

**EXAMINATION OF THE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM ETHICAL, POLITICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL PERCEPTIONS FOR EACH OTHER IN NIGERIA:
IMPLICATION FOR HARMONIOUS INTERRELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE**

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Abstract

This paper entitled; Examination of the Christian Muslim Ethical, Political and Theological Perceptions for each other in Nigeria: Implication for Harmonious interreligious coexistence, aimed at examining the perceptions of Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Among the most difficult challenges that the world is currently passing through are tribal or ethnic conflicts, political oppression, social violence, and disharmony, which are responsible for killings and all are as a result of the negative perceptions Christians and Muslims have for each other. Christians and Muslims Ethical Perceptions tend to be based on the foundational principles of their respective faith. Christians typically believe in the sanctity of life and the importance of ethics, values, and morals as derived from Biblical principles, and they adhere to all of them strictly, in both Muslim and Christian communities, there is a tendency to regard the other faith with suspicion, often leading to tension and even violence. Christianity and Islam have been two of the dominant religious influences in Nigeria. While both religions coexisted peacefully in the past, there has continued to be increasing aggression between adherents of the two religions thereby resulting in religious and political conflicts in the country. The paper uses Historical and descriptive survey method for data collection and analysis. Effort have

been made to proffer recommendations for taming the incidents of religious intolerance as a result of negative perceptions for each other.

Key Words: Examination, Ethical, Political and Theological, Perceptions Implication, Harmonious, interreligious coexistence

Introduction

Perception is one of the substantial elements that shapes the way an individual understands and interrelates with realities. Among the most difficult challenges that the world is currently passing through are tribal or ethnic conflicts, political oppression, social violence, and disharmony, which are responsible for carnage. All of this could be attributed to the influence of the devil. This resulted in the corruption of the mind and misguidance in the thoughts. These complexities have made life so difficult and challenging for human society. This is because records of successes, achievements, and development are all associated with a conducive environment and harmonious relationships among the people in a society. Rotgak (2004) holds that religious conflict has gradually become a reoccurring phenomenon in the country. Nigeria is a pluralistic society with different tribes, cultures, traditions, historical backgrounds, and religions. Islam and Christianity are the dominant religions, but traces of adherents of the African Traditional Religion also exist among the people. In spite of these differences, Nigerians still claim to be one. Sunday (2018) posits that recent developments show that Muslim-Christian relationships are becoming so disquieting due to the incessant violence and other attendant misunderstandings among their adherents. This scenario was the result of some factors, which will be unveiled in due course. Consequently, the situation accounts for a lot of unrest among the adherents of the two faiths, leading to a lack of cordial relationships and trust among them.

Religion in all societies is said to provide a healthy terrain for a functional and vibrant society. Religion is often regarded by scholars as a living thing, and any living thing is very interested in what is happening in the environment. More so, every religion in any environment preaches peace with oneself, peace with others, and peace with God. Unfortunately, there is hardly any peace in our society today (Okwueze, 2003). The history of religion cannot be separated from the attendant conflict that follows it over time. All these observations made by Nnoli (2020) are very rampant in the prevailing situations in Nigerian society. This generates divisive and socio-economic competition, which has anti-social effects.

A religion is the belief in the existence of a god or gods and the activities that are connected with their worship. It is also one of the systems of faith that are based on the belief in the existence of a particular god or gods: The Jewish religion (Judaism), the Christian religion, the Islamic religion, and a host of other world religions. Almost every human being believes in a Supreme Being (with different local names) who controls the universe, the seen world, and the unseen world. He sets a moral standard to be attained by man and is capable of punishing man

here and hereafter, et cetera. The endeavour of man to please the Supreme Being, especially to secure a favourable place for himself hereafter, is known as religion. It emanates from an innate tendency and is hence personal because one is free to believe or disbelieve (Olayiwola, 2011).

Perception, whether positive or negative, is observed as one of the main factors that influence the ways multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies interact with each other. Before now, both Christians and Muslims had lived peaceful lives. This can be seen in the fact that a Muslim man could go to a Christian home during Christmas celebration to celebrate with fellow Christians. They would eat together and even go out to make merriment together. Similarly, during the *Sallah* period, the Christians would go to their Muslim brothers to celebrate with them. Not only that, a Christian could give his daughter in marriage to a Muslim, while a Muslim could also give out his daughters in marriage to a Christian. According to Kefas (2021), Suddenly, the situation deteriorated into another thing all together, resulting in minor altercations between the two faiths. Now, it is hard for both Christians and Muslims to believe in one another, even when they know that their past relationships had been cordial. Christians no longer want to give their daughters in marriage to Muslims; likewise, Muslims will not allow their daughters to marry Christians. Eating at each other's home is no longer tenable, as used to be the case in the past. This unhealthy multi-dimensional development could have been politically motivated, economically originated, socially oriented, or religiously discharged. In the interest of peace and for the purpose of progress.

Christianity and a Christian

The concept of Christianity involves a profound commitment to a set of beliefs, practices, and ethical principles centered around the person of Jesus Christ. A Christian is an individual who identifies with Christianity, a monotheistic Abrahamic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus as presented in the Bible. The term "Christian" itself finds its origin in the New Testament, specifically in Acts 11:26, where it is mentioned that the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch, signifying a distinct community following the way of Christ.

Being a Christian entails a foundational belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. This belief is encapsulated in passages like John 3:16, where Jesus is referred to as the Son of God, and Romans 10:9, which emphasizes the confession that "Jesus is Lord." The acknowledgment of Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God is central to the Christian identity.

In addition to doctrinal beliefs, being a Christian involves a commitment to a way of life guided by the ethical teachings of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5-7, provides a comprehensive guide to Christian ethics, emphasizing virtues such as humility, mercy, and peace-making. The Golden Rule, stated in Matthew 7:12, is a succinct expression of the ethical imperative for Christians: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."

The Christian concept of identity also encompasses participation in communal worship and sacramental practices. Christians gather for worship, prayer, and fellowship, often in Churches. The sacraments, such as baptism and the Eucharist (Communion), are not only symbolic acts but integral components of Christian identity. Baptism, for instance, symbolizes initiation into the Christian faith, as exemplified by Jesus' own baptism by John the Baptist.

The concept of a Christian extends beyond individual beliefs and practices to a sense of belonging to a global community of believers. The Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12:27, describes believers as the body of Christ, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individual Christians in the larger context of the Church.

Islam and a Muslim

Islam is a monotheistic Abrahamic religion founded on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as revealed in the Quran, the holy book of Islam. The term "Muslim" itself is derived from the Arabic word "Islam," which means submission to the will of God (Allah in Arabic). A Muslim, therefore, is someone who practices Islam and follows its principles (Abdullah interview). Central to the concept of a Muslim is the declaration of faith, known as the Shahada, which is a fundamental tenet of Islam. The Shahada states, "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger." By professing the Shahada, an individual publicly his/her submission to the oneness of God and the prophet-hood of Muhammad. This declaration is a key aspect of defining oneself as a Muslim.

Muslims are expected to adhere to the Five Pillars of Islam, which are the core acts of worship and practices in the Islamic faith. These pillars include the declaration of faith (Shahada), performing ritual prayers (Salah), giving to charity (Zakat), fasting during the month of Ramadan (Sawm), and undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) at least once in a lifetime if financially and physically able.

The Quran serves as the primary source of guidance for Muslims, providing ethical and moral principles that govern all aspects of life. Additionally, the Hadith, which are the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad, offer further guidance on how to live a righteous and fulfilling life according to Islamic teachings. Islam also recognizes diversity within its community. Muslims come from various ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. The Quran explicitly states that diversity among humans is a sign of Allah's creative power, and Muslims are encouraged to embrace this diversity and work together for the common good. While the core tenets of Islam are universal, interpretations and practices can vary among different schools of thought within Islam. These variations often stem from cultural influences, historical contexts, and scholarly interpretations. Nonetheless, the overarching concept of a Muslim remains rooted in the fundamental principles of Islam and the commitment to living a life in accordance with the teachings of the Quran and the example set by Prophet Muhammad (Guardians 2021).

The concept of a Muslim also involves a relationship with non-Muslims. The Quran encourages Muslims to engage with others in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, and respect. It emphasizes the importance of peaceful coexistence and cooperation with people of different faiths. The idea of dawah, or inviting others to Islam through good conduct and dialogue, is rooted in the Quranic injunction to "invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction" (Quran 16:125).

It is crucial to note that Islam is not a monolithic religion, and the concept of a Muslim can be expressed in diverse ways across different cultures and societies. Muslims may interpret certain aspects of their faith differently based on their cultural context, historical experiences, and individual perspectives. Additionally, Muslims may belong to various sects within Islam, such as Sunni or Shia, each with its own traditions and practices.

Muslim is intricately connected to the idea of submission to the divine will. Islam teaches that true submission involves surrendering one's ego, desires, and actions to the guidance of Allah. This submission is not seen as a loss of individuality but rather as a path to true freedom and spiritual fulfilment. Muslims believe that by aligning their lives with the principles laid out in the Quran and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, they achieve a state of peace (Islam translates to "peace" in Arabic) and harmony with themselves, others, and the Creator.

The Concept of Conflict

The concept of conflict is a multifaceted and ubiquitous aspect of human interaction, encompassing a wide range of situations from interpersonal disputes to international tensions. In social psychology, conflict is often defined as the perceived incompatibility of goals, values, or interests between individuals or groups. Conflict involves situations in which differences are expressed by interdependent peoples in the process of achieving their needs and goals (Donohue and Kotti, 1992).

Smith (2000) Views Conflict as an endemic feature of human history. The definition opined that, conflicts is an act involving human beings and not a struggle against physical environment which therefore means that, it is an avenue for expressing feelings and thoughts of one group to another on issue(s) of interest. It can arise from various sources, including competition for resources, differences in beliefs, or power struggles. The study of conflict is a complex interdisciplinary field that draws on psychology, sociology, political science, and other disciplines to understand the origins, dynamics, and resolution of conflicts.

It is a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, values or goals (Albert and Watson, 2006). It is also important to note that, before conflict could occur, it has to exceed the threshold level of intensity before the parties experience any conflict. Sa'al (2007) elaborated further that, opposing interests must be recognized by both parties for conflict to exist.

Moreover, the field of conflict resolution emphasizes the importance of managing and resolving conflicts constructively. According to Fisher and Ury's principled negotiation approach (1981), conflicts should be approached collaboratively, seeking solutions that are mutually beneficial. This approach emphasizes separating people from the problem, focusing on interests rather than positions, generating options for mutual gain, and insisting on objective criteria. These principles are crucial for individuals, organizations, and governments seeking to navigate and resolve conflicts effectively.

On a global scale, political scientists often analyze conflicts within the framework of international relations. The Realist school of thought, for instance, posits that conflicts between states are inevitable due to the anarchic nature of the international system (Morgenthau, 1948). From a Realist perspective, states are driven by self-interest and the pursuit of power, leading to competition and conflict. Conversely, Liberal theorists argue that cooperation and international institutions can mitigate conflicts by promoting common interests and shared values (Keohane, 1984). Exploring these contrasting perspectives provides insights into the various approaches to understanding and managing conflicts on the international stage.

Examination of Christian and Muslim Ethical Perceptions about one another

The ethical Perceptions of Muslims and Christians in Nigeria vary widely, depending on the ideological and theological convictions of the different groups. Benjamin, in an interview asserted that both Christians and Muslims Ethical Perceptions tend to be based on the foundational principles of their respective faith. He stated for instance that; Christians typically believe in the sanctity of life and the importance of ethics, values, and morals as derived from Biblical principles, and they adhere to all of them strictly. Christians believe for instance, that the Ten Commandments and other Judeo-Christian principles form the basis for ethical interaction in human relationships and decision-making. They also believe according Geoffrey in an oral interview that; the supreme authority of God and trust in His moral guidance and justice.

In similar vein the Muslims believe in the absolute sovereignty of Allah and the importance of adhering to the teachings of the Qur'an and the Hadith. These teachings according to Sabiu (in an interview) emphasize justice, fairness to one another, and kindness to all, as well as respect for life and, most importantly, ethical living. Sabiu stated further that such ethical principles are reflected in Islamic laws and practices, which have formed the basis for the culture and values of many Nigerian Muslim communities.

Furthermore, while Christians have failed to recognise Muhammad as the prophet; Christians are regarded by some Islamic sects like the *Shia* as unclean. According to Elder (1978), "among Shi'a Muslims, unbelievers are considered unclean and defiling. Today, in Taraba some Muslims, may refuse to shake hands with non-Muslims or decline to drink tea in a Christian home" (Dauda Interview). This is because they perceive that Christians are unclean. This is largely attributed to the fact that the Qur'an only recognises a Muslim as a true follower of Allah and believes in Muhammad as his prophet. For instance, the Qur'an declares

unequivocally that, “Verily, your ‘wali’ is none other than Allah, His prophet, and the believers those who perform As-Salat and give Zakat, and they are Raki’un” (Sura 5:55). Invariably, based on this Quranic injunction, to the Muslims, anybody who does not follow the prescribed teachings and practices in the Qur’an is regarded as unclean. This Muslim belief is similar to the understanding of the Pharisees, who even accused Jesus and his disciples of eating with unwashed hands (Mk 7:1–5), as well as with unbelievers.

Christians are also regarded by Muslims as those who cannot exercise self-denial and endurance in appreciation to God for his supply. Cragg (1985) stated for instance, that: “Christianity is often reproached by Muslim writers for its alleged renunciation of this world. It errs in asking too much of human nature and so remains either unsound or an unfulfilled ideal.”

Christians are also perceived by the Muslims to be part of western civilization, which has not only exploited the world but also dominated the world with its ideologies, as Cragg further explains thus:

Many Muslim writers, past and present, reproach Christianity for its failure to discipline and control western civilization. It has not checked colonialism or corrected any form of exploitation. Even its missions are seen as a form of religious imperialism.

Examination of Christian and Muslim Theological Perceptions of each other

The history of the State and its complex religious background has significantly shaped Muslim-Christian Theological Perceptions. In both Muslim and Christian communities, there is a tendency to regard the other faith with suspicion, often leading to tension and even violence (Makai interview).

In the same vein, there is a long history of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, in many areas, religious communities interrelate with each other on a daily basis and show respect for each other’s beliefs. Some Muslim and Christian leaders have also worked together to promote peaceful coexistence among the two faiths (Jeremiah Interview).

Notwithstanding, the long history of peaceful coexistence disagreement on theological issues have remained an important factor in Nigeria at large. This is because, both faiths have different approaches to understanding the nature of God, the teachings of the prophets, and how one is saved. Muslims tend to view Christianity as having distorted the original message of divine revelation; this argument has been right for a long time, since most Christians view Islam as a false religion.

In spite of this disagreement, Habila (interview) Stated that; both faiths have had success in encouraging dialogue and mutual understanding. In other words, just as Christianity sees itself as the fulfilment and replacement of Judaism, so also Islam sees itself as the fulfilment and replacement of both Christianity and Judaism (Azuma 2008). In the early part of Islam, it

presented Qur'an as the Arabic version of both Jewish and Christian Holy books, however, in the later stage there was a full diversion from the earlier version of it.

The government and religious leaders have also played roles in promoting dialogue and ensuring peaceful coexistence between the two faiths. In recent times, government has sought to promote religious harmony through government policies, such as its "Committees for Religious Harmony," which are assigned specific responsibilities to bring Christian and Muslim leaders together to discuss issues of mutual concern.

Ultimately, both Muslims and Christians in Nigeria can work together to build a society of peace and mutual respect. Despite the differences between the two faiths, there is much that both communities can learn from each other and ultimately achieve more harmonious relationships.

The negative religious Perception of Muslims towards Christians is also attributed to the Muslim's claim of the destabilization of their faith by white Christian missionaries in the pretence of alleviating human suffering and using dubious ways to convert Muslims to Christianity, as Mohammed (1999) puts it:

It was with the arrival of the Christian missionaries in the company of European colonisers that tensions developed. These tensions developed because the prime concern of the Christian missionary enterprise seems to have been the subversion of the faith that the fullness of God had appeared in Jesus Christ and convincing others of this by words and deeds of love. The missionaries engaged in unfair practices to convert Muslims to Christianity. For example, they targeted the poor, the sick, and the immature and offered them economic assistance, medical aid, and education.

At present, many Muslims believe, especially where there are white missionaries, that they are teaching wrong doctrines about Christ and using money to win others to Christianity. They perceive that Christianity is a religion of the white man, and that anybody who professes Christ has been given money to be a Christian. Some Muslims also believe that the Bible is a white man's book and that the religion of the Jews is therefore full of what pleases them only. Doctrinal issues concerning the meaning of the Church have not only divided Christians but have also become a point of defense for Muslims against Christianity. "The meaning of the Church is more often 'caught' than taught. Too many theologians and ecclesiastics have gone astray in the past seeking to locate the true Church, when they should have sought simply to be it" (Cragg 1985).

Muslims also misconceive the Christians as worshipping three gods based on the Christian concept of the Holy trinity. Similarly, the Quran refers to Jesus as the son of Mary (Sura 19:88). Riddell and Peter (2004), on the other hand, explain concerning the way Muhammad understands the Christian Trinity:

What he (Muhammad) seems to have found most objectionable in Christianity was its doctrine of the trinity, which looked to him like ditheism (a belief in two gods, especially as independent and opposed principles of good and evil). It seems as though he thought of the Christian Trinity as Father, Mary, and their son Jesus”.

The Muslim understanding of the Christian Trinity is further exemplified in the Qur’anic Scriptures (Sura 4:171; 5:116). The Muslim Perception of Christian worship of three gods must have come from the way the Church at that time was using the symbols of Mary in its worship as the mother of God. This is established in the work of Register (1979), who states that;

the prominence of Mary in the worship and icons (images or pictures) of the Byzantine Church may have led to the assumption that she was on an equal basis with Jesus and being worshipped as a god with him.

The understanding of Muslims that Jesus is the Son of God, as Christians believe, is mostly understood in the physical sense, as Saal (1993) argues:

More Muslims are totally convinced and equally believe that the Christians worship three gods. They commonly believe that the Christian Trinity consists of God the Father, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus. Muslims suppose that Christians understand Jesus to be the Son of God in a human, physical sense. It is not unusual for Muslims to accuse Christians of believing that God had a wife, Mary, and that Jesus was born as a result of their physical union.

Whereas Christians regard Muslims as unregenerate and in need of salvation, Muslims equally wish for Christian conversion to the Islamic faith, which Muslims claim to be the only true religion. The Muslims argue that the Christians have corrupted the gospel so much so that the Christian gospel does not adequately address the issues surrounding the position of Jesus in terms of his prophethood, as Cragg (1985) explains:

Islam, then, as Muslims see it, has arrived, whereas Christianity has fallen short. If therefore we wish to know what the religion of the prophet Jesus was truly meant to be, we go not to the existing gospels, which are themselves corrupted by the disloyalty of Christians and the deviations of their impure faith, but to the Qur’an.

Similarly, the mission and the death of Jesus on the cross to bring salvation to mankind have been very controversial issues in Christian evangelism for Muslims. Therefore, the Church is perceived by Muslims to be misconstrued by these doctrines of Christ and salvation, and therefore Islam as a religion works to correct these errors. Inasmuch as these ‘errors’ involve the central points of the Christian understanding of Jesus his incarnation and his death on the cross the issue admits no reconciliation. The Muslim sees Islam as correcting Christian ‘distortion’ of Jesus and God”. Generally, Perceptions of Christians by Muslims are not only on an ethical and theological basis but also in a political arena.

Examination of Christian and Muslim Political Perceptions of each other

Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, Christianity and Islam have been two of the dominant religious influences in the country. While both religions coexisted peacefully in the past, there has continued to be increasing aggression between adherents of the two religions thereby resulting in religious and political conflicts in the country. As Goddard (2000) explains, this is largely because, right from the time past: *“Christians and Jews were seen as second-class citizens within the Islamic world, to be manifestly lower than Muslims in terms of prestige and social position”*. Sunday (2022), citing Boer, reinforce this unfortunates practice in his assertion that during the era of Umar's caliphs, Christians were taxed so heavily that the benefits coming from the tax they didn't enjoy. A major factor contributing to the foregoing dual negative Perceptions is the rise of radicalism among both the Christians and Muslim groups. On the Muslim side for instance, the Boko Haram insurgency has caused much destruction and violence, leading to the Perception among many Nigerians that Islam is an inherently violent religion (Dantala interview).

The current Perception of the Christian-Muslim relationship in Nigerian is one of conflict, mistrust, and tension. While there are still many examples of Christians and Muslims living together peacefully, it is clear that much work needs to be done in order to reduce the tension between adherents of the two religions (Sani interview).

Conclusion

The status quo in Nigeria has not reached a hopeless stage; at a moment it has not reached the stage of total fear, suspicion, anarchy and war. Even though the Perceptions of both the two faiths has been very negative, this research work has come out of the hopefulness that in the near future if both the two faiths would respect each other's belief without having a negative Perception on each other, the future would get better as Christians and Muslims submit to the wisdom of God in bringing us together in this entity called Nigerian. We should relate to each other as fellow Nigerians with dignity.

It has been discovered that the root cause of Christians and Muslims conflicts have been the negative Perceptions for each other, Christians and Muslims do not see each other as brothers again. The relationship has been full of hatred and suspicion and bitterness, which has to incessant killings. We all must be as a matter of urgency strive to learn to see each as brothers, and stop having negative feelings for each other, for if God want us to have one religion it will not take him a second to turn everyone to the same faith, He allow us to be in different religion for the purpose base known to him, politician should not use politics to create disharmony among the adherent of the two faith, that has led to so many disharmony and negative Perception for each other in Nigerian. It is hoped that this research would bring about lasting peace in Nigerian.

Recommendations

1. The government should engage on campaigns that would enhance and promote peaceful coexistence
2. There should be a high inclusiveness and participations of all sectors of government
3. Government should endeavour to protect human rights and ensure Justice and equity among its people, Muslims and Christians alike
4. Government should encourage its citizens to imbibe mutual trust and respect for one another's religion
5. Religious leaders of the two faiths should be trust worthy and sincere in preaching peaceful coexistence

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List of Interviewees

Abdullah R, 25th January 2024

Benjamin K, 23rd January 2024

Sadaunu M, 25th January 2024

Dauda H, 25th January 2024

Makai A, 27th January 2024

Jeremiah U, 27th January 2024

Habila N, 26th January 2024

Dantala P, 23rd January 2024

Sani M, 23rd January 2024