved never to allow itself to slip ever again into the abyss of war. However, in spite of the best efforts of the United Nations to prevent conflict in the world and promote peace and dialogue, a number of nations are still plagued by conflicts and wars. It must however be noted that the United Nations itself has often been criticised as the reason why conflict continues to persist between the Christian world and the Muslim world.

Critics of the United Nations allude to the hegemony of the so-called permanent members of the United Nations security council, their continued ability to veto the decisions of the majority members of the United Nations and the flagrant violation of its resolutions by Israel and other countries that have a close affinity to America as the reason why conflicts continue to persist.

Many of these conflicts are either between Christians and Muslims, or have Christian-Muslim undertone. Often times, adherents of these faiths promote conflict in the name of these faiths. Ever since the events of September 11 2001, many Christians have tended to view Islam and, for that matter, Muslims with suspicion. According to John Esposito, historical dynamics have “often found the two communities in competition, and locked at times in deadly combat, for power, land, and souls.”¹

Both Christianity and Islam claim to be the ultimate truths that hold the key to the salvation of human kind. Both religious traditions also seek to convert people of other faiths. Indeed Christianity and Islam both assert that their values hold the key to the happiness of human kind. “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me.”(John 14:7). Even though some scholars have sought to put other interpretations to this biblical verse, the general opinion of Christians is

that no one will attain salvation both in this world and in the hereafter, except one is a Christian. The Qur'an is even more emphatic. "This day have I completed my favor upon you and chosen for you Islam as your religion."(Q:5:3). Therefore, "the religion with Allah is Islam (Q:3:19) and "who so desires any other religion, other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and in the Hereafter he will be among the losers." (Q:3:85)

Thus, adherents of these two faiths have often resorted to arms to settle their differences where their values have clashed; each believing that their values have divine sanction. According to the former U.S Attorney General, John Ashcroft, U.S freedoms are "not the grant of any government or document, but...our endowment from God."²

Indeed even where a conflict is apparently devoid of any religious flavor, adherents of these faiths have tended to give such conflicts a religious meaning. Thus, when American President George Bush (jnr) described his war on terrorism as a crusade, it immediately gave the war on terror a religious colouring and re-echoed the old rivalries between Christianity and Islam. According to Samuel Huntington,

the underlying problem for the west is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture...The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the U.S Department of Defense. It is the West, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture...These are the basic ingredients that fuel conflict between Islam and the West.³

Acknowledging the volatility of the relationship between Christians and Muslims, various conferences have been organised between adherents of these faiths since the late 1950s as a way of promoting dialogue and peaceful co-existence between them. It seems that very little has been achieved from these conferences by way of peace and co-operation between the adherents. Indeed these inter-faith conferences have become what Ali Mazrui calls "a dialogue of the deaf." Using the tensions between Iran and America as a prototype, Ali Mazrui describes the communication between these faiths in a very graphic way that requires quoting in full.

It was as if American culture had switched on the amplifiers and loudspeakers towards Iran while Uncle Sam switched off his own hearing aid and turned a deaf ear to Islam. Iran was

becoming Americanised and Westernised, but under protest. Uncle Sam did not hear the protest until it was too late.⁴

It is precisely as a result of this dialogue of the deaf that Muslim-Christian conflicts continue to rage in most parts of the world and in Africa in particular in spite of the existence of the Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) since 1959.

In Ghana however, Muslims and Christians seem to have found ingenious ways of living together in peace and harmony. This paper explores the dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana and how that can be a model for the rest of the world in promoting dialogue and peaceful co-existence not just among Christians and Muslims, but among people of different faiths. This paper is therefore in the main, exploratory. It examines the everyday life of ordinary Christians and Muslims and shows how these lifestyles have helped to maintain peace between the adherents of these two faiths for centuries.

The lives of Christians and Muslims have been examined in three major areas of life: everyday life in the communities, politics and education. Under everyday life, the home, churches and mosques and the rituals associated with these sites have been examined. This is because, the home (family), the church and the mosque are powerful agents of socialisation and most of the habits and character traits that we form are influenced by the doctrines and dogma that we imbibe from these institutions.

The politics of a nation is a major indicator of how well that nation is organised or perhaps disorganised. Besides, Aristotle's statement that man is by nature a political animal⁵ shows that we all operate within a political framework and how well that framework is organised can have serious implications for the peace of the nation. The President of the United States of America, Barack Obama during his visit to Ghana in 2009, described the purpose of his visit as "lifting up successful (political) models and highlighting the effective governance that they have in place."⁶

Finally, this paper examines the role of Ghana's educational curriculum in promoting the peace among Muslims and Christians. The school is one of the strong agents of socialisation and we are as good as what we learn in school. This is why this paper has sought to find out how the crafting of the religious studies curriculum has helped Christians and Muslims to understand and appreciate each other's faiths and therefore live in peace.

Relevance of this study

This study is important especially for Africa because, peace is essential for development. Wars in Africa have left in their trail - only mayhem and destruction. Therefore, if there is a community or nation of Christians and Muslims which has managed to live in peace and harmony in spite of the competing truth claims, that nation ought to be raised as a model for the rest of the world community.

The Qur'an actually states that you will find the nearest to the believers (Muslims) those who say "we are Christians...because amongst them are men devoted to learning and monks and because they are not arrogant." (Q:5:82) The Prophet Muhammad is also reported to have said that "both in this world and in the hereafter, I am the nearest of all the people to Jesus, the son of Mary..."⁷

It must therefore be a matter of concern, especially to scholars of religion, that adherents of these two faiths are constantly locked in deadly wars for assertion and even sometimes for mere aggrandisement. In Madina, the Prophet fashioned out a charter that recognised the adherents of the Jewish faith resident in Madina, allowing them their freedoms and liberties. The Madinan charter even made room for adherents of two faiths (Islam and Judaism) to assist one another in case there was an attack on one of them. If therefore Christians are described as the nearest to the Muslims, there must be a lesson in mutual co-operation and existence that can be learnt from the Madinan era. Christian-Muslim relations in Ghana certainly provides a model that virtually relives the Madinan experience.

The dialogue of life

The theoretical framework within which this study has been conducted is what Akinade calls "the dialogue of life."⁸ As has been pointed out above, dialogues at conferences on Christian-Muslim relations have largely failed to bring the people of these faiths together. So rather than dialogue at conferences, Christians and Muslims in Ghana have adopted the dialogue of life as the dialogue that ensures peace and harmony.

The theory of the dialogue of life states that life itself offers opportunities for people of different faiths, ethnicities and backgrounds to interact as they go about their daily activities. Aristotle avers that "he who is without a city through nature rather than chance is either a mean sort or superior to man; he is without clan, without law, without hearth."⁹

Thus, as we go about our activities in our various cities, as we go to the market places, football parks, lorry stations and such other public places to conduct our daily businesses, we meet and interact with people of other faiths. That interaction builds camaraderie and understanding. It is this understanding on a personal everyday level that will ensure the peace between people of different faiths rather than yearly conferences. This is what the Ghanaian people have demonstrated over the years and that is what this paper now explores.

In the communities

Christianity in Ghana is mostly concentrated in the Southern regions, while Islam is concentrated in the Northern regions. This is purely as a result of an accident of history. Christianity was introduced into Ghana in 1482 by Portuguese sailors who first landed on the shores of Ghana at Elmina, a town that borders the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁰ From the southern tip of Ghana, Christianity made its thrust into the interior eventually covering most of the Southern parts of Ghana to the middle belt in the Brong Ahafo Region and eventually to the whole country. According to the 2000 Population and Housing Census, 68% of Ghanaians profess to be Christians.¹¹

Islam on the other hand was introduced into Ghana in the late sixteenth century by itinerant traders from Northern Nigeria who engaged in Ghana's gold and cola trade.¹² The oldest Muslim settlement was Begho in the Brong Ahafo Region. Initially quarantined, Islam soon burst out and became the state religion for most of the kingdoms of the Northern Region like Dagbon, Gonja, Mamprugu and the Wala. The 2000 Population and Housing Census puts the number of Muslims in Ghana at 15%.¹³

Despite this seeming geographical gulf between these faiths, economic and political factors were to conspire to bring them together. The Asante kingdom, which is perhaps the most powerful kingdom in Ghana, was to make Muslims perhaps the greatest allies of Christians. The Asante kingdom is essentially a Christian kingdom even though its leaders also avow the traditional religion. It is estimated that there were over 1,000 Muslims settled in Kumasi under the leadership of one Muhammad al-Ghamba popularly known as Baba. He hailed from Gambaga in Mamprusi land in the Northern Region of Ghana.¹⁴ Most of the Muslims in Metropolitan Asante were non-natives from the Northern parts of Ghana, including Gonja and Dagbon, the Upper and Middle Niger

Regions, Hausa land and North Africa who came to Asante in view of the gold and cola trade.

Just like in most of the Northern states where Islam first took root, Muslims remained in quarantine for a long time until the Asante king began to take an interest in the power of the Muslim amulet. According to Joseph Dupuis, the Muslims in Asante enjoyed rank at court, or were invested with administrative powers, entitling them even to a voice in the Asante senate.¹⁵ Thus, true to the political character of Islam, Muslims had become part of Asante statecraft.

Thus, the Muslims soon became integrated into the Asante society even while maintaining their identity as Muslims. This phenomenon eventually became replicated throughout the southern regions of Ghana and in any town that the Muslims could find the prospect of trade in gold, and cocoa. As the gold and cocoa industries thrived, more Muslims migrated from the north to settle in the south. The quarters where they settled in each town has become known as *zongo* being a Hausa word that originally meant a temporal abode.

Rather than meeting in conferences therefore, Christians and Muslims meet on a daily basis in schools, market places, football pitches, town meetings and even curiously enough, in churches and mosques. The voice of the *muezzin* wakes the Muslim at dawn, just as it does the Christian, reminding each of them that “prayer is better than sleep.” Perhaps in other parts of the world, a mosque in the middle of a predominantly Christian town where loud speakers echo unintelligible words five times a day will be considered offensive. Indeed it would be a potentially explosive matter. It is not so in Ghana.

At each Christian anniversary, be it Easter or Christmas, Christians host Muslims to reception in their homes, where they all share in the joy of either the birth, death or resurrection of Christ. Christians pay their Muslim friends reciprocal visits during the Id festivities. (Id refers to the annual Muslim celebrations that follow the end of the Ramadan fast and the celebration that commemorates Abraham’s abortive attempt to sacrifice his son Ishmael in obedience to God’s command). Because of the dominance of Christianity in Ghana, most schools have adopted Christian liturgical practices as part of their morning and afternoon assembly rituals. Muslim children faithfully recite the Lord’s Prayer at school before the start of classes and at the close of the day. For most schools in Ghana, church services are a weekly practice, to which both Muslim and Christian children attend. Muslim parents do not find this offensive and it has never

been the source of disagreement between Muslim parents and school authorities.

Most of the public schools in Ghana are run under the various religious institutions, both Christian and Muslim. There are schools under the Catholic Education Unit, Presby Education Unit, Methodist Education Unit, Anglican Education Unit and Islamic Education Unit. In schools which are also run under the Islamic Education Unit and Senior High Schools run by Islamic institutions like the Ahmadiyya Movement, the *fatiha* is recited in lieu of the Lord's prayer. *Fatiha* is the first chapter of the Qur'an and the most recited verse in Muslim ritual prayer. It is the equivalent of the Lord's Prayer in Islam. For Christian parents too, this has never been reprehensible. At every gathering, congregation or meeting, opening and closing prayers are alternated between Christians and Muslims; if a Christian says the opening prayer, a Muslim says the closing prayer and vice versa.

The role of politics

In Nigeria where Muslim and Christian conflicts are rampant, politics and politicians have often been blamed for fuelling these tensions and conflicts. In seeking to win the allegiance of adherents of one faith, politicians are said to incite them against the other. Political conflicts, therefore assume religious dimensions.

In Ghana, politics has for a long time rather served as the vehicle that has promoted inter-faith harmony between Christians and Muslims. In early 1954, the Muslims of Ghana formed a political party called the Muslim Association Party (MAP). Even though its battle cry was 'Islam!' 'Islam!' the MAP welcomed two important and well educated Christians into its leadership. This obviously was meant to cure the deficit in education that the leadership of the MAP had. These were Bankole Awoonor Renner and Cobbina Kessie.¹⁶

Since then, the alliance between Christians and Muslims has permeated the dealings of all political parties in Ghana. For the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) and its antecedent parties there is an unwritten rule that guides them in the selection of their presidential candidates and running mates. Since 1979, parties of the Danquah-Busia stock have always chosen a Muslim as vice-presidential candidate anytime a Christian has emerged as presidential candidate. In the 2000 presidential and parliamentary elections, the NPP actually won the election and ruled for eight years with John Kufuor (a Catholic) as President and Aliu

Mahama (a Muslim) as Vice-President. In 2008, its presidential candidate, Nana Akufo-Addo (a Methodist) chose Mahamadu Bawumia (a Muslim) as his vice-presidential candidate.

Defending the wisdom of that choice, the presidential candidate, Akufo-Addo argued that “if there is to be a major eruption in our country, it will certainly come from the Muslim north where poverty is rife. It is important that the people (the Muslim north) are factored seriously into every political equation in order to maintain the unity and cohesion of our nation.”¹⁷

Even though Nigeria recently adopted this model as a way of maintaining the balance of power between its mainly Muslim north and Christian south, it failed to produce the desired harmony. President Olusegun Obasanjo and his Vice-President, Abubakar Atiku were not even on talking terms in the latter part of their second four year rule. Therefore, this power sharing formula will not necessarily guarantee peace, dialogue and stability except the parties involved are genuine and sincere. It will seem that sincerity is quite a scarce vocabulary in Nigerian political discourse.

In Ghana, anytime a presidential candidate is chosen for any of the political parties, he or she (so far there has only been men) partakes in both Muslim and Christian thanksgiving services. This was amply demonstrated in 2010 when the NPP elected its presidential candidate for the 2012 polls. On Friday August 13 2010, the candidate, Akufo-Addo and the national officers of the party took part in the Friday Muslim worship at the Abossey Okai Mosque, where they asked for prayers from the National Chief Imam. This was followed by a Christian thanks-giving service at the Ridge Church in Accra the next day, Saturday August 14 2010.

In most of the developed world, a lot of talk goes on about religious freedoms, but there is underneath this talk an inherent phobia for anything Islam or Muslim. In the 2008 electioneering campaign in the U.S, Republican campaigners spared no effort in reminding Americans that Barack Obama was also bears Hussein, a Muslim name. Indeed what they meant was that his father was a Muslim and perhaps that a leopard cannot completely shed its spots. The fact that Saddam Hussein had also become the demon of America made the name Hussein the more terrifying. One can only imagine what would have happened to Obama’s political fortunes if on his campaign tour of Washington, he took time off to worship in the Washington Mosque as an Akufo-Addo will comfortably do in the full view of television cameras in the central mosque in Tamale

(Ghana). His presidency would have been gone with the *salaam* (the salutation that signals the end of Muslim ritual worship).

Religious curriculum

Another way in which Ghanaians have ensured peaceful co-existence has been the crafting of religious studies syllabi from the Junior High School to the University. In the Social Studies, Cultural Studies and Religious Studies syllabi, Islam, Christianity and the African Traditional Religions are all taught. The effect is that by the time students get to the university, they have an understanding of the faiths that other Ghanaians live by. Thus Muslims and Christians are able to empathise with one another and appreciate that the irreducible element in both Islam and Christianity is God.

In the Religious Studies Departments, students graduate with certificates in Religious Studies, rather than in Islamic Studies or Christian Studies as the case is in other parts of the world. Thus by the time one graduates, one would have taken at least a course in each of the major religions in Ghana. The University of Cape Coast has even re-named its Department of Religious Studies as the Department of Religion and Human Values. Many students who have graduated from the Departments of Religious Studies in Ghana have said that the curriculum has shaped their understanding of other faiths. Of 100 Christian graduates of Religious Studies sampled at the 2010 graduation ceremony of the University of Cape Coast, all of them said that their understanding of Islam had changed from what they thought of it before they embarked on the Religious Studies programme.

Conclusion

In spite of the Qur'an's assurance and in spite of the fact that Muslims consider Christians as the People of the Book (*Ahl-al-Kitab*) whose food and women are lawful, mutual suspicion and mistrust continues to characterise the relationship between Muslims and Christians in many areas of the world. Often times this suspicion and mistrust results in open warfare as has been the case in Nigeria and other parts of the world. It is not so with Ghana.

Ghanaian Christians and Muslims have found a way of living together in peace and harmony through a daily, yet practical dialogue that brings them together in both sacred and secular space. Politics, which often times has been the bane of Africa, has tended to afford Ghanaian

Muslims and Christians the opportunity to accommodate each other for the national good. Education is another instrument with which the Ghanaian nation has shaped the understanding of Muslims and Christians about each other's faith.

Perhaps if the rest of the world would emulate the Ghanaian example, it will eliminate a lot of the mistrust that characterises Christian-Muslim relations in the world with its attendant warfare and loss of lives and property. Perhaps, just perhaps, this dialogue of life and co-operation could see a U.S President in *sujud* (prostration) at the Washington Mosque. Perhaps that act and not an F15 fighter jet will down Al-Qaeda's Kalashnikov.

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