

Managing Religious and Ethnic Pluralism since the 7th Century in the Muslim World: Lessons for Contemporary Nigeria

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Abstract

It is indisputable that the modern world is characterized by pluralism, which is reflected in the diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds of its inhabitants. Since the 7th century, the Muslim world has been pluralistic, encompassing peoples of various languages, colors, cultures, ethnicities, and religions. A critical examination of the lifetimes of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), the rightly guided caliphs (R.A), and their faithful successors (R.A) reveals how religious and ethnic pluralism were effectively managed for the development of the Muslim community. However, despite Nigeria's abundant human and natural resources, religious and ethnic diversity continues to pose challenges to the country's development. The purpose of this paper is to contextualize religious and ethnic pluralism from the perspective of Islam. Using historical and qualitative research methods, the study examines how religious and ethnic pluralism has been managed in the Muslim world and draws lessons for contemporary Nigeria. The findings of the study reveal that religious and ethnic pluralism are integral aspects of human existence. Islam recognizes and accommodates religious and ethnic pluralism, teaching Muslims to manage diversity by fostering religious freedom, tolerance, love, and peaceful co-existence with people of different cultures and faiths, as outlined in Islamic scripture. The study recommends, among other things, that Nigeria strengthen its religious institutions and legal framework to promote interfaith dialogue and enable adherents of various faiths and ethnic groups to practice their religious doctrines, which emphasize love, tolerance, good neighborliness, and peace, values essential for the country's development.

Key words: religious pluralism; ethnicity; Muslim world; interfaith dialogue; Nigeria

Introduction

The study explores religious and ethnic pluralism from historical, theological, and sociological perspectives. Pluralism in the world encompasses diverse elements such as religion, ethnicity, culture, language, and politics, and this study specifically focuses on the intersection of religious and ethnic pluralism.

The Muslim world, particularly during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) and his companions, has effectively managed religious and ethnic pluralism. For example, the Prophet's interactions with Jews, Christians, and pagans, as well as his establishment of the Constitution of Madinah, are significant historical examples of managing pluralism. His covenants with various Christian communities further highlight his role as a promoter of religious diversity. This historical legacy is essential in understanding how religious and ethnic pluralism can be managed effectively.

In contrast, modern nation-states, particularly in regions like Nigeria, reflect the pluralization of society, with a multitude of ethnic groups and religions coexisting. For example, Nigeria is home to between 250 to 400 ethnic groups, with major ones including Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and Fulani. Despite this diversity, religious and ethnic pluralism in the modern world is not always effectively managed. Tensions between religious groups, particularly between Christianity and Islam, are prevalent in various regions.

One clear manifestation of this strain is the rise of Islamophobia, particularly in the United States, where a Pew Research Center survey indicates that a significant percentage of Republicans exhibit prejudice towards Muslims. Similarly, the persecution of Christians, especially in parts of the Middle East, is another alarming example, with ISIS (Daesh) being responsible for the death and enslavement of many Christians in Syria and Iraq. These issues point to the ongoing challenges in managing religious and ethnic pluralism in the modern world.

Religious and ethnic pluralism, in theory, should be a blessing to Nigeria, given its status as the most populous Black country in the world and its

diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic makeup. However, the reality has been less than ideal. The multi-religious nature of Nigerian society is often marked by violence, intolerance, provocative evangelization, killings, and other harmful incidents. These occurrences highlight the challenges Nigeria faces in managing its pluralistic society.

Historically, ethno-religious crises have led to the loss of lives and properties, creating tensions that hinder peaceful coexistence and national development. One key area of concern is the practice of Da'wah (proselytization) by Muslims and crusades/evangelization by Christians. While these religious activities may be intended to spread faith, they have sometimes exacerbated hostilities, creating further division between the various faiths and ethnic groups.

This backdrop sets the stage for a critical examination of religious and ethnic pluralism from an Islamic perspective. The paper explores how religious and ethnic diversity were managed in the early Muslim world, particularly under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) and his companions, whose efforts in establishing peaceful coexistence among diverse groups can provide valuable lessons for Nigeria. By drawing on historical examples, this study aims to offer insights into how Nigeria can better manage its own pluralistic society and move toward greater unity, tolerance, and development.

Definition of Religious Pluralism and Ethnicity

Scholars have made various attempts to define and conceptualize religious pluralism and ethnicity, recognizing their relevance in different social, cultural, and historical contexts. Eboh (2019) defines religious pluralism as a situation in which different religious groups coexist within a given institutional framework. He emphasizes that these groups often have distinct doctrines of salvation and worldviews, which shape their values, lifestyles, and ultimate goals. Religious pluralism is further described as the peaceful coexistence of people from different religious backgrounds who interact at all levels without fear, prejudice, or persecution. Synonyms for religious pluralism include terms like "religious diversity," "religious inclusivism," "religious tolerance," and "religious ecumenism" (Ete, 2019).

Within the context of Nigeria, religious pluralism can be defined as the coexistence of adherents from various religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, Traditional Religion, and others. This coexistence is supported by the Nigerian constitution, which guarantees the right to practice different faiths. Religious pluralism in Nigeria, therefore, reflects the nation's commitment to fostering a multi-religious society.

Ethnicity, on the other hand, refers to the identification of individuals with a specific cultural tradition or nation (Hornby, 2020). Umezina (2012) defines an ethnic group as one that claims a common ancestry, whether or not its members are large or small in number. What unites members of an ethnic group is a shared sense of origin, often leading to solidarity within the group. This solidarity is reinforced by cultural practices, language, traditions, and shared values.

Dokua (2018) offers a broader understanding of ethnicity, defining it as a way to distinguish groups of people who are perceived as distinct based on their locational origins and cultural characteristics. The concept of ethnicity often overlaps with terms like “tribalism,” “discrimination,” “racism,” and “prejudice,” as seen in various countries, including the United States. In the Nigerian context, ethnicity refers to groups of people living in the country's six geopolitical zones, North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-South, South-East, and South-West, who are defined by common origins, language, culture, and religion.

Thus, religious pluralism and ethnicity in Nigeria are significant social factors that shape the country's identity. While these elements could serve as a source of unity, they have sometimes been sources of conflict, particularly when not properly managed.

Religious and Ethnic Pluralism from the Perspective of Islam

Religion has historically manifested itself in a variety of forms across different ethnicities, races, languages, devotional practices, myths, and rituals, spanning from the early societies of cave dwellers to the civilizations of ancient China, India, Iran, Egypt, and Babylon (Mahmoud, 2019). Islam, as a major monotheistic faith, recognizes the inherent

existence of religious and ethnic pluralism, which has existed as long as human history. A close examination of the Glorious Qur'an and the authentic Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, S.A.W) reveals that religious and ethnic diversity are part of a divine design, as decreed by Allah (SWT), the Creator of the universe and its inhabitants. In this context, Islam acknowledges religious diversity, inclusivism, and tolerance in societies composed of individuals from various ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds.

The Qur'an specifically addresses people from different religious communities, such as Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Sabians. Allah (SWT) states:

“Surely, those who believe (i.e., the Muslims), and those who are Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever accepts faith in God and the Last Day and performs good deeds, they shall have their reward with their Lord; no fear shall come upon them, nor will they grieve” (Qur'an, 2:62).

In another verse, the Qur'an also recognizes the Magians (Zoroastrians) and idol-worshippers alongside Muslims, Jews, Sabians, and Christians, stating:

“Surely, those who have accepted faith (i.e., the Muslims), those who are Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and those who have associated other deities with God, God will judge them among them on the Day of Resurrection. God is Witness over all things” (Qur'an, 22:17).

Mahmoud (2019) explains that while the Sabians may not have had a specific scripture, unlike Jews, Christians, and Muslims, they were believed to have revered the stars and acknowledged a divine Creator. He posits that the Sabian faith could spiritually prefigure non-prophetic wisdom religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and the religions of China and Japan.

Additionally, the term *Ahl-al-Kitāb* (People of the Revealed Books) is specifically used to refer to Jews and Christians, whose Prophets, Prophet

Mūsā (Moses) and Prophet ‘Isā (Jesus Christ), were granted the holy scriptures of the Torah and the Gospel (Injil), respectively. Muslims, while believing in the Qur'an revealed to Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), are also instructed to believe in the divine messages sent to previous prophets (A.S) without any form of discrimination or distinction. This reinforces the concept of inter-religious respect and acceptance in Islam, further promoting a pluralistic understanding of faith and belief.

In essence, the Islamic perspective on religious and ethnic pluralism calls for peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and respect among different religious communities, acknowledging that diversity in faith and ethnicity is part of the divine plan. This framework is vital for fostering mutual understanding and harmony in a diverse world. This instruction is contained in the Qur'an where Allah (SWT) commands thus:

Say: “We believe in God, and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes and in (the books) given to Moses, Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between one another among them, and to God do we submit (in Islam) (Q3:84).

Central to religious pluralism in Islam is the religious freedom and inclusiveness that is guaranteed to the adherents of different faiths. The Glorious Qur'an allows people of other faiths such as idol-worshippers or pagans to practise their faith (i.e. polytheism) (Q109) and that no one should compel or coerce people to accept Islam (Q2:256). Having different faiths in the world is the wish of Allah (SWT) because He had the power to make the whole mankind follow or belong to one religion. This religious diversity cum religious freedom is captured in the Qur'an where it says:

And if your Lord had pleased, surely all of those who are in the earth would have believed, all of them, then will you then force men till they become believers? And it is not for a soul to believe except by Allah's permission, (Q10-99-100).

Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) exemplified the proper approach to managing ethnic diversity through his actions and teachings. A notable instance was his appointment of Bilal ibn Abi Rabah, a Black man of

Ethiopian origin, as the first *Mu'adhdhin* (caller to prayer) in Islam, due to his melodious voice—an act that went against the prevailing Arab ethnic pride of the time. Similarly, during the Battle of *al-Khandaq* (the Trench), the Prophet accepted and implemented a strategic suggestion from Salman al-Farisi, a Persian companion, demonstrating that wisdom and contribution, not ethnic background, were what truly mattered in Islam.

Islam acknowledges and affirms the existence of diverse ethnicities, tribes, languages, and skin colours as signs of Allah's creative power and not as bases for discrimination. This diversity is explicitly recognised in the Glorious Qur'an, where Allah (SWT) declares:

“And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours. Indeed, in that are signs for those who know” (Qur'an, 30:22).

In another verse, Allah makes it clear that the purpose of ethnic diversity is mutual recognition, not rivalry or claims of superiority. The true basis of honour in the sight of Allah is *taqwa* (piety), not tribal affiliation:

“O mankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Verily, the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware” (Qur'an, 49:13).

Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) strongly condemned tribalism and ethnic partisanship. In a Hadith recorded by Tirmidhi and Abu Daud and cited by Lemu (1992: 62–63), he stated:

“He is not one of us who calls for tribalism; he is not one of us who fights for tribalism; and he is not one of us who dies for tribalism.”

Despite Islam's inclusive teachings, ethnic stereotyping and hierarchies occasionally surfaced in the early Muslim community. The fact that Islam was first revealed in an Arab context led some Arab Muslims to develop a sense of ethnic superiority, making it difficult for them to fully accept non-

Arab converts as equals. Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), however, consistently worked to dispel such attitudes.

In his *Khutbat al-Wada'* (Farewell Sermon), the Prophet addressed this issue directly, emphasising the shared humanity and equal status of all people regardless of ethnic origin:

“O people! Your Lord is One and your father is one. You are all from Adam, and Adam was created from dust. Indeed, the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is the one with the most taqwa (piety). An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have superiority over an Arab, except by taqwa” (Mujahid, 2000: 32).

This statement remains a cornerstone in Islamic teachings on equality, affirming that the true measure of human worth lies in moral character and piety, not ethnicity, race, or language.

Management of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Islamic History

The mission of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), as the final Messenger of Allah (SWT) and the seal of prophethood, became pronounced in the seventh century. While in Makkah between 610 and 622 CE, amidst a predominantly polytheistic society, the Prophet focused his message on *Tawhīd* (the oneness of Allah) and *Taqwa* (God-consciousness). The Makkans attempted to persuade him to compromise by participating in the worship of their 360 idols. However, the Prophet (S.A.W) firmly rejected such overtures and instead preached religious freedom, asserting that each group was free to practise its own beliefs. This principle is articulated in the Qur’ān where Allah (SWT) commands: **“Say: O disbelievers! I do not worship what you worship... To you your religion, and to me mine.”** (Qur’ān 109:1–6).

The Prophet’s commitment to inclusivity became even more pronounced during his time in Madinah (622–632 CE), a city known for its religious and ethnic diversity. There, Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) established the *Sahīfat al-Madīnah*, commonly referred to as the Constitution of Madinah. This document, considered one of the earliest charters of civil governance,

brought together Muslims, Jews, Christians, and polytheists under a unified political community based on principles of justice, tolerance, and mutual protection.

Tumin et al. (2020:65) observe that Islam addressed religious diversity in Madinah through a pragmatic framework, especially in its dealings with the Jewish tribes of Madinah and the Christian delegation from Najrān. The Constitution of Madinah, consisting of 47 clauses, enshrined fundamental human rights and religious liberties. Among its key provisions were:

- **Article 25:** *The Jews shall have their own religion and the Muslims their own. This applies to their clients and to themselves, except for those who act unjustly or treacherously, for they bring harm upon themselves and their families.*
- **Article 37:** *Each party must support the other against any aggressor. They must seek mutual advice and consultation. Loyalty protects against betrayal...*
- **Article 40:** *The protected neighbour is as sacred as the protector himself, provided he does not harm or betray.*

Beyond the Constitution, the Prophet (S.A.W) extended his commitment to interfaith harmony through treaties with various non-Muslim communities. These included covenants with the Christians of Najrān, the Monks of Mount Sinai, the Christians of Persia, and others (Considine, 2016). Craig Considine's analysis underscores that these covenants illustrate the Prophet's practical demonstration of religious tolerance, inclusion, and accommodation.

The legacy of religious pluralism and mutual respect was carried forward by the second Caliph, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (R.A), who ruled from 634 to 644 CE. During his visit to Jerusalem in 638 CE, 'Umar exemplified religious tolerance. He declined to perform *ṣalāt* (prayer) inside a church, despite being invited, in order to prevent future Muslims from using his action as a precedent to seize Christian places of worship. Furthermore, he acted as an impartial adjudicator between Christians and Jews concerning communal disputes in the city.

‘Umar also issued a historic covenant guaranteeing the safety and religious freedom of the people of Jerusalem. Part of the covenant reads:

In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful. This is the assurance of peace granted by the servant of Allah, ‘Umar, Commander of the Faithful, to the people of Jerusalem. He grants them safety for their lives, their property, their churches, and their crosses. Their churches shall not be turned into dwellings or destroyed, nor shall their crosses or property be violated. No coercion shall be placed upon them concerning their religion, and none of them shall be harmed (Thowhidul, 2018:197).

This covenant illustrates the high level of religious freedom, tolerance, and mutual understanding practised during the era of the rightly guided caliphs—Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (632–634 CE), ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (634–644 CE), ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān (644–656 CE), and ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (656–661 CE).

The trend continued through the Umayyad (661–750 CE) and Abbasid (750–1258 CE) caliphates. During the Umayyad era, non-Muslims—including Christians, Jews, and Sabians—enjoyed considerable religious autonomy and protection of their places of worship. In the Abbasid period, members of non-Muslim communities held prominent roles in the bureaucracy and intellectual life. Christian patriarchs and Jewish rabbis were entrusted with key clerical and administrative responsibilities, reflecting the continuation of policies promoting pluralism and coexistence (Thowhidul, 2018).

In summary, from the prophetic period through the subsequent caliphates, Islamic governance demonstrated a consistent pattern of respecting religious and ethnic diversity. This tradition, grounded in the Qur’ān, Sunnah, and early Islamic constitutional practice, offers enduring principles for managing pluralistic societies.

In the later development of Muslim states and societies, particularly during the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt and the period of Islamic rule in Spain, diverse ethnic and religious groups came into contact with Islam and Muslims. Historical accounts indicate that several Jews and Christians

served in high-ranking positions under Muslim caliphs. Notable among them were Ya‘qub ibn Killis and Hassan Ibrahim, both of Jewish descent, and Badr al-Jamali, an Armenian Christian, who occupied roles equivalent to ministers of defence and civil service (Thowhidul, 2018).

In Muslim Spain, people of various races and religions—such as the Suevi, Goths, Vandals, Romans, and Jews, were accorded equal rights alongside Muslims. It has been documented that Muslim rule in Spain diminished the influence of the privileged nobility and clergy. Furthermore, Islamic leadership improved the social conditions of the servile class and extended to Christian landowners the right to alienate their property, a right previously denied under Visigothic rule (Thowhidul, 2018).

Highlighting the religious tolerance and inclusivism experienced by Jews and Christians under Muslim governance in Spain, Yitik (2004:5) observes:

“In Islamic history, religious persecution of the members of other faiths was almost absent. The rule ‘Let there be no compulsion in religion’ has banned Muslims from practising what is called religious persecution against non-Muslims. Jews and Christians under Muslim rule were not subject to exile, apostasy or death, which was the choice offered to Muslims and Jews in re-conquered Spain. And Christians and Jews were not subject to any major territorial and occupational restrictions such as were the common lot of Jews in pre-modern Europe.”

By contrast, the management of religious and ethnic pluralism in some contemporary Muslim-majority societies has not reflected the inclusive values upheld during the Prophet's time and the early caliphates. For example, according to the United States State Department, Saudi Arabia imposes strict limitations on religious minorities. Public expressions of Christianity and other non-Islamic religions are reportedly prohibited under Saudi law. Similarly, in Syria and Iraq, non-Muslims are said to face varying degrees of religious persecution.

Nonetheless, several Muslim-majority countries continue to uphold the principles of tolerance and coexistence exemplified by the Prophet

Muhammad. These countries include Turkey, Albania, Gambia, Kazakhstan, Senegal, and Uzbekistan (Considine, 2016). Recalling the flourishing atmosphere of religious and ethnic harmony during the classical Islamic period, Tumin et al. (2020:65) note:

“During the golden ages of Islam (750–1258 CE), people of all races and ethnic groups lived and worked together for the Muslim empires at that time, especially in the cities of Baghdad and Cordova. People of different religions and beliefs such as Muslims, Jews, Christians and the worshippers of fire collaborated to expand knowledge and conducted scientific research like translating ancient manuscripts from Greek, Persian, Indian and other languages into Arabic.”

Manifestation of Religious and Ethnic Pluralism in Contemporary Nigeria

Nigeria is widely recognised as a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious nation, where individuals from diverse cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic backgrounds coexist. Within this pluralistic setting, citizens openly and freely express their religious beliefs and practices in both private and public domains. Nigeria is also the most populous country in Africa. According to the United Nations World Population Prospects (2022), the population was estimated at 218,541,212 in 2022 and projected to reach approximately 223,804,632 (224 million) by 2023.

The three principal religions in Nigeria are Islam, Christianity, and Traditional African Religion, with Islam and Christianity being the most prominent. Data from the Pew Research Center (2018) indicate that the Muslim population was approximately 78,056,000, accounting for between 50% and 52% of the national population, while the Christian population was estimated at 76,281,000, representing 46% to 48%. Adherents of Traditional Religion constituted about 0.6%, and those who follow other faiths made up approximately 1.3%.

Religious pluralism in Nigeria is further reflected in the internal diversity of the major religions. Within Islam, adherents include Sunni Muslims—many of whom belong to the Sufi brotherhoods of Qādiriyyah and

Tijaniyyah—as well as Shi‘ites, members of the Ahmadiyyah movement, and followers of Kala Kato. Christianity in Nigeria is also composed of numerous sects and denominations. These include Evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah’s Witnesses (Garba, 2020). Other denominations include the Seventh-day Adventists and the African-initiated Aladura churches such as the Celestial Church of Christ and the Cherubim and Seraphim Church.

Beyond the three dominant religions, a small segment of the Nigerian population adheres to other faiths, including Judaism, Hinduism, the Bahá’í Faith, Chrislam, the Grail Movement, the Rosicrucian Order, Freemasonry, and the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity.

In 2018, available record showed that Nigeria had about 400 ethnic groups. The major ethnic groups in Nigeria are Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo (Ibo), and Fulani. Hausa people, an ethnic group that speak Hausa language made up of 30 percent of the Nigerian population. Both Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups constituted 30 percent while 6 percent of Nigerians were Fulani ethnic group. The remaining 34 percent of the population was shared among the minority ethnic groups of Tiv, Kanuri/Beriberi, Ijaw/Izon and others. The ethnic groups are found in the major southern and northern regions of the country. For the Northern region, the commonly found ethnic groups are the Hausa, Kanuri and Fulani. The southern region constitutes majorly Yoruba, Igbo and Niger Delta people (Dokua, 2018). While giving a comprehensive report on the Nigerian religious and ethnic diversity in 2020, Office of the International Religious Freedom, United States Department of State reports thus:

The Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri ethnic groups are most prevalent in the predominantly Muslim North-West and North-East regions. Significant numbers of Christians, including some Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri also reside in the North-East and North-West. Christians and Muslims reside in approximately equal numbers in the North-Central and South-West regions, including Lagos where the Yoruba ethnic group-whose members include both Muslims and Christians, predominate. In the South-East and South-South regions, where the Igbo ethnic group is dominant, Christians

groups, including Catholics, Anglicans and Methodists, constitute the majority. In the Niger Delta region, where ethnic groups include Ijaw, Igbo, Ogoni, Efik, Ibibio and Urohobo, among others, Christians form a substantial majority; a small but growing minority of the population is Muslim. Evangelical Christian denominations are growing rapidly in the North Central and South East, South-South and South-West regions. Ahmadi Muslims maintain small presence in several cities, including Lagos and Abuja. The Shia Muslim presence is heavily concentrated in the North-West region states of Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Zamfara and Kano (International Religious Freedom Report, 2020:4).

Historically, since the 19th Century, Nigeria has not been able to manage its religious and ethnic pluralism due to the British colonisation that promoted evangelization through western education, the rise of Pentecostalism and Salafism that preached religious exclusivism and particularism and the rise of fundamentalist and extremist groups such as Islamic West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Boko Haram that misinterpreted Islamic texts, declared *takfir* (unbelief) on Muslims and waged Jihad against Muslims and non-Muslims in the Northern Nigeria and the politicisation of religion by the Nigerian political class (Owoyemi, 2020).

From the foregoing, one may assume that the plurality of Nigeria ought to be a source of strength and blessing for the country, but the reverse is the case if one considers the prevalent ethno-religious situation which has had adverse effect on the socio-economic and political affairs of Nigeria since 1999 when the country returned to democratic dispensation. The religiously motivated violent crises which Nigerians had experienced in the past reveal the fact that religious pluralism has not been effectively managed by the government and religious practitioners. It is on record that some Traditional Religious practitioners and Muslims had, at one time or the other, clashed. Some of the clashes between Muslims and Traditionalists in the South-west include Shaykh Dandawi clash with Ogun worshippers in Ado-Ekiti, Ajagbemokeferi vs Oloolu religious riot in Ibadan, Osogbo Muslim-Osun devotees' conflict and *Gangaro* Masquerade/Muslim religious violence in Osogbo (Salisu, 2014). Similarly, some adherents of Islam and Christianity had fought and killed one another all in the name of God. For instance, the introduction and implementation of *Shari'ah* law in the Northern Nigeria, the introduction

of Islamic Bank, *Jaiz* in Nigeria and the wearing of *Hijab* by female students in the south-west public schools are among the religious issues that have claimed lives of some Nigerian Muslims and Christians (Quadri, 2013).

Nigeria has witnessed both the intra and inter-religious conflicts. For instance, due to doctrinal and ideological differences, a Muslim group will accuse another Muslim group of infidelity and heretical practices. For example, *ahlul-sunnah* (group that claims to have followed the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.)) has accused *ahl-Tariqah* (the Sufis) of heretical innovations in Islam. Similar accusation of infidelity is levied by the protestant churches against the Catholic Church (Nweke, 2019).

The negative exhibition of ethnicity has also been identified as a major factor contributing to the underdevelopment of Nigeria. The recurring desire of one ethnic group to dominate another remains a pervasive issue across the country. This fear of ethnic domination, especially among minority groups, was one of the root causes of the Nigerian Civil War, which lasted for thirty months. The aftermath of the war continues to foster ethnic suspicion, division, and animosity in contemporary Nigeria.

Commenting on the detrimental effects of ethnicity on political development, Umenzinwa (2012:221) notes:

“The level of ethnic rivalry in Nigeria has made it impossible for her to produce the right leaders who live above boards, who exude impeccable and predictable character, and who are ready to spend themselves for the development of the nation. Ethnic affiliation has not allowed such leaders to emerge. At each election, the emphasis has always been on where the candidates come from rather than on the right candidates for the election.”

From the foregoing, it is evident that both religious and ethnic pluralism have not been properly managed in Nigeria, despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing freedom of religion and protection of cultural diversity. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria explicitly protects this right. Chapter IV, Section 38 states:

“Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance” (Ministry of Information and Culture, 2004:78).

Regrettably, some Nigerian politicians have exploited religion and ethnicity as tools for political mobilisation and manipulation, often at the expense of national cohesion, effective governance, and sustainable development. A recent illustration of this is the controversy surrounding the Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket of the All Progressives Congress (APC), featuring Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Kashim Shettima in the 2023 general elections. The ticket drew widespread criticism and reignited debates over religious balance in national leadership, further highlighting how religious intolerance and ethnic sentiment continue to obstruct national progress.

This raises a fundamental question: how can Nigeria learn from the experiences of early Muslim societies, particularly those from the 7th century onward, in managing religious and ethnic diversity? The subsequent sections of this paper seek to address this pertinent issue.

Lessons for Nigerians on the Management of Religious and Ethnic Pluralism in the Muslim World

The plurality of Nigeria is incontrovertible. This diversity is clearly evident in the multiplicity of cultures, languages, ethnicities, and religions represented across the six geo-political zones, namely, North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-East, South-South, and South-West. Fundamentally, all human beings, irrespective of their colours, ethnicities, and languages, originate from a common ancestral lineage, Adam and Ḥawwā' (Eve), as taught in the Qur'ān (Q4:1, Q49:13). Therefore, adherents of different religions and members of various ethnic groups in Nigeria ought to perceive themselves as part of a single, unified human family. Nigerians from diverse ethnic backgrounds are encouraged to coexist peacefully and harmoniously, as exemplified by the city of Madinah, where intercommunal cooperation thrived. In the Nigerian

context, it is practically unfeasible for any ethnic group to live in isolation without economic and political interdependence. Muslims alone cannot advance Nigeria's political and economic development without the collaboration of adherents of Christianity, Traditional Religion, and other belief systems. Likewise, ethnic groups such as the Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, and Tiv in the Northern region cannot independently meet their economic needs without interacting with other ethnic groups from the South-East and South-West, and vice versa. From an Islamic perspective, every ethnic group is indispensable, and every Nigerian deserves a sense of belonging, as all human beings share a common origin, Adam and Eve (Q4:1).

During the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in Madinah (622–632 CE), religious inclusivism and tolerance were both encouraged and practiced among Arabs of various tribes and clans who professed Paganism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A cordial and robust interfaith relationship existed between the Prophet and the *Ahl al-Kitāb* (People of the Book, i.e., Jews and Christians) in Madinah. This historical relationship demonstrates that Islam acknowledges and promotes religious pluralism and inclusivism. Consequently, adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Traditional Religion in Nigeria may draw lessons from the Prophet's life and that of his successors in managing religious and ethnic diversity. The propagation of exclusivist and particularist ideologies by some religious practitioners has hampered constructive interfaith relations in Nigeria. The absolutist claim by some religious adherents that only their faith guarantees salvation or paradise is detrimental to fostering interreligious dialogue and interaction. Given the historical endurance of Traditional Religion, Islam, and Christianity in Nigeria, it is plausible to assert that each contains elements of truth. From the Islamic viewpoint, the existence of multiple religions is a divine design, as God allows for different paths to reach Him (Q10:99). Therefore, every religion should be accommodated and tolerated within Nigeria's pluralistic framework (Q2:256, Q109:1–6).

An additional lesson that Nigerians can draw from the Muslim world concerning the management of religious and ethnic diversity lies in the historical precedent of treaties and peaceful negotiations between Muslims and non-Muslims living in Muslim-majority societies. The treaties,

covenants, and constitutional arrangements established during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) enabled non-Muslims to live peacefully within the Muslim community. For instance, the Covenant with the Christians of Najran, the Covenant with the Christians of Persia, and the Constitution of Madinah were all formulated to ensure the peaceful coexistence and religious freedom of Christians and Jews (Thowhidul, 2018). In the modern era, Muslim-majority countries such as Turkey, Albania, Egypt, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan have continued this legacy by managing religious and ethnic pluralism effectively. In these nations, individuals of various faiths are permitted to practice their religions without fear or persecution.

Nigeria, being a multi-religious state, should take cues from these countries by reinforcing its religious institutions. This could be achieved through legislative actions by the National and State Assemblies, including the establishment of a Federal Ministry of Religious Affairs and state-level legislation tailored to managing religious and ethnic diversity. Additionally, every state should establish an interreligious or interfaith council, following the precedent set by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his successors, to promote dialogue and interaction between adherents of different religions, especially among Muslims and Christians.

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that religious and ethnic pluralism constitute fundamental aspects of human existence. Since the 7th century, Islamic teachings have provided guidance on managing religious and ethnic diversity through the promotion of religious freedom, tolerance, love, and peaceful coexistence with people of varying cultural and religious backgrounds, as enshrined in the Islamic scriptures. However, the legacy of British colonisation, the emergence of religious exclusivism and particularism in the 19th century, and the politicisation of religion by the political class in the 21st century have significantly hindered Nigeria—a multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation—from effectively managing its religious and ethnic diversity for socio-economic and political advancement in the contemporary era. It is posited that if Nigerians draw practical lessons from the Muslim world's approach to religious and ethnic pluralism, the country could experience meaningful development and

sustained peaceful coexistence among adherents of different faiths and ethnic groups.

Recommendations

Arising from this study, the following recommendations are offered with a view to managing religious and ethnic pluralism in Nigeria for national development:

- (i) Nigerians, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds or tribal affiliations, should see themselves as members of the same family or progenitor-Adam and Hawa' and exhibit love among themselves. Hence, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and other ethnic groups in Nigeria should trace their common origin to their fore parents-Adam and Hawa (Eve) by coming together as one big family for the unity, peace and development of Nigeria.
- (ii) Nigerian government at all levels should strengthen their religious institutions by making laws through state and federal legislatures for the management of religious pluralism that will promote religious inclusivism and tolerance.
- (iii) Federal and state governments should establish a Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs for the management of religious and ethnic diversity at the state and federal levels.
- (iv) Individuals belonging to different faiths (Islam, Christianity, Traditional Religion and others) should encourage and promote interfaith dialogues through the establishment of interfaith council or committee at local government level by the apex religious bodies such as Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).
- (v) Nigerians of diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds should exhibit their religious doctrines that teach love, tolerance, good neighbourliness, truthfulness, sincerity, peace, etc., that are germane to the development of the country

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