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Political Violence or Religious Supremacy Contest? The Imperative of Inter-Religious Dialogue for Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Nigeria is not just the most populous black African country, but also a perfect example of a pluralist society. It is both multi-ethnic and multi-religious in its make up. This has made it prone to violence of different dimensions. Though no society is free from violence, violence is never a wanted phenomenon. Due to the huge size of Nigerian population, violence always has devastatingly damaging effects on its general political structure and its social fabrics. Like many other countries, Nigeria has witnessed plethora of ethnic, religious, political, and even occupational violence. However, this study focuses on political violence in the country. It features Inter Religious Dialogue (IRD) prominently in its analysis since political violence in Nigeria is often triggered by religious bigotry. Its data are primarily and secondarily sourced. This is complemented by the combined utilization of the Qur'anic concepts of *Tasamuḥ* (tolerance) and *Sulḥ* (peacemaking). Findings of this study reveal that instances of political violence do have religious undertones and are majorly caused by deliberate provocations and supremacy contest (among others) among the adherents of the two primary religions namely Islam and Christianity. It concludes that peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims is achievable via IRD and can thus help curb and avert political violence. It recommends regular friendly dialogue among leaders across religious divides as this will hopefully create harmonious environment particularly during electioneering in election periods.

Siyasi Şiddet mi, Dini Üstünlük Mücadelesi mi? Nijerya'da Barış İçinde Bir Arada Yaşama için Dinler Arası Diyalogun Önemi

MAKALE BİLGİSİ	ÖZ
	Nijerya sadece en kalabalık siyahi Afrika ülkesi değil, aynı zamanda çoğulcu bir toplumun mükemmel bir örneğidir. Yapısı hem çok etnikli hem de çok dinlidir. Bu durum, ülkeyi farklı boyutlarda şiddete yatkın hale getirmiştir. Hiçbir toplum şiddetten muaf değildir, ancak şiddet asla istenen bir olgu değildir. Nijerya nüfusunun çok büyük olması nedeniyle, şiddet her zaman genel siyasi yapısı ve sosyal dokusu üzerinde yıkıcı etkilere sahiptir. Diğer birçok ülke gibi Nijerya da çok sayıda etnik, dini, siyasi ve hatta mesleki şiddete tanık olmuştur. Ancak bu çalışma, ülkedeki siyasi şiddete odaklanmaktadır. Nijerya'daki siyasi şiddet genellikle dini bağnazlık tarafından tetiklendiği için, analizinde Dinler Arası Diyalog (IRD) önemli bir yer tutmaktadır. Veriler birincil ve ikincil kaynaklardan elde edilmiştir. Bu, Kuran'daki Tasamuḥ (hoşgörü) ve Sulḥ (barış sağlama) kavramlarının bir arada kullanılmasıyla tamamlanmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın bulguları, siyasi şiddet olaylarının dini alt tonları olduğunu ve esas olarak İslam ve Hristiyanlık gibi iki ana dinin mensupları arasında kasıtlı provokasyonlar ve üstünlük mücadelesi (diğerlerinin yanı sıra) nedeniyle meydana geldiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, Hıristiyanlar ve Müslümanlar arasında barış içinde bir arada yaşamanın IRD yoluyla mümkün olduğu ve böylece siyasi şiddeti azaltmaya ve önlemeye yardımcı olabileceği sonucuna varmıştır. Çalışma, özellikle seçim dönemlerinde seçim kampanyaları sırasında uyumlu bir ortam yaratacağı umuduyla, dini ayrımlar ötesinde liderler arasında düzenli dostane diyalog kurulmasını önermektedir.

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Introduction

Nigeria has experienced a considerable number of political violence incidents in its fourth republic which began with its transition to democracy in 1999. Since then, its periodic elections which take place at the turn of every four years have never been free from political violence (Election Watch, 2023). While political violence is often an offshoot of ethnic chauvinism and rivalries among political parties, it has also been caused by contest over religious supremacy. Over the years, religion has played a major role in shaping the political landscape in Nigeria. It has been an institution for political socialization and mobilization. There are alleged attempts of Islamization and Christianization or as Obadare (2018, p. 75) prefers to call it "Pentecostalisation of politics" in the Fourth Republic. His Pentecostal Republic gives an account of the struggle, he wrote: "to 'Pentecostalise' power and governance—if not democracy itself—against the backdrop of perceived creeping Islamization of politics by the Muslim 'other'" (Obadare, 2018, p. 31). A point of reference is the 2023 presidential election which had a hallmark of religion than any other variable due to the ruling party's innocuous but controversial Muslim-Muslim ticket. That is to say religion, as an institution, has had great influence in the course of Nigeria's democratisation.

However, on the flipside, abuse of religion has also led to political violence. In essence, religion has been problematized in Nigeria's political space. In view of this, this study asks some salient questions. Can Muslims and Christians have friendly dialogue on issues of the moment that affect the wellbeing of all and sundry? Can they—in the course of playing religious politics—promote healthy politics free of rancor? Can they debate policies of government, its decisions and make joint contributions/advice for timely actions? Can they agree to restrain the media from promoting dogmatic and fanatical views that offend their mutual sensitivities? Can they admit mistakes, express regrets, and offer apologies when they offend one another? Can they project the etiquettes, courtesy, suavity, and graciousness of their respective beliefs as enshrined in their scriptures? If answers to these questions are in the affirmative which is the position of this study, the country shall be way away from political violence in the name of religion. Answering "yes" to the above questions, and in order to curb political violence and avert its future reoccurrence, this paper explores the option of Inter Religious Dialogue (IRD).

In addition, addressing political violence through IRD needs some sorts of conversation with forbearers of political violence who ignorantly resort to political violence in the name of religion. For effectiveness, this conversation would have to be through the medium of the scripture—that is, speaking in the name of God. This will definitely necessitate diving into religious scriptures to discover and interpret some of the provisions therein as they relate to curbing violence generally and political violence specifically. But not all religions in Nigeria have a written scripture; one is compelled to narrow down the study's religious reference to either Christianity or Islam or both. This paper makes the Qur'an as reference point as it discusses the IRD (otherwise known as interfaith dialogue) as option to address political violence which often occurs between the adherents of the two major religions. It is strongly hoped that IRD, if earnestly exploited, can create a political atmosphere characterized by peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding between the major religious groups in the country.

Statement of the Research Problem

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic state with two major religions. As a result, it has witnessed plethora of political violence often in the name of religion. Political violence is often associated with massive destruction of lives and property. This violence becomes even more destructive and more difficult to resolve when it is caused by religion. Political contest in Nigeria, especially at the national level, is seen as a contest for religious supremacy. Thus, politics becomes a tug of war which makes peaceful coexistence near impossible among the adherents of the two major religion. Exchange of provocative utterances among Christians and Muslims is a commonplace—particularly in election season. Any act that affects peaceful coexistence is a problem that should be investigated which is the focus of this study.

Methodology

This paper is a qualitative research and is essentially descriptive and analytical in its approach. Methodologically, this study gathers its data from both primary and secondary sources as it makes Nigeria its focal point. Scriptural references make up the primary source while other scholarly publications, opinion articles, interviews, newspapers, etc. are referenced as secondary source. Cases of threats to violence and actual political violence which would have been prevented by IRD are cited from some selected states across the country.

Theoretical Framework

This study has two variables. One variable is political violence in a democratic setting; the other variable is the proposition of religion as option for arbitration. Thus, there is an interface of the divine and the secular in its subject matter. Therefore, religious dialogue is chosen as a tool for arbitration. This is because perpetrators of political violence with a religious undertone, in most cases, profess one religion or the other. Thus, Contact Hypothesis Theory is employed as theoretical explanation for the study from the secular angle, while the combined concepts of *Sulḥ* (reconciliation) and *Tasamuḥ* (tolerance) are utilized as matching concepts from the religious (Islamic) perspective. These concepts are adequately used in the Qur'an to encourage tolerance and could hopefully be used to curb political violence. What follows is conceptualization of these concepts, their usefulness, and how germane they are in IRD discourse vis-a-vis curbing political violence.

Contact Hypothesis

This theory was propounded by Gordon Allport, an American social psychologist. The basic assumption of

Contact Hypothesis is that positive inter-group contact helps reduce prejudice and promotes positive relations among groups. In other words, Contact Hypothesis helps reduce prejudice among members of majority and minority groups within the context of social relations. Allport (1954: 250) explains: "It has sometimes been held that merely by assembling people without regard for race, color, religion, or national origin, we can thereby destroy stereotypes and develop friendly attitudes." This looks too simplistic. Hence, Allport's Contact Hypothesis and other inter group contact theorists before him were roundly criticized. Though Contact Hypothesis inspires promise of harmonious atmosphere in pluralist society, it can not be generalized in the least. In many cases as Allport (1954: 251) acknowledges himself—citing the increasing racial contact in the United States—"the more contact the more trouble."

Allport's theory was countered and turned inversely as Negative Hypothesis Contact by critics (Paolini, Harwood, and Rubin, 2010: 1724). The assumption is that inter group contact can have negative, more than positive, impact on prejudice among groups diseased with mutual prejudice. Members in these groups are more likely to gravitate towards hostility than amity. Many studies also established negative effect of contact between antagonistic groups. Agirdad et al., (2012, p. 368) finds that Belgian teachers who teach in schools with large Muslim population are more belligerent towards Muslim students than other teachers despite the contact.

In response to criticism of his hypothesis, Allport was quick to caution that inter group contact that will promote positive relation will be possible under appropriate conditions. These conditions are equal status, common goals, inter-group cooperation, and support of authority. Unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual, Allport (1954: 258) explains that

Prejudice may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom or local atmosphere), and if it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups.

The Concept of *Sulḥ* and *Tasamuḥ*

Tasamuḥ literally means tolerance. In Islam, it means being generous in social relations. It is synonymous with *tasahul* (leniency). *Tasamuḥ* is the quality of tolerating differences as a result of being open-minded. Its opposite is to be self-opinionated and being intolerant to opposing views. While many verses of the Qur'an allude to *Tasamuḥ* as seen in Table 1, it should be noted that the word does not exist in the Qur'an. However, we find *Tasamuḥ* is some number of Prophet's hadith. The Prophet SAW said: "*ismahu yusmah lakum*" meaning "Be tolerant, you will receive tolerance" (San'ani, d 211/826). May Allah have mercy on a man who is *samhan* (lenient) when he sells, when he buys, and when he demands back his money (Al-Bukhari, 1997), the best of faith is patience and *As-Samahah* [tolerance] (Tabarani, 2013).

Sulḥ literally means reconciliation; peacebuilding, and to make peace. After several injunctions in the Qur'an on reconciliation, it, at a point, for emphasis, says *As-Sulḥ* (reconciliation) is better (Q4:128). *Fa aslihu bayna akhwaikum* "Make reconciliation between your brothers" (Q 49: 10). *Sulḥ* has other Qur'anic derivatives like *islah* and *salaha* (bridge-building, reconciliation, restoring relations, and resolving conflicts). For example, bridge builders or peacemakers are referred to as *musliheen* (derived from *Sulḥ*) in the Qur'an. Clearly, this term, Shafiq and Abu-Nimer (2011: 51) assert, is linked to the meaning of interfaith dialogue's quest for peaceful and harmonious coexistence and friendly relations. An instance is this Qur'anic verse which extols the virtue of helping others toward goodness and reconciliation: "There is no good in most of their secret talks save (in) him who orders *Sadaqah* (charity in Allah's Cause) or *Ma'ruf* (righteous deeds) or *Islah* (reconciliation) between mankind, and he who does this, seeking the good Pleasure of Allah, We shall give him a great reward" (Q 4:114).

Table 1. Qur'anic verses on ird, tolerance and arbitration

INTER RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE (IRD)	Q3: 64	O people of the scripture come to a word that is just between us and you
	Q4: 171 Q5: 77	O people of the Scripture! Do not exceed the limits in your religion
	Q5: 2	Help one another in goodness and piety, and do not help one another in sin and aggression
	Q16:125	Argue with them in a better way
	Q29: 46	Argue not with the people of the Scripture unless it be in (a way) that is better
TOLERANCE	Q2: 256	There is no compulsion in religion
	Q5: 48	If Allah willed, He would have made you one nation, but that (He) may test you in what He has given you; so strive as in a race in good deeds.
	Q43: 89	So turn away from them and say: Salam (peace)
	Q49: 11	Do not ridicule one another
	Q109: 6	To you your religion, and to me my religion
ARBITRATION	Q5: 8	Let not the enmity and hatred of others make you avoid justice. Be just: that is nearer to piety
	Q5: 42	If you judge, judge with justice between them. Verily, Allah loves those who act justly.
	Q5: 48	Judge between them by what Allah has revealed

| | Q38: 26 | Judge you between men in truth (and justice) and follow not your desire for it will mislead you from the path of Allah |
| | Q49: 10 | Make reconciliation between your brothers and fear Allah that you may receive mercy |

Source: Compiled by authors (2014)

The Qur'an teaches the Muslims the ethics of dialogue. After affirming choice of religion (Q 2: 256), the Qur'an again exhorts the Muslims to "Argue with them [people of other faiths] in a better way" (Q 16: 125); "Argue not with the people of the Scripture unless it be in (a way) that is better" (Q 29: 46). Muslims can neither make peace nor engage people with whom they share different faith in dialogue save after contact is established. Here again, Allport's Contact Thesis comes to the fore.

What is religion?

To Tylor (1871, p. 424), the least definition of religion is "the belief in Spiritual Beings." To Tillich (1969, p. 14), "the concept of religion must be derived from the concept of God, not the reverse." Tylor and Tillich place God at the center of religion. However, one can be religious without belief in God! Religion can exist without any attachment to God. For example, Buddhism readily comes to mind. Durkheim (1995, p. 44) avoids this pitfall of making God the pivot around which religion revolves. To him, "religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden." To Kierkegaard Swenson (1941, p. 173), religion is a subjective truth which is true on personal ground (that is, for the one who believes in it). He considers religion as a personal choice which varies from individual to individual rather than a set of objective truths to be followed. He sounds like a pluralist.

Thus, we define religion as the highest ideal in people's lives in which they invest their emotions, passion, and resources; sacrificing their comfort, relationships, and—ultimately—their lives. Religion is sacrosanct to the believers as it gives them a sense of belonging, identity, and security. Its spirit is molded in morality and ethicality, with the attributes of good character, decent behavior, manners, and good conduct. If religion is as defined above, then it should be a useful tool to prevent violence before it occurs and curb it when it occurs. In view of this, IRD inspires hope of addressing political violence in Nigeria. We then turn to conceptualization of IRD.

IRD and the Concept of Religious Diversity: A Passing Critique

Religious diversity is sometimes referred to as religious plurality. It is a situation whereby there is interaction between peoples of different faiths like Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Taoism, Japanese Shinto, and Chinese folk religion; or even those who do not believe there is any deity at all, as is the case with Buddhism (Schneider1969, p. 28; Dukawa, 2023, p. 7). However, the religious focus in this paper is Islam and Christianity. These two religions are chosen (notwithstanding the presence of others) because they are the dominant with institutionalized representation in Nigeria. What readily comes to mind when Islam is mentioned in Nigeria is the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA). Similarly, Christianity in Nigeria is associated with the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) which is Christians' umbrella association (Dukawa, 2022, p. 2).

Religious plurality holds that one religion is as good as others; this is against religious exclusivity. But the truth is, virtually every religion (or rather its adherents) claims that salvation is exclusive to it. Ruhmkorff (2013, p. 1) identifies this problematique and addresses it scholastically. He wrote: "religious pluralism is the view that more than one religion is correct, and that no religion enjoys a special status in relation to the ultimate. Yet the world religions appear to be incompatible." He, then asks: "How, then, can more than one be correct?" This is the primary cause of tugs-of-war which often involves Nigerian Christians and Muslims—struggling for religious supremacy in the political arena. Therefore, the concept of religious pluralism is problematic in principle. But in practice, it inspires mutual respect and gives hope of peaceful coexistence and should be resorted to. Again, Ruhmkorff (2013, p. 2) gives an insight; "pluralists want to preserve the integrity and dignity of established religions, especially in the context of a history of religious violence, oppression, and colonialism."

"A recognition of otherness and an acceptance of difference" Grimshaw (2023, p. 80) argues is "a mark of civilized society." This point is succinctly and precisely couched in what has almost become an adage: "Respecting the otherness of others." It is within this contest that IRD should be understood. Thus, contextually, Dukawa (2023, p. 5) defines IRD as "a conversation between two or more people with different religious traditions in order to express their opinions freely and listen to the other respectably."

It is important, at this juncture, to correct a notion among some conservative Muslim intelligentsia and ulama (Islamic scholars) who hold that a call for religious dialogue (inter faith discourse) to address issues of common interests, for instance, political violence is a call to unify, merge and mix religions. Put differently, any call for IRD is a call for religious unification which is against the Qur'anic concept of "Yours is yours and mine is mine" (Q 109: 6). This is utterly incredulous. We are constrained to make a comprehensive refutation as this is not the appropriate place for a long scholastic argument or explanation; it suffices to quote a Dalai Lama's (2003) response. When Lama—a Buddhist spiritual leader—was asked if it is possible to unify religion from the pluralist view, he responded:

I am a Buddhist. Therefore, Buddhism is the only truth for me, the only religion. To my Christian friend, Christianity is the only truth, the only religion. To my Muslim friend, [Islam] is the only truth, the only religion. In the meantime, I respect and admire my Christian friend and my Muslim friend. If by unifying you mean mixing, that is impossible; useless.

It is naive to think Muslim intellectuals will have their religion (Islam) watered down just because they engage in IRD. This is not only preposterous, it is against many injunctions in Islam which espouse making peace, and tolerating the otherness of those who are religiously different from us particularly the *Ahlul Kitab*—People of the Book. The difference between the Muslims and the Christians is not fundamentally substantial in origin, we are both of Abrahamic origin. The difference is in practice which is due to several interpolations that later crept into the religious scriptures of the People of the Book and affected their rituals. Even though these religions are of Abrahamic origin, Prophet Ibrahim was neither a Jew nor a Christian but a true Muslim (Q 3: 67). Nevertheless, we can always refer to our origin in the cause of dialogue.

Political Hostility and Violence in Nigeria—the Role of Religion

Hostility is a state of ill will and bad feelings. It can be used to describe aggressive relations between people as well as between two countries. Violence is the use or threat of physical harm by groups involved in domestic conflicts. When it has a religious undertone, the violence takes another dimension as people would be fighting enthusiastically with rare hardihood—rightly or wrongly—in the Name of God. Can we divorce religion from politics to bring an end to political violence that has religious imprimatur? That would have been a good solution if not that it is utopia. Going by Nigerian history and how it is constituted, it is utopian to think people will do away with religion when it comes to politics. This is not because Nigerians are religious people in the ideal sense but because politicians have politicized religion to the extent that it is being utilized, along with money, as a convenient vehicle to ride to the corridor of power (Salaudeen and Isah, 2024).

If religion cannot be divorced from politics in Nigeria, then can it be used to curb political violence? This question is more practical and answer to it is the focus of this paper. In our opinion, religion, if properly understood, can be used to stem the tide of violence. One of the ways to go about it is to understand the points of convergence and divergence between the two major religions (Christianity and Islam) which are the focus of our study. One of the best ways (if there are other ways?) to promote religious mutual understanding is by creating an atmosphere of trust where contact is encouraged—like in Allport's hypothesis—through IRD. It is in this religio-political space that mutual understanding can be stimulated for harmonious co-existence. To address political hostilities and promote peaceful co-existence, three things need to be done. Behaviors that spite one by the other must be understood; there should be respect for the religious sensitivities of one another; most importantly and lastly there must be knowledge of the meeting and parting points among religions involved in IRD. We shall now identify some points of convergence and divergence between Christianity and Islam.

Meeting Points of Islam and Christianity

On a general note**,** both Muslims and Christians believe in the essence of religion as of moral and ethical conduct of human behavior which imposes upon man humane conduct and compassion in dealing with others—with empathy and sympathy. Islam and Christianity made claims to a just social order based on the principle of fair dealings in all matters and thus abhor corruption, injustice, transgressions, sinning, wrong doings, indecent behavior, and anti-social behaviors such as drug abuse, theft, bribery, etc. (Qur'an—17:35, 2:282, 5: 2, 7:189, 25:68-69; Bible—Isaiah 1:17, Leviticus, 19: 35-36, Mathew 7: 2, Peter, 3:11, Exodus, 20:16). The two religions promote virtues like piety, alms giving, protecting the family institutions as the building block of society, pursuit of knowledge, and its utilization as cultural asset and civilization mission. The joint efforts of Nigerian Muslims and Christians in promotion of virtue were evident when they vehemently and successfully fought against the unholy same-sex marriage that culminated into signing of the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Bill into law (Reuters, 2014). As the issue of LGBTQ allegedly resurfaced recently in the controversial Samoa Agreement, that common ground was still maintained (Jimoh and Ahmad, 2024). This is an excellent example of uniting against evil and promoting virtue from adherents of different religions. The two religions both encourage educating and socializing the young in good character, manners, and correct social behavior derived from the teachings of the sacred books, standing for society as a whole for peaceful co-existence, harmonious relationship, fair dealing, and concordant interactions.

On the political and economic front, they still both have many things in common. They declare a common stand against all practices, businesses, as well as movements that are the antitheses of belief in God which provide avenue for the dominance of a few to the detriment of majority. They reject all practices that threaten and abuse the right to life and well-being of mankind for economic gains (e.g. abortion, human trafficking, human organ harvesting, and substance abuse). They stand together for good, responsible, and accountable governance in respect of the management of resources, inclusiveness and fair/open opportunity for all. They stand together against all internal and external threats to peace and security as well as the safety of individuals and communities in terms of their possessions and common patrimony (Qur'an—2:275-280, 59:7, 83:1-6, 4:29; Bible—Leviticus 19:13, Proverbs 28:3, Jeremiah 22: 13-19, Isaiah 58:6-7).

Parting Points of Islam and Christianity

Though both religions rightly claim origin to Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham), they differ greatly in their conception of God. Islam is *Tauhidic* (Monotheistic in and out), Christianity is Trinitarian (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit). While Christianity umbilically ties man to the Original Sin, Islam sees man as noble in character, free of any baggage of the Original Sin, thereby giving him the opportunity to rise to the highest level of spirituality. Islam connects man—in orientation and outlook—through all the Prophets as bearing witness to the truth of Monotheism, relieving him of speculations, philosophical or theological. Christianity holds discriminatory belief towards the prophets. Some they consider prophets and revere; some they reject as prophets and despise (Ansari, 2023). Corollary to this, all through

history, Christian mission has concocted all manners of demonization of Islam and its Prophet, claiming that there is something intrinsic in Islam which promotes violence. This runs contrary to empirical evidence as will be discussed below. Rather, Islam prohibits abusive attack on the belief system of others (Q 6: 108) and respectfully addresses the Christians as *Ahlu-l-Kitab*—People of the Book (Q 4: 171).

Table 2. Points of convergence and divergence between Islam and Christianity

Points of Convergence	Points of Divergence	
Islam & Christianity	Islam	Christianity
Abrahamic in origin	*Tauhidic* (Monotheistic)	Trinitarian
Belief in Heaven and Hell as destinations for reward and punishment	Respectful towards all prophets	Disrespectful towards some prophets
Recognition of Supreme Deity	Rejects Original Sin	Belief in Original Sin
Observation of prayers and fasting	Worship is observed daily in mosques by genuflecting and prostrating	Worship is observed on Sundays in churches by singing and dancing
Welcome and encourage converts through proselytization	Obligatory fasting in the whole Month of Ramadan for all adult Muslims	Fasting forty days of Lent is only recommended
Religion as a moral and ethical conduct of human behaviors	Friday as special day of the week	Sunday as special day of the week
Aim to establish just social order based on the principle of fair dealings in all matters	Respect Christianity as Abrahamic religion	Despise Islam despite being an Abrahamic religion
Abhorrence to corruption, injustice, sin, and other anti-social behaviors	Practices and encourages polygamous marriage	Prohibits polygamous marriage
Rejection of all practices that threaten and abuse the right to life and well-being of mankind	Celebrates 'Idul Fitr and 'Idul Adha	Celebrates Christmas and Easter
Both have quacks and charlatans	Doctrines are based on the Qur'an and hadith.	Doctrines are determined by the church

Source: Compiled by authors (2024)

As highlighted above, there are great doctrinal differences—in practice—between Islam and Christianity. Basically, they both believe in God and worship Him but conceptualize Him differently and adopt different modes of worship. Islam has inherent mechanisms to perpetuate itself doctrinally without any mutation due to age and time. This is essentially because its doctrines are from the Qur'an which has never been changed and unchangeable (Q 10: 15). Doctrines are determined by the Church in Christendom; they are thus vulnerable to change in time and space. The recent approval of same sex marriage—which forbiddance is as old as the origin of Abrahamic religions—by Pope is a handy reference. When asked by a journalist if gays could be priests, in his famous five words response, the Pope responded: "Who am I to judge" (Lamb, 2023). This was in 2013. Ten years after, the Pope authorized blessings of gay (and lesbian) marriage and declared that the LGBTQIs+ are "Children of God." Though there are backlashes from some Catholics, the Pope is only referenced here to buttress the role of the Church in doctrinal formation in Christendom.

That said, it is conspicuous from Table 2 above that there are many meeting points between Islam and Christianity which, if leveraged on, could douse tension and inspire harmony. Generally speaking, both religions aim at promoting social harmony, protection of life and property, and wellbeing of mankind. Even if they differ in their specific ways of achieving some of these socio-economic and political objectives, they can come together to harmonize interests (not worship) for peaceful co-existence. IRD is one practice that can facilitate the coming together of these two religions for mutual understanding of causes of religious and political conflicts. The rest of this paper shall focus on cases of political tension (in some cases, violence) in recent time which are instigated by the misapplication of religion. Then, causes of these tension and violence shall be identified for discussion followed by recommendations to avert future occurrence.

Nigeria's 2023 Election: Religious Politics and Tension

Nigerian history is awash with records of religious tensions and violence during elections. For once, religion has not been spared from being flogged. Even though the 2023 presidential election did not lead to physical violence at the national level where religion was sentimentally flogged, the election will be unrivalled in Nigerian political history as the most religionized election. Noise of Christianization and Islamization heavily polluted the atmosphere more than usual. It started with the declaration by the then Vice President Yemi Osinbajo who signaled interest to contest for presidency under the ruling party—All Progressives Congress (APC). Being a Christian and a pastor of Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG)—the most politicized Pentecostal church in Nigeria—many Muslims could not tolerate him. Thus, they nursed the fear of Christianization based on Osinbajo' antecedents—deeds and misdeeds—which were chronicled by Kperogi (2022).

However, Osinbajo lost out at the party's primary election to Bola Ahmed Tinubu (a Muslim) who in turn took a Muslim as a running mate. This was later to be known as Muslim-Muslim ticket. This did not go well with

many Christians who shouted Islamization like many Muslims reacted to Osinbajo's candidacy earlier. Truly, mixed religious presidential ticket has been conventionalized (not constitutionalized) since the return to democracy in 1999. Yet, the ruling APC ignored the conventional practice and chose to hug controversy in its bid to secure power which ultimately worked out for it. Apparently, the Muslim-Muslim ticket was adopted just as a political strategy to win election; it has nothing to do with Islamization given the personality of the presidential candidate himself whose Muslimness was doubted by many Muslims (Kperogi, 2023). To counter the Christians' censure of the same faith ticket, many Muslims stood by the Muslim-Muslim ticket and some Muslim clerics even declared it a jihad (Salaudeen, 2023). It looks like a war. In a viral phone conversation between one of the major presidential candidates and a pastor, the election was said to be a religious war (Peoples Gazette, 2023). The religious atmosphere was so tense that the outcome of the presidential election was to be seen as victory—or humiliation—of either of the two major religions (Salaudeen, 2023).

It should be noted that appeal to religion was not limited to the presidential election. Some states of the federation were not also free from politicization of religion and religionization of politics. While Christians were desperate to wrestle power from Muslims in Nasarawa State, Muslims also tried hard to put an end to Christian political leadership in Taraba State. In Kaduna State, Muslim-Muslim ticket suddenly became an issue after years of pairing Muslim-Christian candidates. It is an unwritten convention to always run Christian-Christian governorship ticket in Plateau State despite the fact that the number of Muslims in the state amounts to almost half of the population. In his analysis of the interface between religion and politics in Northern Nigeria, Abubakar (2019, p. 34) cites example of Plateau State. He wrote: "A good example can be Plateau State that has Muslims who represent more than 40 percent of the total population but lack commensurate representation in the executive affairs of the state, let alone having a Muslim as deputy governor."

In Adamawa State where the leading candidates of the two major parties are Muslims, appeal to religion was also resorted to as a campaign strategy. The gubernatorial election was between the Peoples Democratic Party's (PDP) candidate Umar Fintiri and the APC's candidate Aisha Binani. Being a female, the latter was said not to be appropriate for leadership by some clerics—quoting verses from the Qur'an and hadith of the Prophet (PBUH). In Lagos state, Muslim clerics supported Christian incumbent governor of APC (still in the name of religion) arguing that it will concretize the Muslim-Muslim ticket because Lagos State is the political base of the presidential candidate of the APC (Bola Ahmed Tinubu). Yet, in Oyo Sate, these same clerics were desperate to vote out a Christian governor (Seyi Makinde) because he is not a Muslim. In Kano State where the two major candidates are both male Muslims, the election was still considered by some clerics to be a jihad. Ahead of the March 18 governorship election, a cleric in Wudil (Kano State) was arrested by the State Security Services (SSS) for inciting violence. Obviously a loyalist of one of the major political parties, he asserted, in

his Friday sermon that the election is a war worth dying for (Salaudeen, 2024). In his words: "Let the security agents take note no more inconclusive in Kano we are going to die with all of you...If we die we are doing to Paradise (Maishanu, 2024, para. 12). Rivers State was already declared a Christian state which is a "political no go area" for the Muslims. It was a tug of war in states like Adamawa, Kano and Lagos (Salaudeen, 2023).

Major Causes of Conflict Political Between Muslims and Christians

There are many causes of conflicts between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. It is sad to note that these conflicts do not arise out of desire for development and progress of the country. It is mostly about relevance and supremacy contest. Tussle for political relevance and power is the common denominator. Every religious group wants to be on top and like to be seen in the seat of authority and at the corridor of power. The Christians want only Christians to be president (Salaudeen, 2022; Ibile & Ibile, 2023) just like the Muslims wants only Muslims to be president (Isenyo, 2023) Though the focus of this paper is not to apportion blame; its focus—as the topic itself implies—is to forge unity in diversity and to encourage inter religious dialogue for peaceful co-existence. Notwithstanding, some notions need to be corrected with fact. This leads to the identification of two major causes of inter religious conflict in Nigeria viz. demonization of the Muslims and misrepresentation of facts.

Misrepresentation of Facts and Demonization of the Muslims

Misrepresentation of facts is a major cause of conflict. To avoid conflicts, records must be kept intact and made straight as they should be. Muslims are often accused as war mongers who could neither recognize nor tolerate Otherness in their midst. This is factually wrong. It is also alleged that Islam is intrinsically a violent religion which is why Muslims cannot be weaned from violence. This is also against established fact. Analyzing these reprehensibly problematic claims from the global perspective, Sheikh (2013) and Kuru (2019) set the record straight. Sheikh gave empirical and verifiable statistics of death tolls and wars across seven religions and civilizations in the globe to show that Muslims are less violent. Tracing history from as far back as two millennia ago up to 2008 and utilizing four categories of violence viz. war, civil war, democide (mass murder of people by government), and structural violence, Sheikh (2013) wrote:

Politically and religiously motivated violence has cost between 447.86 million and 706.72 million lives. The **Christian** civilization's share of this is the largest with between 119.42 million and 236.66 million victims (median 178.04 million). In second place is the **Antitheist** civilization which has contributed with a median figure of 124.41 million deaths. The **Sinic** civilization is third with 107.92 million deaths (median). Fourth is the **Buddhist** civilization with ca. 87.95 million deaths. Fifth is the **Primal-Indigenous** civilization with 45.56 million deaths. Sixth is the **Islamic** civilization with 31.02 million deaths. Finally, seventh and last, is the **Indic** civilization with just under 2.39 million deaths. (Sheikh, 2013, p. 199)

Like Sheikh, Kuru (2019, p. 15) argues that Muslims' association with violence is a recent phenomenon. The average rate of Muslim countries committing homicide is historically lower than that of non-Muslim countries. Even when it comes to political violence, Muslims' involvement was minimal until the late twentieth century and this was due to the injustices of colonialism and authoritarianism. The Muslims, Kuru (2019) elucidates,

...played a very limited role in the World War I and World War II. Until the 1980s, Muslims generally experienced less state violence domestically in comparison to several communist and fascist regimes in the Soviet Union, China, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. From the 1940s to the 1980s, the major terrorist organizations were also primarily socialist, not Islamist. (Kuru, 2019, p. 15)

Could it be said that Kuru—a Turkish Muslim—and Sheikh—a British born Pakistani Muslim—have attempted to defend Islam and the Muslims through their writings? Reading their works reveals that they only presented facts and data as they are. They do not claim that violence is completely not committed by Muslims (of course, every religion has adherents who are psychopathic extremists), they only assert that Muslims are less violent and are not always the problem as against the propagandist narration. The findings of these researchers find support in the writings of some Nigerian Christians.

For instance, a Nigerian Rev., Sunday Mbang, was quoted to have said (in Enwerem, 1995, p. 163) that "many Christians are chameleons and wolves in sheep's clothing...They are the nation's problems and disasters of the Christian religion." Obadare (2018), another Nigerian Christian author discusses at length several attempts by the Pentecostal to hijack the reign of power in Nigeria. This, they tried to achieve by demonization of Islam. Describing Nigerian Christians' modus operandi when they seize power, wrote:

Once installed, this new power nexus sought expression and openly indulged in the deployment and manipulation of religious symbols, in particular the performance of religious rituals in public offices, institutions and functions, the use of religious (Christian) criteria as a basis for appointment to public office; a particularly grating mode of moral triumphalism that seemed to draw its oxygen from the demonization of Islam and traditional forms of belief; and, last but not the least, the inundation of public debate with Christian rhetoric. (Obadare, 2018, p. 80).

He continued: "Both the faith-based recruitment of public officials and the demonization of Islam should be seen against the backdrop of Christians' long-standing complaint that, when the Muslim Northern elite wielded power, the distribution of social largesse tended to be based on the singular criterion of religion." Whether the Christians' complaints about the Muslim elite are in order (or out of order) is not the point here, the point is that demonization of Islam has been roundly established as a political strategy that the Nigerian Christians resorted to in their struggle for power. Therefore, demonization of Islam (and by implication, the Muslims), despite plethora of facts to the contrary, has the natural tendency of triggering conflicts and violence.

Other Sundry Causes of Violence

Though there are common grounds between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria as listed in Table 2 above, these are not always emphasized. The point of emphasis has always been the areas of divergence which, in turn, fuels intolerance. It should also be noted that even in these areas of divergence, Muslims and Christians still share some common grounds in principle. For instance, Islam and Christianity prohibit usury, promiscuity, alcohol etc. in their respective scriptures. But in practice, Christians accommodate these prohibitions with leniency while Muslims oppose them with vehemence. Correspondingly, there are practices—polygamy, covering of head and entire body by women, *halal* food etc.—accommodated by Muslims but opposed by Christians. In principle, these practices are permissible in their respective scriptures but the Christians, as Dukawa (2023, p. 29) mentions elsewhere, loathe them largely due to rivalry rather than adherence to scriptural injunctions.

The two religions are not also free from quacks, charlatans, and ignoramuses; this does not help matters. Deliberate provocations such as trampling on the sensibilities of Muslims like hurling insults at the Prophet PBUH are a case in point. The killing of one Deborah Samuel for her disrespectful utterances in respect to the personality of Prophet Muhammad and the irrational mob reaction of the aggrieved Muslim youths in Sokoto State that followed remains a handy reference. Describing the evil of ignorance which led to the unfortunate incidence, Salaudeen (2022) laments thus: "Those who brutally killed Deborah should be educated. They seem to be ignorant of Islam just like Deborah who was ignorant of the station of the Prophet (SAW)." Then he asks; "If someone commits an offence that warrants capital punishment, is it to be carried out by the mob or by the constituted authority?" Of course the punishment is supposed to be carried out by the constituted authorities.

It is also an established fact that some Muslims in Nigeria do provoke Christians by calling them derogatory names like "Arna" or "Kirdi" which means faithless people. (This is even though Muslims, in northern Nigerian vernacular, largely label all non-Muslims as such from the linguistic point of view). This inciting characterization must be condemned as it amounts to vilification which obviously goes against the dictate of the Qur'an. The Qur'an instructs the Muslims not to scoff at another group, not to insult them, and not to call them bad nicknames, (Q 49: 11) nor revile what they worship (Q 6: 108). If what is worshiped cannot be reviled, the worshipers should not also be subject of ridicule. For peaceful coexistence, the Qur'an politely calls the Christians *Nasara* (Christians) or *Ahlu-l-Kitab* (People of the Book). In the spirit of dialogue, mutual understanding, and peaceful coexistence, Rev. Emmanuel Kana Mani once advised: "We need to disabuse the minds of our adherents through awareness and

enlightenment campaigns. 'Arna' and 'Kirdi' are people who are faithless. Muslims and Christians are both descendants of Abraham, only differing in our approaches to an already known supreme God." He advocated jail term for whoever calls Christians with such derogatory names (Maina, 2014).

One other very important cause of violence is when a religious group unsolicitedly interferes into affairs of another religious group. For instance, Christians' interference in some affairs that are of importance to Muslims—which the Muslims consider supreme—such as Sharia and other values is uncalled for. Christians' antagonism towards some of these affairs that are peculiar to the Muslims triggers misunderstanding and could escalate to violent confrontation. A case in point is a practice that is as innocuous as establishing Islamic banking. As usual, a loud noise was made about Islamization of Nigeria (Abubakar, 2019). Below is a list of causes of politico-religious violence:

1. Misrepresentation of facts
2. Demonization/Othering
3. Lack of promoting common and similar teachings
4. Preaching by quack preachers
5. Uncouth utterances and discourteous behavior of Ignoramuses (ignorant followers)
6. Deliberate provocations among inter-religious faithful
7. Religious manipulation political elites
8. Non-adherence to peace promotion tenets
9. Media propagation of violence
10. Unhealthy rivalry and quest for power and control

How to Uproot Areas of Conflict and Harness Benefits of Diversity?

Drawing on some Qur'anic verses, Shehu (2013) asserted that heterogeneity which he refers to as *Mashi-ah al-Kauniyyah* (the universal will) is a reality of existence. While heterogeneity manifests itself in variety of ways, Shehu's reference to faith is germane in the context of this study. One of the most effective ways to uproot conflict and harness benefits of diversity is, in the words of Shehu (2013, p. 8) "Balancing those divergences and differences and engendering harmonious co-existence in spite of such differences (harmony or unity in diversity) as *Mashi-ah al-Shar'iyyah* (God's legislative will)—Qur'an, 49: 11." By *Mashi-ah al-Shar'iyyah,* Shehu obviously means it is the design of Allah that Muslims should live together in harmony with others despite their otherness. Similarly, others (particularly Christians) must learn how to live with Muslims tolerantly. This will be possible by creating a common platform for discussing religion to foster proper understanding.

Through the medium of IRD, alliance can be formed to fight bad governance, corruption and other unethical behavior. Such alliance could be a platform for the pursuit of justice, fairness, and equity for all while respecting the sensibilities of others. Forming alliance among adherents of different religions for a common good is not an innovation in Islam. This misconstruction has been addressed above. In addition, IRD could be said to be a resuscitated practice of the Prophet PBUH. It was related to us how the Prophet PBUH participated in *Hilf al-Fudul* (Alliance of the Virtuous) before he was commissioned to the office of prophet-hood. The alliance was meant to address wrong doings—to assist the weak against the powerful. This alliance was formed by idol worshipers of Makkah and the Prophet participated in it because it was for a virtuous purpose. His nostalgia for such alliance even after he became a prophet is instructive. He [PBUH] was reported to have said: "I witnessed an alliance with my uncles in the home of 'Abdullah ibn Jad'an and I would not like to exchange it for the choicest luxuries. If I were [to be] called in Islam to participate in it, I would respond" (Ghazali, 1999, p. 88).

Consequences of lack of IRD

Though IRD has not been well utilized in Nigeria despite its benefits, something similar to it has been in existence with laudable outcomes. Presidential elections in Nigeria, until recent, have always been embroiled in turmoil. The violence and wanton destruction of life and property that greeted the announcement of winner of the 2011 presidential election remains one of the ugliest scenes of political violence in Nigeria. Therefore, in response to initial threats prior to the 2015 general elections, the country saw the emergence of the National Peace Committee (NPC) convened by Rev. Mathew Hassan Kukah in 2014. The NPC is comprised of eminent Nigerians and religious leaders across religious divides. Its primary objectives are to ensure that peace prevails and breakdown of law and order is avoided prior to, during, and after election. In no small way, NPC has been successful in committing major political contestants to signing of peace accord. This implies that aggrieved losers in elections are morally obliged to seek redress in the court of law rather than incite violence. Even if NPC is not IRD, it has the characteristics of IRD. If such is replicated at the state level, it will hopefully prevent political violence which has recently characterized elections more at the state level (gubernatorial) than the national level (presidential). Other initiatives for the promotion of inter-religious understanding in Nigeria are Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and Centre for Islamic Civilization and Interfaith Dialogue (CICID) in Kano, among others.

Having said this, consequences of lack of IRD are the consequences of not understanding one another. It leads to mutual distrust and intolerance for the otherness of the "Others". In a pluralist society like Nigeria where religion has become a major source of discord, lack of IRD leads to ascendancy of rabid dogmas of sectionalism and demonic doctrines. It diminishes excellence that religion promotes due to mutual hatred and unhealthy rivalries. This gives undue advantage to the enemies of religion to discredit it, deny it, and diminish its sublime teachings. When there is lack of contact (as in Allport's contact hypothesis) to discuss issues of common interests by people from different faiths, what follows is demonization of fellow humans with dire consequences to peaceful coexistence and wellbeing.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper identifies three major types of violence in Nigeria viz. ethnic, political, and religious. It singles out political violence for discussion but avers that political violence in the country often has religious undertone. To address this existential problem which is acknowledged to be a feature of pluralist society, it proffers Inter Religious Dialogue (IRD) as a veritable solution. It identifies Islam and Christianity as the two major religions which contest for political supremacy has often led to political violence. It bemoans mutual rivalries between these religious groups as they are both Abrahamic in origin. It explains that through IRD, adherents of the two major religions will come to realize that there are many points of convergence between them. Even some of the areas of divergence are in practice; not in principle. The basic fact that the Muslims and the Christians are more alike than unalike can be best realized through regular contacts. Thus, using Allport's Contact Thesis as theoretical lens and building on some verses of the Noble Qur'an which encourage IRD for dispute reconciliation and peaceful coexistence, this study establishes that IRD can be a veritable tool for promoting peace and averting political violence with religious nuances. It leaves a research gap for **Intra** Religious Dialogue (IRD) which also deserves scholarly attention. It then concludes that peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria is possible, can be achieved, and must be achieved.

Recommendations

1. Through IRD, leadership of the two major religions should be required to meet regularly—with institutional support—to discuss issues of common interests.
2. Only clerics and intelligentsias—with no traits of extremism—should form membership of IRD under appropriate condition for mutual understandings and fruitful outcomes.
3. While religious politics is not undemocratic, religious leaders in the course of supremacy contest for state power should not incite followers to violence against the faithful of other religion.
4. Bogus demonization of any religion by the faithful of other religions should be criminalized.

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