

**Inter-Religious Dialogue: the Nigerian Experience, by Prof. Murtala A. Bidmos. Abuja, Panaf Publishing 2006.161pp. ISBN 978-37049-4-X.**

Reviewed by:  
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The title of this book is well thought out, accurate and nicely concise, but it unfortunately fails to capture and represent the contents. It will be hoped by any enlightened reader that a book on the Nigerian experience of inter-religious dialogue will not fall short of offering useful information on the journey so far in Nigeria with regards to inter-religious communication. A book containing such useful information would have provided a worthy and rewarding readership that is expected of Bidmos in his *Inter-Religious Dialogue*. Yet, this book is more qualified than any other in the market to shed light on at least one of the – if not major – then, at least, major peripheral factors militating against peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians in Nigeria.

The book is divided into nine chapters and an epilogue. Chapter 1, tagged “Introductory Remarks”, contains the rationale for the study, as “Inter-Religious Dialogue is now an important academic discipline in the tertiary institutions’ and there is ‘an unqualified zeal by some concerned individuals and organizations in different parts of the world...’ to put in place theories in Inter-Religious-Dialogue, ... with action for practicalization” (p 2).

The author adds that “such individuals and organizations are ... doing marvelous jobs in parts of Europe, Asia, America and Africa (p. 2) but fails to offer any meaningful information on them or their efforts, let alone cite any reference to that effect in any chapter throughout the book. Yet, one is tempted to resist the impression that what the author offers here, unless supported with a reliable reference or considerable evidence, may be dismissed as rumours from the market.

Aside that, it is a bad signal that a book that claims to have taken “a hard but realistic look at the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria” (p. ix), seeks to provide a balance sheet of the religious climate in the country” and offer “techniques for successful conduct of Inter-Religious Dialogue” therein (p.ix) will rely solely on the Qur’an which is the scripture of just one section of the vast and largely diverse religious community in the country, in offering a scriptural and theoretical foundation for its subject.

Quoting the Qur’anic injunction that says “... nothing have we omitted from the Book” (Q6:38), the author writes that “the comprehensiveness of the Qur’an as a writ is captured in this verse. And the plain meaning of the verse is that there is no subject under the sun except it is being touched upon in the Qur’an even in most

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cases not just touched upon but also treated explicitly” (p.1). A critical reader will expect, the “balance sheet” to offer a truly balanced analysis by providing a Biblical perspective alongside the Qur’anic but that, unfortunately, is not the case in this regard. However, this chapter contains useful information on advantages of inter-religious dialogue in the country.

Chapter 2, “The Holy Books and Inter-Religious Dialogue” addresses scriptural provisions for inter-religious dialogue and highlights the commonalities in both the Qur’anic and Biblical injunctions supporting such an understanding. The author’s approach in this chapter is devoid of the lopsided dimension of the earlier chapter. The “balance sheet” that is lacking in chapter 1 seems present in this chapter and the author must take some credit for that.

Chapter 3 addresses the status of Nigeria with regards to religion and secularism. The author provides constitutional stipulations on freedom of religion in the country. He however posits that “experience shows that public affairs... in Nigeria... have always been conducted with due consideration for religious principles” (p.32). In what follows in the chapter, the author discusses secularism and its implications as well as its effects on Nigeria. He interestingly takes a judgmental position in the chapter that Nigeria is not a secular state and that it is not in her interest to go secular!

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 address issues concerning inter-religious relations of Muslim and Christians in Nigeria. Specifically, chapter 4 focuses on the factors affecting inter-religious relations in the country. Such factors as identified in this connection include the missionary nature of Islam and Christianity, the media, external influence, unhealthy rivalry and incitement. Chapter 5 discusses obstacles to dialogue. Such obstacles as identified by the author include scriptural provision, cultural conflict, approaches, and the death of Pope John Paul II. In chapter 6, “The Effects of the Factors”, the author, rather than address the subject of the chapter, focuses on the commonalities in the religious teachings and principles of Islam and Christianity and quotes extensively from the Qur’an and the Bible. The concluding part of the chapter is no more than the author’s veiled defense of Islam, in a sub-heading tagged “The Critics of Islam”. A major deficiency of this chapter lies in the author’s insensitivity to citations as he muddles up the American Psychological Association (APA) style with the Chicago style, thereby using both in-text references and footnotes in his citation of one single source, as in his words “Ajikobi... (1999) violates a basic research principle... According to Ogunbiyi (1969:49), quoted by Ajikobi (1999:15), women have been lowly rated in the Qur’an”-9 (p.91). This does not seem pardonable more so that the author is in the context of deflating an inaccuracy concerning research principles, and there certainly are numerous instances of this in every chapter of the book.

Chapter 7 discusses the potentialities of the Shari’ah in inter-religious dialogue. The author labours in this chapter to present Shari’ah as the best thing that has ever happened to mankind and recommends it as the ultimate source of guidance, arguing that “what makes Shari’ah indispensable to man is its efficacy, which is

derived from its origin.” He further argues that given that man cannot know “unaided all he should know in order to live a life of peace, comfort and harmony,... he needs the divine guidance as contained in Shari’ah” (p.98). Although, the author tries frantically to conceal the fact that he is an imam by offering some Christian perspectives that compare meaningfully with the Shari’ah, the veiled face of an Islamic worker who obviously is more familiar with the Qur’an than he is with the Bible, is exposed in various parts of the book.

The following statements by the author give him out as a great defender of Islam and not a sincere advocate or committed promoter of inter-religious dialogue that he claims to be:

1. Should any group complain of domination, it is Muslims, as the nation’s public life is recklessly given Christian colouration (p.57)
2. ...official intervention culminated in the establishment of the Muslim Pilgrimage Welfare Board. After some time, the Christians asked for the same facility. The pertinent questions are: what is the position of pilgrimage in Christianity? If the Christians genuinely need such a board why did it take them so long after the Muslims were given one before asking for it? (p.56)
3. ...while the Muslims are in the office on Friday, which necessitates the building of a Mosque near the workplace for the Jumu’ah service, Christians are at home on Sunday – a work free day – in which case any nearby church will conveniently satisfy their weekly Sunday Service (p.56).
4. It is common knowledge that the press was established in Nigeria by the missionaries as the first newspaper was published for the purpose of preaching the gospel. In the public health sector, facilities like ambulances which are purchased and maintained with the public fund in which the Muslims are major contributors, carry the Red Cross sign. Theologically, the religious symbolism of the Red Cross is not acceptable to the Muslims. Similarly, the common law practiced in Nigeria is of Western origin, and it is an axiom that Christendom has been delicately interwoven into the Western Culture (p.59).
5. The adoption of December 25 as Jesus’ Birthday is arbitrary, for Jesus was not born on December 25. Muslim have retained 12<sup>th</sup> of Rabiul Awwal which is the actual date Muhammad was born (p.68).
6. The emergence of various churches with significant theological differences is a form of restructuring of Christianity... The emergence of the Catholic Good News Bible which has about 17 books more than the content of the King James Version (66 books) of the Bible is a mark of restructuring. On the contrary, Muslims

have retained the Qur'an in one single indivisible book made up of 114 chapters. It has remained the way it was handed down by Allah through Prophet Muhammad (SAW) to mankind some 15 centuries ago (p.69).

There are several instances of such statements which suggest that the author is aimed at making through the instrumentality of his book, a case for his fellow Muslims whom, as noted in his sentimental views, he believes are being brazenly oppressed and horrendously suppressed by Christians. It should be pointed out for the record that such statements and perceptions are not in consonance with the spirit and principles of inter-religious dialogue as they are capable of breeding discord, promoting hostility and aggravating the already volatile religious atmosphere in the country. A critical reader may, on account of the author's partiality instead of neutrality, be tempted to regard the book as more of Bidmos' monologue than inter-religious dialogue.

Chapter 8, "The Modus Operandi of Inter-Religious Dialogue" seems the most important in the book, in view of its centrality to the subject. The chapter offers useful information on the characteristics of participants in inter-religious dialogue, the dialogue structure as well as on operational mechanism for dialogue. As characteristics, the author identifies, qualification, maturity, sincerity, experience, sensitivity and mutual respect as being of great importance (pp.113 – 117). With regards to the structure, he emphasizes the need for a standing committee as well as an advisory council (pp. 118 – 120). Concerning operational mechanism he identifies the mobilization approach, the theological approach, the ethical approach, and the in-house cleaning approach as possible approaches to inter-religious dialogue (pp.120 – 130).

It is interesting to note that in an attempt to discuss trends in inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria, the author illustrates with his 1973 conference experience at the University of Ibadan, a journal named *Religions* and floated in 1976 by the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions, Religious Studies curricula and the founding in 1986 of the National Association for Religious Tolerance (NARETO) (pp.133 – 138). For a book published in 2006, events of early 1970s and mid 1980s which are experiences recorded more than two decades earlier are not the best illustrations of trends or developments. Could that mean there was no development whatsoever on the subject for more than two decades? Such developments as should have been cited by the author in this regard include the founding by President Ibrahim Babangida of the Advisory Council for Religious Affairs in Nigeria (ACRA), in July 1987, the establishment by President Olusegun Obasanjo of the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, 1999, the formation of the Centre for Interfaith Relation and Outreach in Ogbomosho in 2004, the national conference on Religions organized by the Catholic Mission and held at the University of Ibadan in 2006 where the author himself presented a paper, as well as various initiatives of inter-religious understanding recorded between the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) specifically

between August and September, 2006. It is unfortunate that the author fails to make reference to any of these epochal inter-religious initiatives.

As trends in inter-religious dialogue at international level, the author cites the Vatican gesture of 1964, Unification Church of South Korea, Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF) of Germany, 1981, and the United Kingdom experience as well as the founding of the Muslim World League in 1961. Again, for a book published in 2006, the events of 1960s and early 1980s are not the best examples of current trends. Such trends as should have been cited by the author include some of those contained in Evers, G. (2006), Trends and Developments in Inter-Religious Dialogue, *Studies in Inter-religious Dialogue*, 16 (2006) 2, pp.235 – 250, and may be identified as follows:

1. An international Conference held in Rome, September 25 – 28, 2005, which was exemplary in the way it reaffirmed the new approach of the Catholic Church to other religions.
2. Pope Benedict XVI's giant stride of March, 2006 when he asked cardinals from all over the world for their views on the Church's dialogue with Islam. Consequently, there was agreement that the Catholics in countries all over the world should continue to be constructive and positive in approaching Muslims.
3. Mufti Abdul Aziz Al-Sheikh, the highest authority of Islam in Saudi Arabia unequivocally condemned terrorism committed in the name of Islam in a sermon directed at the two million pilgrims during the festival of sacrifice (Id al-Adha) at the end of the Haj in 2006. It was the first time that such a clear condemnation was made by an authority of the Wahhabi Islam in Saudi Arabia which often has been accused of having fostered the growth of radical Islam in the past.
4. In November 2005, various Muslim organizations in Indonesia, such as the Indonesian Ulema Council and the Mass organizations of Nahdatul Ulema and Muhammadiyah explained in a joint statement activities and suicide bombings as violating basis Islam principles... Prior to this statement, there had been a public condemnation of the renewed bombings in Bali on October 1, 2005, by Buddhist, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim, Hindu, Confucian and Taoist Religious Leaders. In response to these terrorist attacks, the religious leaders launched an Anti-Terrorist National Movement to improve mutual trust among different faiths.
5. Summit of Religions in Moscow, July 3 -5, 2006, which was attended by some 200 leaders of the world's religions from forty countries to discuss common problems that afflicts contemporary society today – such as terrorism extremism and intolerance.

6. Inter-religious dialogue at the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Allegre, Brazil, February 14 – 23, 2006.
7. Various inter-religious consultations on “Conversion: Assessing the Reality,” Lariano, May 12 – 16, 2006.
8. Various inter-religious activities in Asian countries in 2006 such as those held in the Republic of China in April, 2006, South Korea in June, 2006, Indonesia in January 27, 2006, March 2006 and May 15, 2006, in Philippines in March, 2006, Bangladesh in February, 2006 and Pakistan in June 21, 2006.

Grammatical flaws and ambiguous statements abound in the book. An instance of that is where the author writes “any attempt to impose an idea by one party on the other is alien in dialogue” (p.4) instead of “any attempt by one party to impose its own idea on the other is alien to dialogue.” Another instance of it is where he writes “Religion and related issues provide a good example of which man through ages has buried himself striving to study, understand reject or accept” (p. 1) instead of “Religion and related subjects are a good example of what man has been trying to study, understand, reject or accept.” Yet another instance of it is where he writes “such writings cannot certainly be equated with the Qur’an or the Bible” (p. 7) instead of “... certainly cannot...” Similarly, he writes “This writer was opportune to participate in the 1973 edition of conference” (p.134) and repeated this on page 140 where he writes “This author was opportune to participate... while on Sabbatical leave...” whereas there is no such adjective as “opportune” which implies or connotes what the author attempts to express, rather than mean “timely, appropriate, convenient, proper” etc. Yet, one more illustration is due at this juncture, concerning the author’s statement that:

One of such churches in Lagos was declared independent of the Church of England as late as August 1991 i.e. 31 years after Nigeria’s attainment of her sovereignty (courtesy of Frank Olize on Network News line, NTA Channel 10, Lagos, August 11, 1991) (p.33).

This in fact is a case of both situational inaccuracy and linguistic inexactitude for, one, Nigeria did not attain her independence courtesy of any Frank Olize!; two the church in question was not declared independent courtesy of Frank Olize!; and three, there has never been “Network News line” on NTA Channel 10, Lagos, as suggested by the author. Rather, there is “Newline” on NTA Network Services. It is obvious that such a carelessly constructed statement as this is capable of misleading, misinforming and even miseducate the reader who may have expected a high degree of sagacity and reliability from the book. To correctly and unambiguously express himself, the author should have written “...as reported by Frank Olize on Newline, NTA Network Services, August 11, 1991.”

It is of great value to examine the following statement by the author, concerning his method in this book:

My instrument in this study is not extra-ordinary. It is conventional. It includes extensive fieldwork within Nigeria and abroad wherever useful and relevant information on religious enterprise in a multi religious community is available, administration of questionnaire, interview, consultation of primary and secondary reference materials, and observation of interplay of interpersonal relationship among the principal actors as well as their subordinates in matters of religion. The findings are then analyzed. Hopefully the conclusions drawn from the findings would have reasonably addressed the issues involved (p.8).

There obviously are several research-related pitfalls in the author's claim in this regard. One, his claim that his instrument includes "extensive field work" lacks credibility for fieldwork is, by no means a research tool. It is rather a stage in research as in literature or research readings, fieldwork or data collection, and data analysis and interpretation. Similarly, his claim that he conducted an "extensive fieldwork within Nigeria and abroad" also lacks credibility for, there is no single reference to that effect anywhere in the book excepting his participation in an "inter-religious discussion while on sabbatical leave in London in 1991/92" (p.140) and his participation in a conference on Religions at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria in 1973 (p. 134). One wonders whether it is not benefit of logic to claim that a 1973 conference experience was part of the fieldwork for a book published more than 20 years later.

As regards administration of questionnaire, there is no evidence of that anywhere in the work and the orientation of the work even suggests the contrary. Concerning interviews, there is one single reference to it throughout the book (p. 132) though the author fails to state who the interviewee was, and where and when he interviewed him, to enable us determine whether there was really an interview. However, there is no doubting the author's claim to "consultation of primary and secondary reference materials, observation of interplay of interpersonal relationship among the principal actors as well as their subordinates in matters of religion." This shows that his study is purely qualitative in nature and he should not have committed a blunder by claiming to have employed questionnaire and interviews. If the author had identified the historical and philosophical methods in his methodology, his mastery of research concepts would have been commended. Unfortunately, he lays claim to fieldwork as an instrument and a questionnaire where no one was used.

Readers who expect close readings or systematic analysis of emergent issues in inter-religious dialogue might be disappointed, for the book under review has fallen short of offering all that. The author's failure to benefit from the available body of sophisticated scholarship on the subject of his book is indeed a major minus for his work, which probably gives the impression that we are not dealing with a well grounded scholar in the area of inter-religious dialogue. If its referencing style is anything to go by then, the book may be dismissed as un-academic and unscholarly. Such an evaluative dismissal is owing to the fact that notwithstanding that the author provides notes and references at the end of each chapter, there is hardly a correct citation of any work in his references.

Fortunately for him, a book is not only evaluated on the basis of the degree of accuracy in its references as the quality of its contents, too, matters much. This is where Bidmos' book earns itself some credibility and high rating as a major contribution to scholarship, and therefore should be so acknowledged.