

## **Understanding the Islamic Viewpoint on Religious Pluralism in Nigeria with Special Reference to *Ahl Al-Kitab***

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**Abstract:** Islam, as a universal religion and a complete way of life, acknowledges the existence of other religions just as it does to the diversity of human nature. This paper focuses on the Jews and the Christians, referred to as *Ahl al-Kitab*, who are given special recognition in the Qur'an, which is God's final revelation to humanity. Islam, therefore, allows for Muslims to interact with the followers of other religions, especially the peace-loving and non-hostile non-Muslims. Despite this permission, there are often hostile relationships between Muslims, Christians, and adherents of other religious traditions in some parts of the world, including Nigeria; this hostility often leads to violence that may be fuelled by political, tribal, or regional undertones. Over time, this trend has led to the loss of lives and the destruction of invaluable properties and places of worship across multicultural and multi-religious communities. Observably, ignorance and misconceptions by the adherents of the two major religions play a considerable role in virtually all the politico-religious crises and communal-tribal clashes that have occurred in Nigeria since the late 1970s, thereby challenging the peaceful coexistence and national development of the nation. This paper unveils the Islamic viewpoint on religious pluralism and the unmatched position afforded to the *Ahl al-Kitab* by Islam with the aim of fostering an understanding among the people for better interfaith relations and national development. The researchers recommend that the government use all possible means to check the excesses of individuals and groups against the manipulation of religion to cause unrest, and that religious bodies use

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dialogue as a viable tool to foster understanding. This paper uses exegetical and descriptive methods of research.

**Keywords:** Religious Pluralism in Nigeria, *Ahl al-Kitab*, Islam, Interreligious Relations in Nigeria, Peaceful Coexistence, National Development in Nigeria.

## Introduction

Islam, as a universal religion and a complete code of conduct, respects and recognises the diversity of human nature from all of its ramifications. It is believed to be the religion of all God-sent Prophets and Messengers from Adam to Abraham, to Noah, to Moses, to Jesus, and up to the seal of the chosen Apostles, Muhammad (PBUH) (Qur'an 13: 7; 22: 78; and 42:13). Those who believe in the last Prophet and the Qur'an as a revelation from God in addition to all the previous Prophets and their divine scriptures are called Muslims. However, as a whole, those who disbelieve in this fundamental article of the Islamic belief system are called *kuffar* (i.e., non-believers or non-Muslims). Within this category of Qur'anic expression consists of all the *Mushrikun* (polytheists), the *Majus* (Zoroastrians), the *Mulhidun* (atheists), the *Sabi'in* (Sabians), the *Yahud* (Jews), the *Nasara* (Christians), *et cetera*. From this group (i.e. the *kuffar*), Islam accords the Jews and the Christians a special unique mention with the title, *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Scripture). This is by virtue of them being the recipients of God's last two revered books before the Qur'an, namely the *Taurat* (Torah) given to Moses (PBUH) and the *Injil* (Gospel) given to Jesus (PBUH). In furtherance to this, every Muslim is enjoined, as a matter of belief, to hold dearly, in reverence, all the Prophets of God sent to the Israelites, including those sent to the Jews and the Christians. Those Prophets, therefore, served their people in their time as sources of guidance leading to worship of God rather than of objects.

Due to the sense of connectivity between the Jews, Christians, and Muslims shown above, an atmosphere of peace should reign wherever they live together to sow the sense of religiosity across the globe, rather than conflict. This paper seeks to examine questions, such as what is the position of *Ahl al-Kitab* in Islam vis-à-vis the rights accorded to them? What is the approved level of interfaith relations and engagement

between the Muslims and the *Ahl al-Kitab* as enshrined in the Qur'an and how did the Prophet exemplify the maxims? These questions will be answered based on scholarly explanations using exegetical research methodology.

### **Research Problem**

In Nigeria, religious events have degenerated so rapidly in the last few decades that questions should be raised regarding the standpoint of the heavenly revealed writings. More often, the question remains as to why do communal, tribal, transborder, and political clashes transform to religious crisis between the Christians and the Muslims in Nigeria. Should such an antagonistic situation truly prevail in Nigeria, in spite of the emphasis on peace in the Bible and in the Qur'an? What explanations could be advanced for the break in communication between the Christians and the Muslims in Nigeria, in view of the Qur'an's positive exhortation, which clearly denotes that Muslims are permitted to relate with non-Muslims amicably, with kindness and justice, unless they are hostile, or persecute or drive Muslims out of their homes? These are the questions which this study aims to resolve.

### **Methodology**

This study applied exegetical and descriptive methodologies in view of the necessity to analytically interpret ancient writings in a modern context to solve contemporary problems.

### **Definition of Terms**

Since some of the terms are used to mean different things in varying contexts, this study chose to make clear definitions of the following key terminologies as applied in the paper to ease comprehension.

### **Islam: A Religion and a Way of Life**

Linguistically, the word "Islam" is an Arabic term derived from two roots; *salam* (i.e., peace) and *silm* (i.e., submission). Technically, Islam means peace acquired by submitting one's will willingly to

the Almighty God (Naik, 2005). As a way of life, Islam dictates and regulates the entirety of a human being's religious and temporal life, cutting across religious or spiritual, social, economic, and political spheres, technically referred to as *ibadat* (devotion or worship) and *mu'amalat* (transaction or dealing). In this guise, Islam remains a belief system and a devotional endeavour of a Muslim. As such, in a popular hadith of the Prophet (PBUH) in which Angel Gabriel (AS) visited and asked him several questions with the view to teaching Muslims their religion, the important questions asked were "tell me about Islam" and "tell me about *Iman* (belief)". Instantly, the Prophet responded that:

Islam, is to testify that none is worthy of worship except God and Muhammad is a Messenger of God, establish *Salat* (prayer), give out *Zakat* (alms), observe *sawm* (fasting) of Ramadan and pay visit to the sacred Ka'bah for *Hajj* (pilgrimage)...*Iman* is to believe in Allah, His Angels, His revealed Books, His Messengers, the Last Day and to believe in *Qadr* (destiny) whether good or bad. (Bukhari, Vol. 1, Book 1, No. 7)

The above responses serve as the pillars and foundational principles of the belief system of Islam as a religion, which are to be observed by all Muslims. Based on these authorities, Islam can be understood to be the manifestation of the rooted Muslim culture and the centre point of their civilisation and value system.

Islam cannot be adequately explained without bringing to light the position of the Qur'an and Sunnah, which serve as the basic sources of Shari'ah (the Islamic Law). The former represents the last testament, God's divine communication to humanity in general and not to Muslims alone, which was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as explained in the Qur'an (25:1 and 34:28). In contrast, the latter explicates the practical life experiences of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the recipient and an expounder of the Qur'an. It is through the Qur'an and Hadith that Muslims come to know about their religion and how to relate with the *Ahl al-Kitab* and other non-Muslims. Both serve as the guiding principles and the scales with which the Muslims' actions and inactions are measured. Furthermore, the Qur'an by its name, *al-Furqan*, serves as a criterion to differentiate right from wrong, good from evil, and truth from falsehood. Ayoub's (2012) description of the position of the Qur'an and Sunnah in Islam is very apt, where he says:

The Qur'an and Sunnah are the two primary sources of Muslim faith, life, law and morality. They are as well the framework of the Islamic worldview and civilisation. The Qur'an is believed by all faithful Muslims to be literally the Book of God, and the Sunnah, or life-example of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), is the key to the understanding and interiorisation of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is for Muslims the foundation of their faith and the Sunnah is the framework of their morality. Together they constitute the two sources of the law (Shari'ah) of God, which is humanity's guide to prosperity and happiness in this life and to the bliss of the hereafter. Both the Qur'an and Sunnah were revealed by God. (p. xi)

### **Religious Pluralism**

Religion represents a system of belief in a supernatural controlling power. It is a set of beliefs, feelings, dogmas, and practices that define the relations between human beings and the Divine or Sacred Being, whereas pluralism etymologically denotes multiplicity in contrast to singularity. Therefore, plurality implies difference, hence diversity. In this regard, Ayoub (2012) views religious pluralism as the recognition of the multiplicity and diversity of religions as a natural or divinely-willed phenomenon (pp. 40-41). This is unlike how some perspectives view it as the validity of many ways (religions) to God or the validity of many gods, which is an absolute inclusivist ideology, pointing to the relativity of truth. In essence, the viewpoint of Islam on religious pluralism is also dissimilar to the majority exclusivist Christian ideology as portrayed in John 14:5-6 and Acts 4:12, depicting Jesus Christ (PBUH) as "the way, truth and life" through whom alone, lies the salvation as well as the doctrine of "*salus extra ecclesiam non est*" (outside the Church there is no salvation) formulated by the third century North African theologian, Cyprian (Ayoub, 2012, p. 40).

Islam, as a religion, uniquely acknowledges the ideology of the existence of multiple religions while validating the messages of all other Prophets that preceded Muhammad (PBUT) as truth from God. As a testimony to this fact, the Qur'an mentions the followers of other theistic religions, namely the Jews, Christians, and the Sabians, alongside the Muslims in a number of passages. Regarding the acceptability of their deeds, God the Almighty says:

Verily! Those who believe (i.e., the Muslims) and those who are Jews and Christians, and Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and do righteous good deeds shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Qur'an 2:62; a similar expression is also found in in Qur'an 5:69).

As per the recompense of any group of people in the Hereafter, God the Exalted says:

Verily, those who believe (in Allah and in His Messenger Muhammad SAW), and those who are Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians, and the Magians, and those who worship others besides Allah, truly, Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection. Verily! Allah is Witness over all things. (Qur'an 22:17)

Therefore, diversity of religions is a representation of human diversity that should serve as a meaningful framework of constructive dialogue among the adherents of various religious beliefs (Ayoub, 2012, p. 41).

### ***Ahl al-Kitab***

The term, "*Ahl al-Kitab*", is an Arabic compound word comprising of "*Ahl*" which means "people of" and "*Kitab*" which means "Book" or "Scripture". Therefore, it jointly connotes "people of the book or scripture". However, scholars differ in their categorisations regarding who the people of the book really are. For instance, Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam Shafi', and Ibn Hazm maintained that the term generally refers to all people of the previous scriptures, such as the Jews, Christians, Sabians (Qur'an 2:62), and Zoroastrians (Da'wah Institute of Nigeria, 2008, p. 52). In recent times, some people have a contention that even Muslims could literally be referred to as *Ahl al-Kitab* simply because they have a scripture, i.e. the Qur'an. However, it should be noted that it is the Qur'an that gives the title to the nations that preceded it; therefore, Muslims can only be technically called people of the book if addressed as such by a divine scripture after the Qur'an, which ultimately would not exist. However, according to the majority of scholars, the term "*Ahl al-Kitab*" is an honorary name given specifically to the Jews (*Yahud*)

and the Christians (*Nasara*) in the Qur'an who are in many other places referred to as *banu Israil* (children of Israel). The phrase "*Ahl al-Kitab*" has been mentioned in several occasions in the Qur'an, such as in the following chapters and verses: 2:105, 2:109, 2:144-146, 2:159, 2:213, 3:110, 3:113, 3:199, 4:123, 4:131, 5:77, 7:157, and 29:46-47. We exegetically analysed some of these citations in what follows as reference points.

### **Islam and Universal Brotherhood**

Islam, as a universally approved religion by God from the onset of human existence till the end of time (Qur'an 3:19), acknowledges the singularity of human source through Adam and Eve. Allah (SWT) says in the Qur'an, "O humankind, fear your Lord Who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women..." (4:1). In addition, He also says:

O humankind, indeed We have created you from (a single pair of) a male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may come to know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has *At-Taqwa* [i.e., one of the *Muttaqun* (pious)]. Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware. (Qur'an 49:13)

It could be inferred from the above verses that human beings, irrespective of the language they speak, the tribe they belong to, the complexion of their skin, the region they come from, the belief or religion they profess to, and the gender they belong to, share a common origin and hence, become brothers in humanity. Therefore, no one is superior to another, except by piety as explained by the Prophet (PBUH) in his last sermon as he said that all mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also, a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action. As such, Islam makes human life, faith, honour, lineage, intellect, wealth, and being just to everyone, even if it is against oneself, inviolable as its universal *maqasid* (higher intents of Islamic law-Shari'ah) (Da'wah Institute of Nigeria, 2015, p. 215).

The aforementioned stance notes that Islam frowns at and disproves of regionalism, chauvinism, xenophobia, tribalism, and all other negative stereotypes, prejudices, and cruelty against anybody on account of any of the above diversities of human nature. In spite of the accommodating spirit of Islam, it abhors injustice in the least irreligiosity, treason, and *shirk* (Qur'an 4:48 and 6:21).

### **Diversity of Human Nature and the Stance of Islam**

According to the Australian Multicultural Foundation and Robert Bean Consulting, diversity refers to the significant differences between people, including perceptions of differences that need to be considered in particular situations and circumstances (Guan, 2010, p. 8). Such variations are the characteristics that make a person unique, such as age, gender, ethnicity or culture, region, religion or faith, education level, and family background. These parameters of diversity are strictly for recognition and should serve as blessings and sources of strength for humanity, although it has been wrongfully perceived. Based on the authorities quoted above from the Qur'an (4:1 and 49:13), Islam calls for the understanding and appreciation of the differences of one another. Diversity is, therefore, a sign of God's omnipotence and divine will to do as He pleases, which should be appreciated by all. Therefore, the human diversity in racial and cultural affinities is a representation of the diversity and plurality in religious affiliations; all of which Islam concedes.

The religious diversity among mankind is a divine decree purposely designed by God to fulfil His order of placement of creatures into various groups. Allah (SWT) says in the Qur'an: "If your Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind One People: but they will not cease to be diverse" (Q: 11:118). He also declares that: "To each of you (religions) God (Allah) has prescribed a law (*shir'atan*) and a way (*minhaj*). If God (Allah) had willed he would have made you a single people. But God's purpose is to test you in what He has given each of you. So, strive in the pursuit of virtue (5:48).

This passage shows that it is God's ordainment that people must belong to different religions and be judged based on their level of compliance and godliness in the Hereafter. Across the globe, there are



no less than 4,200 different religions from among the monotheistic, polytheistic, atheistic, anthropomorphic, and indigenous or traditional beliefs (Satterfield, 2014). These include, inter alia, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism, but the most widely practiced are the first two.

### **Prophet Abraham (PBUH): The Father of Faith**

Abraham (PBUH) was one of the mightiest messengers of God through whom He transformed humanity and promised eternal bliss to whoever agreed with and followed their guidance. Abraham (PBUH) is described in the Qur'an as an *Ummah* (a nation) for his firm stance towards *Tawhid* (monotheism) and invited his father as well as his people to join its cause (Qur'an 16:120). He was a stern advocate against all forms of idolatry in his time (Qur'an 21:51-71; 19:41-50; and 14:35). God answered his prayers by choosing from among his descendants, Prophets, and Messengers who conveyed divine messages to humanity at different times and places in the annals of history (Qur'an 57:26 and 2:129). He was regarded as the father of faith by the adherents of the world's three major religions, namely Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

Historically, in addition to being a spiritual father, Prophet Abraham (PBUH) was found to be the biological father of the three Prophets sent to the Jews, Christians, and Muslims. From his wife, Sarah, God gave him a son, Ishaq (Qur'an 11:69-73) (Isaac, the father of the Israelites) through whose offspring, the Prophets Musa (Moses) and Isa (Jesus) (Peace Be Upon Them), the last two Prophets from Banu Isra'il, came forth. Likewise, from his other wife, Hajar (Hagar), God gave him another son, Isma'il (Qur'an 14:37-38) (Ishmael, the father of the Arabs), through whose loins, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the last and universal messenger of Islam, descended (Ibn Kathir, n.d.). Therefore, because of this bio-spiritual ancestry, the Christians, Jews, and Muslims associate their faiths with Prophet Abraham (PBUH). As a result, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are called Abrahamic faiths.

Notwithstanding the above historical fact about the biological link between Prophet Abraham (PBUH) and the other three noble Prophets of God as explained in the above paragraph, the claim of the Jews and the Christians that Abraham (PBUH) was one of them has been

challenged by the Qur'an and confirms his affiliation only to Islam and Muslims. This is where Allah (SWT) says:

O people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians)! Why do you dispute about Ibrahim (Abraham), while the *Taurat* (Torah) and the *Injeel* (Gospel) were not revealed till after him? Have you then no sense? Verily, you are those who have disputed about that of which you have knowledge. Why do you then dispute concerning that which you have no knowledge? It is Allah Who knows, and you know not. Ibrahim (Abraham) was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was a true Muslim *Hanifa* (Islamic Monotheism - to worship none but Allah Alone) and he was not of *Al-Mushrikun*. (Qur'an 3:65-67).

In verse 68 of the same chapter, God the Exalted made clear about those who have the right to associate themselves with Abraham (PBUH): "Verily, among mankind who have the best claim to Ibrahim (Abraham) are those who followed him, and this Prophet (Muhammad SAW) and those who have believed (Muslims). And Allah is the Wali (Protector and Helper) of the believers". Consequently, by implication, had the Jews and the Christians believed in the prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH), their claim to Abraham (PBUH) would have been valid because he was also a Muslim.

Moreover, not only was Abraham (PBUH) a Muslim, but God in the Qur'an also confirms him as the father in faith to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his followers, and that Allah (SWT) Himself named them together with Abraham as Muslims, where He says:

And strive hard in Allah's Cause as you ought to strive (with sincerity and with all your efforts that His Name should be superior). He has chosen you (to convey His Message of Islamic Monotheism to mankind by inviting them to His religion, Islam), and has not laid upon you in religion any hardship, it is the religion of your father Ibrahim (Abraham) (Islamic Monotheism). It is He (Allah) Who has named you Muslims both before and in this (the Qur'an), that the Messenger (Muhammad SAW) may be a witness over you and you be witnesses over mankind! So, perform *As-Salat* (*Iqamat-as-Salat*), give *Zakat* and hold

fast to Allah [i.e. have confidence in Allah, and depend upon Him in all your affairs] He is your *Maula* (Patron, Lord, etc.), what an Excellent *Maula* (Patron, Lord, etc.) and what an Excellent Helper! (Qur'an 22:78)

### ***Ahl al-Kitab* from the Spectacles of the Qur'anic and Prophetic Traditions**

To show the closeness of the people of the book to the Muslims, God the Almighty in various places of the Qur'an has described them with both praiseworthy and blameworthy qualities. In the following verse, God the Exalted describes them as, "Those to whom We gave the Scripture (Jews and Christians) recognise him (Muhammad PBUH) as they recognise their sons..." (Qur'an 2:146). This verse means that those who are well acquainted with the narratives and the coming of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in their scriptures, know him just as they know their own sons. By implication, they ought never to have rejected the message of goodwill and well-meaning brought by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), as further explained in the following verse:

Those who follow the Messenger, the Prophet who can neither read nor write (i.e., Muhammad PBUH) whom they find written with them in the *Taurat* (Torah/the law) (Deuteronomy 18:15) and the *Injil* (Gospel) (John 14:16), - he commands them for *Al-Ma'ruf*; and forbids them from *Al-Munkar*; he allows them as lawful *At-Taiyibat*, and prohibits them as unlawful *Al-Khaba'ith*, he releases them from their heavy burdens (of Allah's Covenant), and from the fetters (bindings) that were upon them. So those who believe in him (Muhammad SAW), honour him, help him, and follow the light (the Qur'an) which has been sent down with him, it is they who will be successful. (Qur'an 7:157)

Despite the *Ahl al-Kitab's* rejectionist approach to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his message, the Qur'an impartially eulogises the admirable qualities of the righteous people among them who answered the above clarion call of the Prophet and rebuked those who rejected it by saying:

Not all of them are alike; a party of the people of the Scripture stands for the right, they recite the verses of Allah during the hours of the night, prostrating themselves in prayer. They believe in Allah and the Last Day; they enjoin *Al-Ma'ruf* and forbid *Al-Munkar*; and they hasten in (all) good works; and they are among the righteous. And whatever good they do, nothing will be rejected of them; for Allah knows well those who are *Al-Muttaqun* (the pious) ... (Qur'an 3:113-117)

In other Qur'anic verses, such as 28:52-54 and 2:121, a similar statement is made by God to reiterate the above point. However, the following verse is more illustrative, where He says:

And there are, certainly, among the people of the scripture (Jews and Christians), those who believe in Allah and in that which has been revealed to you, and in that which has been revealed to them, humbling themselves before Allah. They do not sell the Verses of Allah for a little price, for them is a reward with their Lord. Surely, Allah is swift in account. (Qur'an 3:199)

While commenting on the above verse, Ibn Kathir (2003) cited Imam al-Hasan Al-Basri who posited about Allah's statement:

And there are, certainly, among the People of the Scripture, those who believe in Allah..." that it refers to: "The People of the Book before Muhammad was sent, who believed in Muhammad and recognised Islam. Allah gave them a double reward, for the faith that they had before Muhammad, and for believing in Muhammad (after he was sent as Prophet)".

In a corroborative Prophetic tradition as to the above exegesis, Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (RA) said that the Messenger of Allah said: "Three persons will acquire a double reward (in the hereafter), among them is a person from among the People of the Book who believed in his Prophet and in me..." (Reported by Bukhari and Muslim).

Moreover, some of the followers of Jesus Christ (PBUH), the Christians, are addressed as those in whose hearts there exist mercy and compassion (Qur'an 57:27); hence, because of their love for peace, soft-

mindedness, nearness to Muslims in terms of belief and their utmost fear of God, unlike the Jews and the polytheists, are specifically and exceptionally singled out for a tribute in the following Qur'anic verses:

Verily, you will find the strongest among men in enmity to the believers (Muslims) the Jews and those who are *Al-Mushrikun* (see Qur'an 2:105), and you will find the nearest in love to the believers (Muslims) those who say: "We are Christians." That is because amongst them are priests and monks, and they are not proud. And when they (who call themselves Christians) listen to what has been sent down to the Messenger (Muhammad SAW), you see their eyes overflowing with tears because of the truth they have recognised. They say: "Our Lord! We believe; so, write us down among the witnesses ... So, because of what they said, Allah rewarded them Gardens under which rivers flow (in Paradise), they will abide therein forever. Such is the reward of good-doers. But those who disbelieved and belied Our *Ayat* (proofs, evidences, verses, lessons, signs, revelations, etc.), they shall be the dwellers of the (Hell) Fire". (Qur'an 5:82-86)

The aforementioned verses imply that Christians are more loving to Muslims than the Jews. Therefore, where Muslims and Christians live together, there should be more understanding, harmony, peace, and respect among them, unlike what is experienced in many multi-religious societies, such as Nigeria. For the simple fact that, on one hand, Muslims believe and adore all Prophets of God, including Moses and Jesus (PBUT), Jews and Christians should not have any grudges against them. On the other hand, Christians also believe in Prophets Moses and Jesus (not as the second person in trinity or as a son of God), although most of them with the exception of Muhammad (PBUH); however, they are better than the Jews, who only believe in Moses (PBUH) but disbelieve in Jesus and Muhammad (PBUT). This is notwithstanding Moses' supplication to God in the Taurat for the Jews in Deuteronomy 18:15-20, and Jesus' for the Christians in the Gospel of John 14:16 and 16:7, prophesying of the Prophet to come after them. Therefore, it could be argued that if there are only two religious groups in the world who should work for peace and ensure that it reigns at any point in time, they should be Muslims and Christians. However, this can only be feasible

if each adheres strictly to the undiluted dictates of the scripture against the influence of egocentrism and ulterior motives driven by the devilish forces of whims and caprices. This is the atmosphere one would wish to witness in Christian-Muslim societies.

### **The Qur’anic Guiding Principle for Interfaith Relations**

Qur’an as God’s revelation and His last testament to humanity contains divine instructions to those who believe in it on who to relate with, how to go about the relationship, and what is the crux of such interfaith relationship. This is because God has made it clear that it is His divine arrangement and will that human beings cannot belong to the same religious canopies and socio-cultural identities. Therefore, as they coexist within the same families and communities, it is inescapable that they relate with one another. The following verses define for Muslims who to relate with and who not to relate with, when God the Almighty says:

Allah does not forbid you to deal justly and kindly with those who fought not against you on account of religion and did not drive you out of your homes. Verily, Allah loves those who deal with equity. It is only as regards those who fought against you on account of religion, and have driven you out of your homes, and helped to drive you out, that Allah forbids you to befriend them. And whosoever will befriend them, then such are the *Zalimun* (wrong-doers those who disobey Allah). (Qur’an 60:8-9)

The statement, “Allah does not forbid you...”, implies in this context a positive exhortation which expressly denotes that Muslims are permitted to relate with non-Muslims amicably with kindness and justice, unless they are hostile, persecute or drive Muslims out of their homes (Da’wah Institute of Nigeria, 2008, p. 17). According to Imam Ibn al-Jawzi (as cited in Taha, 2003), “The verse permits association with those who have not declared war against the Muslims and allows kindness towards them, even though they may not be allies” (p. 26). Therefore, if the teachings of these verses are considered and put into practice, then peace would reign and linger forever across the globe. This is in the event where non-Muslims desist from persecuting Muslims, and the Muslims adhere to the injunctions of God in the Qur’an. In this guise, the

verses emphasise and enjoin the believers to be kind, just, and righteous and render back trust belonging to everybody irrespective of religion, region, or tribe. In essence, when anyone seeks to live peacefully with the Muslims, the Muslims are in turn duty-bound to ensure that peace reigns between them and should prevent any upheaval and the causes of such upheaval from their side. It is based on this benchmark that all interfaith relations should be built.

### ***Ahl al-Kitab* and the Muslims: Some Areas of Relationship**

In addition to the general permission to Muslims to relate with the non-hostile non-Muslims at individual and group levels in things that are lawful for the collective good of the society, the following verse provides some specific imperative areas of convergence between Muslims and the *Ahl al-Kitab*:

Made lawful to you this day are *At-Tayyibat*. The food (slaughtered cattle, eatable animals, etc.) of the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians) is lawful to you and yours is lawful to them. (Lawful to you in marriage) are chaste women from the believers and chaste women from those who were given the Scripture (Jews and Christians) before your time, when you have given their due *Mahr* (Bridal money), desiring chastity (i.e. taking them in legal wedlock) not committing illegal sexual intercourse, nor taking them as girl-friends. And whosoever disbelieves in the Oneness of Allah and in all the other articles of faith, then fruitless is his work, and in the Hereafter, he will be among the losers. (Qur'an 5:5)

From the above verse, two major interfaith relationships are licensed to Muslims, namely the food of and interfaith marriage with the Jews and the Christians. Regarding the food, Ibn Kathir (2003), under his exegesis of the above verse opined that scholars have explained that it includes the eatable lawful animals slaughtered by the *Ahl al-Kitab* as stated by Ibn 'Abbas, Abu Umamah, Mujahid, Sa'id bin Jubayr, Ikrimah, 'Ata', Al-Hasan, Makhul, Ibrahim An-Nakha'i, As-Suddi, and Muqatil bin Hayyan. Ibn Kathir (2003) explained further that this permission is, "Because the People of the Book believe that slaughtering for other than Allah is prohibited. They mention Allah's name upon slaughtering their

animals, even though they have deviant beliefs about Allah that do not benefit His Majesty.”

However, despite the aforementioned permission for Muslims to eat the food including the meat of animals slaughtered by the people of the book, many Muslims in Nigeria find it difficult to contextually apply the text. This is most specifically due to some impending realities surrounding the questions of in whose name and for what purpose the animal is slaughtered for and whether it is in itself lawful for the Muslims. These important theological questions are informed by God’s command to Muslims to joyfully eat the meat of lawful animals slaughtered in His name and solely for His sake; otherwise, the meat is prohibited to them (Qur’an 5:3). This golden rule applies not only to non-Muslims but also to Muslims who slaughter in the name of any mortal being and/or as a sacrifice to any other than God (Ahmad Ibn Ali, 1405, p. 155). It is also worth noting that, for most of the Muslims interviewed by this research on why they do not eat meat slaughtered by the Christians in Nigeria, the above reasons form part of their reservations.

In addition, some of the Muslims chose not to eat the meat specifically for fear of disobeying God’s command, as they observe that the Christians whom they live together with eat some animals that are prohibited in Islam, such as pigs, dogs, donkeys, and monkeys (S. Rabiu, 2017), albeit some of them are also made unlawful in the Bible (Leviticus 11:7; Acts 15:29). Other Muslims in their own right shun meat slaughtered only for Christian festivities, such as Christmas (Ahmad, 2017). This is simply because Christians themselves are not unanimous as to how truly Christian Christmas is and ask further as to whether it is biblically commanded by God or just a teaching of the church or an old pagan festival adopted by some Christian leaders and incorporated into what later came to be known as Christianity (Jerold, n.d.). Based on our analysis, the above viewpoints of Muslims evolve and revolve around the controversial position of Jesus Christ even within Christianity. While some Christians, like Muslims, believe Jesus to be God’s servant and His Prophet (PBUH) born miraculously without male intervention, many Christians consider him to be either Son of God or God, i.e. one of the three persons in the divine trinity. This fundamental belief of the Christians makes Muslims accuse them of polytheism in contrast to the monotheism preached and practiced by Jesus Christ (PBUH). These are



some pertinent theological issues that should be clarified by Christianity for a smooth interfaith relationship with the Muslims.

As a wrap up to the question of eating meat slaughtered by the *Ahl al-Kitab*, Muslim scholars differ over some issues concerning the permissibility of the meat served during their festivities such as Christmas, the mode of slaughtering, and other details (Ibn Rushd, n.d., pp. 461-464). Some permit it irrespective of the mode of slaughtering, if done for the sake of God (Ibn Al-Arabi, n.d., p. 55), while others do not with some reservations (Al-Qardawi, n.d., pp. 54-57). The following statement by the Prophet's companion, Caliph Ali bin Abi Talib (RA), is a criterion in this regard where he said:

If you hear a Jew or Christian mentioning other than Allah (on their animal) do not eat it. If you did not hear them mentioning other than Allah on it, eat it because Allah has permitted their animal for us and He knows what they utter. (Ahmad Ibn Ali, 1405, p. 155)

Another permitted relationship for Muslims is the interfaith marriage with chaste women from among the Jews and the Christians, which many other religions do not allow (Da'wah Institute of Nigeria, 2008, p. 27), where Allah (SWT) says in the Qur'an:

(Lawful to you in marriage) are... and chaste women from those who were given the Scripture (Jews and Christians) before your time, when you have given their due *Mahr*, desiring chastity (i.e., taking them in legal wedlock) not committing illegal sexual intercourse, nor taking them as girlfriends. (5:5)

From the above Qur'anic articulation, it is clear that Muslims are simply allowed by God to marry chaste women from the *Ahl al-Kitab* who must be given their due *Mahr*. Likewise, Muslims are prohibited from taking them as illegal sexual partners for pre- or extra-marital affairs, and not even as girlfriends. Therefore, any Muslim who does otherwise cannot claim to be guided by the tenets of Islam but could have been driven by the forces of devilish temptations and their lustful desires. It is imperative to mention that no evidence in Islam permits marriage between Muslim women and men of the *Ahl al-Kitab*. However, the researchers discovered via interaction with many Christian men over

time that they assume this Islamic rule to be unfair to them and asked why Islam should allow its men to marry Christian women but disallow it if it were vice-versa.

In simple terms, there are reasons and wisdoms behind all rules in Islam, and this limited interfaith marriage is not an exception. It indeed explicates the level of legitimate mutual love and intimate relationships that Muslims can extend to some non-hostile *Ahl al-Kitab* women and their families in this regard. Summarily, since the fact that this pattern of marriage is permitted in Islam, some scholars discourage it due to a number of reasons. One of which is that, in marriage, a couple should help boost their partners spiritually; a stride that may be difficult since the couple subscribes to different religious worldviews. Additionally, the following explanation by the Da'wah Institute of Nigeria reiterates that:

The situation is even worse (and therefore prohibited) in the case of a Muslim woman married to a non-Muslim husband since, more often than not, the husband is regarded as the head of the family. Under the Shari'ah, the protected rights of the wife (whether Muslim or non-Muslim) include (among others) her right to proper feeding, clothing, shelter, medication, visits, good treatment, religious freedom, inheritance and other financial and non-financial rights (Qur'an 4:34; 2:233, 240; 4:4-5, 24, etc.). A Muslim husband is not allowed to hinder his non-Muslim wife from practicing her religion. Some of these rights are not guaranteed under other religious legal systems. A non-Muslim husband cannot be compelled to guarantee those rights to his wife because he (being a non-Muslim) is not bound by the Shari'ah. The Muslim wife may be put under pressure to renounce or be negligent of Islam. The husband may also insist on their children being brought up as non-Muslims. Also, how can a true Muslim woman live happily with one who feels free to consider her Prophet as an imposter while she respects the Prophet of his own religion (PBUH)? Not only may the husband interfere with her religious duties (for example, prayer, fasting, *Hajj* and *Da'wah*) but he may expect his wife to adapt to an un-Islamic life style in respect of serving alcohol and pork, abandoning *hijab* and

attending un-Islamic gatherings, parties, etc. He would naturally encourage their children to enjoy these things too, and the wife would have no legal right to resist, since the “husband” would not be accountable to the Shari’ah or to a Shari’ah court. (p. 40)

Genuinely, therefore, Islam disallows a Muslim woman from marrying a non-Muslim man due to but not limited to the concerns pointed above surrounding the spirituality or religious development of the couple and the resultant effects on their children.

### **God’s Divine Command to Muslims in Relation to *Ahl al-Kitab***

Islam does not give Muslims an open-ended license for relationships with the *Ahl al-Kitab*, but approves to a level that would not encroach into the boundaries of the principle of *al-wala wa al-bara’* within the purview of the Shari’ah. Those confines are designed in such a way that both parties, apart from establishing a network of peace promoters, should as well remind one another of their commitment to the worship of the One and Only God, the Almighty. God Himself has the attribute of peace and He is the Giver of security (Qur’an 59:23), and thus, only through His service and obedience is peace guaranteed. Therefore, the Muslim-*Ahl al-Kitab* relationship should be built on common grounds as the verse says, “Say (O Muhammad SAW): O people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians): Come to a word that is just between us and you...” (Qur’an 3:64).

Historically, all the correspondences and other interfaith encounters Prophet Muhammad and his followers had with the Jews and the Christians were epitomised by the dictates of the verse mentioned above in compliance to the verses in the Qur’an (60:8-9) as elucidated in the subsequent sections. Until the end of time, these verses and the Prophetic model worthy of emulation (Qur’an 33:21) expounded above should be the guiding principles for interfaith engagements between the Muslims and any non-Muslim individual or group, particularly the peace-loving ones (Qur’an 8:61). In the same vein, it is not expected of a Muslim to compromise any spiritual or moral standard of Islam while seeking for common grounds to live peacefully with the *Ahl al-Kitab*, because God warns, “...Never will the Jews or the Christians be satisfied with you

unless you follow their form of religion. Say: ‘The Guidance of Allah is the only Guidance...’ (Qur’an 2:120). In spite of this, Muslims are enjoined by God to partner in doing all good and righteous things but to desist from evil and sinful ventures: “Help you one another in *Al-Birr* and *At-Taqwa* (virtue, righteousness and piety); but do not help one another in sin and transgression. And fear Allah. Verily, Allah is Severe in punishment” (Qur’an 5:2).

### **Reflective Moments in Prophet Muhammad’s Relations with the non-Muslims**

The life history of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is full of prototypical examples of the conduct of interfaith dialogue and interreligious interactions (A. Rabi, 2018, p. 41). He started to build the spirit of corporate social responsibility at youthful age, long before his call to Prophethood. He joined the peace negotiations and shared in the duties and rights of his society. The dearest to him were the *Hilf al-Fudul*, which was a league to protect the defenceless and guarantee the safety of strangers in Makkah (Kilani, 2014, p. 12); on this, he exclaimed, “If I were called to it now in the time of Islam, I would respond” (Sunan al-Kubra, No. 12114; Musnad Ahmad, No. 2904). Therefore, he is described in the Qur’an as the noblest of all in character worthy of emulation (Qur’an 33:21). While extolling his character, one of his wives, Aisha (RA), metaphorically portrayed him as the ‘walking Qur’an’ (Sunan Abu Dawud, No. 1342). Therefore, through his teachings and practical applications of the divine instructions, the Prophet sets the archetypical model for everything good, including interfaith relations. The multi-religious nature of his immediate and surrounding environment predominated with Christians, Jews, *Hunafa’*, and a host of other polytheists, in addition to divine guidance, nurtured him to excel in this venture sent as a mercy to humanity (Qur’an 21:107). The Prophet’s (PBUH) and all Muslims’ interfaith endeavours, especially with the *Ahl al-Kitab*, are informed and premised by the dictates of the following and other related injunctions in the Qur’an:

Say (O Muhammad SAW): O people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians): Come to a word that is just between us and you, that we worship none but Allah, and that we associate no partners with Him, and that none of us shall

take others as lords besides Allah. Then, if they turn away, say: "Bear witness that we are Muslims". (Qur'an 3:64)

From the onset of his Prophetic mission, though amidst inhumane treatment, Muhammad (PBUH) had non-Muslim neighbours; he traded and exchanged pleasantries with them. He used to accept their gifts, through one of which a Jewish woman plotted to kill him with poisoned mutton but did not succeed, although it led to the death of one of his companions who also ate from it (Bukhari, No. 2617 & 3169; Muslim, No. 2190). Despite the Prophet's hospitality, several attempts were made by the Jews to kill him, and they treacherously connived with the polytheists of Makkah against the Muslims and Islam. Finally, they breached the agreement entered into with the Prophet, which led to their expulsion from Madinah (Bukhari, No. 2375; Muslim, No. 1801). He used to visit their sick; for instance, a son to one of the Prophet's Jewish neighbours, who used to serve him, fell sick, and the Prophet visited and even invited him to Islam; under the permission of his father, the boy accepted the Prophet's call (Bukhari, No. 1356). From this narrative, a sense of tolerance, compassion, and gentleness is inferred as displayed by the Prophet (PBUH) towards all people. Thereafter, when the persecution, maltreatment, and torture of the Makkan polytheists against the emerging Muslim *ummah* became persistent and unbearable, in the year 614 CE, the Prophet (PBUH) sent a Muslim delegation to Abyssinia or Habasha (present day Ethiopia) to seek for political asylum under a Christian King called Najjashi (Anglicised as Negus), whose name was Ashama bin al-Abjar (Al-Mubarakpuri, 1979, p. 157). This marked the first historic formal international Christian-Muslim relations based on trust and confidence. In the same vein, the illustrative conversation that transpired between the king and the leader of the Muslims' delegation, Ja'far bin Abi Talib (RA), is another incredible historical interfaith engagement.

Another interfaith enterprise materialised when the Prophet (PBUH) received a delegation of 12 at first, and over 70 Yathribites from the two powerful tribes of Aws and Khazraj in the years 621 CE and 622 CE, respectively, which led to what is popularly known as the pledges of *al-Aqabah*. The history of these tribes was full of long-lasting continuous wars over trivial issues, as they revealed to the Prophet, "We have left our community, for no tribe is so divided by hatred and rancour as we are. Allah may cement our ties through you" (Al-Mubarakpuri, 1979,

p. 69). Due to the shared hospitality between the two parties and the respectful and understanding deliberations they had, the Prophet agreed to make *hijrah* from Makkah to Madinah with his followers in 622 CE, thereby forming a formidable Islamic government. In such a divinely guided and guarded migration, an interfaith succour surrounded by mutuality and trust also occurred because the guide in the journey was a non-Muslim named Abdullahi bin Uraiqit, whom the Prophet (PBUH) and Abu Bakr (RA) trusted and did not betray despite being hunted by oppressors (A. Rabi, 2018, p. 43).

Upon the momentous migration, a consolidated central government was established under the leadership of the Prophet (PBUH). This resulted in another milestone in the history of the cordial Muslim-*Ahl al-Kitab* relationship, namely the formulation of the Charter of Islamic Alliance (the Madinan Constitution) and a Pact with the Jews (Al-Mubarakpuri, 1979, pp. 87-90). Admirably, just as the Prophet (PBUH) established *ukhuwwah al-Islamiyyah*, in the same way, he established a peaceful relationship between the Muslims and non-Muslim tribes of Arabia. He succeeded in charting an alliance with the surrounding tribes and deconstructing the *jahiliyyah* acrimony and inter-tribal feuds. Additionally, well captured in the constitution were the rights and responsibilities of non-Muslims under the Islamic government who were accorded the immaculate title of *Ahl al-dhimmah* or *dhimmis*, treated with all sense of fairness and equity. They enjoyed the rights and utmost protection like the Muslims in the state as enshrined in the Shari'ah.

Moreover, apart from the famous treaty of *al-Hudaibiyyah* signed between the Prophet and the Makkans in the sixth year after *hijrah* which is yet another key moment in the face of interreligious discourse and mutual agreement, most of the correspondence the Prophet had with the kings and emperors of his time was also a resounding success in building strong interfaith relations. The recipients included the Abyssinian King, Najjashi (Negus), Juraij bin Matta, called Muqawqas, the vicegerent of Egypt and Alexandria, and Chosroes, the Emperor of Persia (A. Rabi, 2018, pp. 45-47).

Another revolutionary interfaith engagement that yielded positive interreligious and inter-communal harmonious coexistence in Islamic historiography is the interfaith dialogue that transpired between the

Prophet and a delegation of 60 Christians from Najran in the year 631 CE, which according to A. Rabiū (2018), “One cannot afford to delist while talking about interreligious encounters of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) with the *Ahl al-Kitab* that is still fresh in the golden pages of history” (p. 47). It was a knowledge-seeking-driven dialogue loaded with certain doctrinal questions posed to the Prophet (PBUH) by the group of Christians. When they asked him about the nature of God in Islam (see Qur’an 59:22-24), the Prophet (PBUH) answered them with *Surah al-Ikhlās*, a Qur’anic chapter that gives the standard definition of God, where God the Exalted says:

Say (O Muhammad (Peace be upon him)): “He is Allah, (the) One and Only. Allah-us-Samad (The Self-Sufficient Master, Whom all creatures need, He neither eats nor drinks). He begets not, nor was He begotten. And there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him. (Qur’an 112:1-4)

Regarding their question on the nature of the birth and position of Jesus (PBUH) in Islam (see Qur’an 19:16-37), the Prophet (PBUH) replied to them with the following verses from *Surah Āli ‘Imrān*:

Verily, the likeness of ‘Isa (Jesus) before Allah is the likeness of Adam. He created him from dust, then (He) said to him: “Be!” - And he was. (This is) the truth from your Lord, so be not of those who doubt. Then whoever disputes with you concerning him [‘Isa (Jesus)] after (all this) knowledge that has come to you, [i.e. ‘Isa (Jesus)] being a slave of Allah, and having no share in Divinity) say: (O Muhammad SAW) “Come, let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves - then we pray and invoke (sincerely) the Curse of Allah upon those who lie”. (Qur’an 3:59-61)

Likening the creation of Jesus to that of Adam in the above verses could be explained to mean that, if Jesus (PBUH) is given the share of divinity by Christians because he was born without a father, then Adam, who had no father or mother, is more deserving of being divine. However, both of them were human beings, God’s servants, and His Prophets (Acts 3:13; Qur’an 19:30); therefore, neither of them should be worshipped, except God the Almighty (Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:28-29; Qur’an 20:14). Since the attributes of God are those of perfection

and the ones of man's are not, it cannot be rationalised that one is human and divine at the same time. The other issue discussed bordered on the rights and obligations of non-Muslims under the Prophet's care, of which the enactment of the Madinan Charter addressed well enough as shall be discussed below. Afterwards, the members of the delegation agreed to the terms and continued paying *jizyah* while enjoying the freedom of religion and other protective rights under the Prophet's leadership (*Zahoor*).

### **Content Analysis of the Madinan Charter of Alliance**

The Madinan Charter or constitution (*Yasār*) is arguably the first constitution ever written that incorporates both religion and politics (i.e. state). It is relevant to current tensions existing between the Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Unfortunately, ignorance and fear, suspicion, and disrespect plague the interaction and stereotypes that exist between the followers of the three world's religions (White, 2010). While the presentation of the complete content of the charter is out of the scope of this paper, some of the rights and responsibilities accorded to the *dhimmis* shall be mentioned. They enjoyed the right to life, but those who committed an act of treachery and betrayal were prosecuted; they had the right to choose their own religion, as the Prophet (PBUH) provided them the freedom to practice their faith (Adebayo, 2015, p. 22), and he did not force anyone to become Muslim in compliance to the Qur'anic rule that, "there is no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256). They had the right to own property. The Prophet did not confiscate the property of any one of them; rather, he approved of the Muslims doing business with them. They enjoyed the right to protection and defence. The constitution of Madinah stated that each must help the other against anyone who attacks the people of this document.

Moreover, the pact of 'Umar bin al-Khattab (RA), the second caliph, required the *dhimmis* to pay annual poll tax (*jizyah*), in exchange for which they were ensured of their safety (*aman*), the security of their persons, families, and possessions (Hussam, 2014, p. 32). However, it should be noted that the Jews in Madinah were not required by the Prophet (PBUH) to pay the *jizyah*. Another right is fair treatment and standing up against wrongdoings committed against anyone. As such, the Prophet was just in passing judgements among the contracting



parties, even if it was at the expense of the Muslims. The two cases in which a Muslim was killed by the people of Khaybar (Bukhari, No. 6769; Muslim, No. 1669) and the land dispute between a Muslim and a Yemeni Jew referred to the Prophet are good examples (Bukhari, No. 2525; Muslim, No. 138).

In addition to this, the Prophet (PBUH) gave the *dhimmi*s the right to adjudicate their affairs based on the dictates of their own religious laws. He did not impose the Shari'ah laws on them so long as both parties in the matter were non-Muslims, unless they referred the dispute to him for judgement. This is complying to God's instruction that, "So if they come to you (O Muhammad PBUH), either judge between them, or turn away from them... And if you judge, judge with justice between them. Verily, Allah loves those who act justly" (Qur'an 5:42). This is a simple fact that many non-Muslims, particularly Christians in Nigeria, do not seem to understand, as they continuously yet unjustifiably preach against the Nigerian Muslims' agitation for the implementation of Shari'ah to govern their affairs.

More often, the bone of contention in interfaith discourse and engagement used to concern areas of worship, while the Qur'an acknowledges that each religion has its own dictates and law; "... To each among you (religions), We have prescribed a law and a clear way..." (Qur'an 5:48); therefore, Muslims are not allowed to adopt or partake in any lifestyle and act of spirituality that is specific to other religions. To this end, the Prophet (PBUH) and his followers were ordered by God in the Qur'an:

Say (O Muhammad): "O *Al-Kafirun* (polytheists and disbelievers) I worship not that which you worship. Nor will you worship that which I worship. And I shall not worship that which you are worshipping. Nor will you worship that which I worship. To you be your religion, and to me my religion (Islamic Monotheism)". (Qur'an 109:1-6)

Nonetheless, the Prophet (PBUH) and, by extension, his followers were instructed to call others to the way of their Lord: "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good preaching and argue with them with that which is best" (Qur'an 16:125). Due to this proselytisation assignment championed by the community of the Prophet (PBUH), who

took the moderate-middle course in everything they did (Qur'an 2:143), they are singled out with the honorary title of “the best of nation” because of the multi-tasking responsibility of enjoining righteousness and forbidding evil (A. Rabiu & S. Rabiu, 2015, p. 40). As mentioned in the following verse:

You [true believers in Islamic Monotheism, and real followers of Prophet Muhammad SAW and his Sunnah (legal ways, etc.)] are the best of people ever raised up for mankind; you enjoin *Al-Ma'ruf* and forbid *Al-Munkar* and you believe in Allah. And had the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians) believed, it would have been better for them; among them are some who have faith, but most of them are *Al-Fasiqun* (disobedient to Allah - and rebellious against Allah's Command). (Qur'an 3:110)

This is why the Prophet (PBUH) and his followers called the *Ahl al-Kitab* to Islam and did not miss any opportunity to convey to them the religion of God, to the extent that the Prophet (PBUH) did not begin any fight with them — the cause of conflict was their treachery and betrayal — until he first called them and exhorted them, as he said to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (RA) on the day of the conquest of Khaybar:

Advance cautiously, until you reach their open space, then invite them to Islam, and tell them of their duties before Allah. By Allah, if Allah were to guide one man through you, that would be better for you than having red camels. (Bukhari, No. 2942; Muslim, No. 2406)

To show the seriousness of Islam on the bid to protect the rights of the *Ahl al-Dhimmah*, the Prophet (PBUH) warned in strong terms against the violations of such rights and privileges, as reported by Safwan from among the companions of the Prophet (PBUH), when he said, “Beware, if anyone wrongs a contracting man (*Al-Dhimmi*), or diminishes his right, or forces him to work beyond his capacity, or takes from him anything without his consent, I shall plead for him on the Day of Judgment” (Abu Dawud, Book 19, No. 3046). It is in this spirit that Ibn Hazm (995-1063 CE), a classical jurist of Islam (cited by Al-Qarafi in ‘*Al-Furuq*’ vol. 3, 14), said:

If we are attacked by an enemy nation who is targeting the People of Covenant (non-Muslim citizens) living among

us, it is our duty to come fully armed and ready to die in battle for them, to protect those people who are protected by the covenant of God and His Messenger. Doing any less and surrendering them will be blameworthy neglect of a sacred promise. (Da'wah Institute of Nigeria, 2012, p. 7)

Regarding the protection of their places of worship in addition to *masajid* (mosques), God the Almighty allows the use of full force to repel any attack targeting such places, where He states:

For if God had not checked one set of people by means of another, there would surely have been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques, in which the name of Allah is commemorated in abundant measure. Allah will certainly aid those who aid His cause – for verily Allah is full of Strength, Exalted in Might, (Able to enforce His will). (Qur'an 22:40)

To an extent, both Muslims and Christians in Nigeria reciprocated the gesture of protecting one another in places of worship and serving as asylum to each other in times of crisis. This commitment to always fight the common enemy should be maintained. Moreover, in the Shari'ah, Muslims and non-Muslims share the same societal responsibility of protecting and enhancing the common good. As such, they should work together to build institutions and uplift each other's standard of living. Additionally, they ought to secure boundaries from external breach and maintain internal peace, security, and stability.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It is evident from the discourse that Islam, through the lenses of its final code of life, the Qur'an, explicates the universality of its coverage and unmatched accommodating nature. It recognises the inherent diversity of humankind across faiths, races and colour, geographical and civilisational backgrounds, and states that the dearest of all in the sight of God is the most pious one. In spite of this multiplicity, Islam acknowledges the singularity of the human progeny from Adam and Eve created by God. To help man fulfil his essence of creation – God's worship – He raises some of His servants at reasonable intervals

as Prophets to guide man to achieve eternal felicity via an approved way of life called Islam. Therefore, all Prophets of God from Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (PBUT) were Muslims; Muhammad (PBUH) only served as the last in the long chain of the institution of Prophethood and was the one to whom God revealed His final and universal message to humanity. Those who believe in all the Prophets of God, including Muhammad (PBUT) after his coming, are called Muslims; those who segregate between them are referred to as non-Muslims, including the Jews and the Christians, who are specifically addressed as *Ahl al-Kitab*. Therefore, it is a derivable conclusion, that only with proper and sound intra- and inter-religious knowledge and understanding, reciprocal and mutual respect in addition to strict adherence to the dictum of sacred scriptures by the Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Nigeria and the global community, that peace will beget human and capital development for the benefit of all.

Finally, the researchers strongly believe that there is strength in diversity, and differences should in no way lead to disunity, just as unity is not uniformity. Therefore, the peaceful coexistence of religious communities, such as the Muslims and the Christians living together in places such as Nigeria, should not in any way call for unification of religions, or syncretism, which calls for synthesis between divergent yet convergent faiths to develop a new common universal religion operational across geo-cultural and racial denominations (A. Rabi, 2018). The researchers recommend that Muslims and Christians, wherever they are, should not allow political predators and power mongers or any ill-meaning religiously crowned personalities to manipulate them to achieve their ulterior motives. Likewise, they should not let biased media reporting, virulent propaganda, unconfirmed reports, or rumours spread over social and other online media platforms mislead them to make regrettable decisions and actions against their fellow human beings. Christian clergies and Muslim imams should fear God, uphold sincerity of purpose in their preaching and avoid misleading and inciting hate-filled speeches that would trigger or fuel the ember of religious crises. Government and community leaders should, in the best possible ways, check the excesses of pseudo-clerics to block the chances of continued commercialisation and politicisation of religion. Lastly, the researchers strongly recommend dialogue between adherents of various religions as one of the viable methods to clarify one another's

teachings and practices that would foster mutual understanding where the parties must agree to disagree.

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